

★ **SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE!** ★

ALFRED MYSTERY MAGAZINE **HITCHCOCK**

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2011

**Criminous Short
Fiction for Long
Winter Nights**

**11 tales of chilling
suspense with**

Jeffrey Cohen

Mike Culpepper

R.T. Lawton

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Saturday, January 1, 2011

EDITOR'S NOTES

HAPPY HOLIDAYS . . . FROM THE STAFF OF AHMM..



The Lineup

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MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

The Passage 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...



BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

This month's column takes us to the British Isles. In Galway, Ireland, Ken Bruen's Jack Taylor is not only fighting familiar demons but takes on the

devil himself. Farther up the Irish coast in...



THE STORY THAT WON

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LITTLE DEEPER

KENT BROWN

"I thought you told me we wanted Mansfield?" Joe asked. "Yeah, Mansfield," Tim replied. "Better read the headstone again," Joe said. "This is the Manfield grave," a gravelly voice announced behind them. Joe and Tim turned. Standing before them was Patrolman Higgins. "What are you boys up to?" It..

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EDITOR'S NOTES



Art by Jorge Mascarenhas

HAPPY HOLIDAYS . . .
FROM THE STAFF OF AHMM

The Lineup



JEFFREY COHEN is the author of three novels featuring reporter/amateur sleuth Aaron Tucker, and two books about parenting autistic children. An Uninvited Ghost: A Haunted Guesthouse Mystery, written under the name E.J. Copperman, comes out in April.

Since DAN CRAWFORD's first appearance in this magazine (July 1987), AHMM has published more than 50 of the Chicago resident's stories.

MIKE CULPEPPER has finished a novel featuring Colm, the former slave in ancient Iceland. "The Berserk Feud" is his sixth story for AHMM.

JOHN H. DIRCKX retired from his primary care medical practice in 2003. He has been publishing stories in AHMM since 1978.

DOC FINCH makes his fourth appearance in AHMM this month. He is finishing a novel about a houseboat that sails the Mississippi River from its source to its outlet and from the past to the future.

EVE FISHER teaches university-level history and lives in a small town in South Dakota “with 5000 books, a husband, and a cat.”

Booked & Printed columnist ROBERT C. HAHN reviews mysteries for Publishers Weekly and New York Post, among other places, and is the former mystery columnist for the Cincinnati Post.

JANICE LAW has a story in the upcoming International Association of Crime Writers anthology, A World of Crime and Mystery, edited by Douglas Preston. She is the author of the novel Voices.

R.T. LAWTON, a retired federal law enforcement agent, is a 2010 Derringer award nominee. “The Alchemist” is fourth in his 1660s Paris Underworld series, and his 21st story for AHMM.

Over the next year, KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH’s entire short fiction backlist will be available electronically from WMG Publishing, including the first ever appearance of Spade (1998) in a story called “Stomping Mad.” Her next Kris Nelscott mystery

novel will appear late in 2011.

WILLIAM F. SMITH's last story for AHMM was "Who Put the Poison in Mrs. Murphy's Chowder?" (June 1997). He passed away in December 2009 at the age of 87.

L.A. WILSON, JR. is a full-time physician in Atlanta who plans to retire by 2012 to spend more time writing. Some of his stories, including a sequel to "Dancer in a Storm" titled "Darktown Strutters," are available as audiobooks from Mind Wings Audio (mindwingsaudio.com).

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MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



© 2010, by *Mark F. Russell*

The Passage

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, 267 Broadway, 4th Floor, New York, New York 10007-2352. Please label your entry "January/February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If you

would like your story returned, please include an SASE.

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BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN



This month's column takes us to the British Isles. In Galway, Ireland, Ken Bruen's Jack Taylor is not only fighting familiar demons but takes on the devil himself. Farther up the Irish coast in Donegal, Inspector Benedict Devlin contends with a wealthy mine owner, illegal immigrants, and the visit of a U.S. senator in Brian McGilloway's gloomy new novel. Then it's much farther north to the tiny speck in the North Sea above Scotland called Fair Isle, where Inspector Jimmy Perez has taken his fiancée to meet his parents in Ann Cleeves's enthralling conclusion to her Shetland Island series.

Jack Taylor is a former member of the Garda Síochána who was dismissed because of his drinking problem—a problem that follows and bedevils him periodically in his new life as a “finder,” a sort of unofficial private eye. A fierce drinker when not fighting the habit, Taylor is given to bouts of guilt and depression and occasional hopes for the future. In his eighth outing in *THE DEVIL* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.99), Taylor is six months clean and looking forward to a new start in America when he's turned back at the airport gate and has his first encounter with a man, who may not be a man at all. While Taylor has his doubts about who the stranger is, Bruen leaves the reader no doubt at all that the suave entity bedeviling Taylor is indeed the Devil.

Returning to Galway, Taylor hits the bottle again, even as he takes on a case for a mother whose son has dropped out of sight. That case inevitably leads back to the man calling himself “Kurt” on one occasion, Mr. K on another, and other names at other times—there are plenty of names for the Devil. Taylor seems to be the lightning rod attracting the Devil's attentions.

Bruen's brilliant dialogue between Taylor and the Devil combines philosophical depth, the Devil's glibness, and Taylor's increasingly desperate responses. This book may also be the most unconventional in a series of unconventional novels, but it is filled with Bruen's usual eclectic literary and musical allusions and the savage poetry that makes the author one of the most exciting stylists in the mystery genre. I've yet to read anything by Bruen that wasn't top-notch, but it is his Jack

Taylor series that stands out above the rest of his nearly thirty novels so far.

If Jack Taylor is the wild, untamed face of Irish crime fiction, Brian McGilloway's Inspector Benedict Devlin might well be the new polite face of reason and justice. Introduced in *Borderlands* and returning in *Gallows Lane*, the Garda inspector deals with multiple intractable problems in *BLEED A RIVER DEEP* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.99).

Devlin's ongoing problem is Superintendent Harry Patterson, who could be a poster boy for Worst Boss. Patterson is a petty, ambitious, glory-seeking toady ready to jettison or stab his inferiors. And to top it off, he's incompetent and unprofessional as well.

Devlin's been assigned responsibility for security for the impending visit of U.S. Senator Cathal Hagan, an Irish-American with links to Heal Ireland, a charity that serves as a front for funding Republican causes in the North. The site chosen for Hagan's visit is Orcas, a relatively new, prosperous, and controversial gold mine owned by John Weston, a wealthy American who has returned to live, and invest, in Ireland.

A series of errors—misidentification of a slain bank robber, involvement with a case that crosses the border to Northern Ireland, and a screwup in the security arrangements for Hagan's visit—result in a two-week suspension for Devlin, even though they were not all of his making.

It is Devlin's decency and humanity that come to the fore in

McGilloway's capable hands. He refuses to stop working the cases he's involved with in spite of his suspension. Devlin's attempt to protect a Polish woman who is a victim of human trafficking tests his wife's patience to the breaking point. And he makes efforts to help the son of an old college friend when his break-in at the Orcas mining operations lands him in jail.

McGilloway tackles a number of tricky subjects in this novel, including the sometimes uneasy cooperation between North and South in the Borderlands area; legal and illegal immigration in Ireland, and Irish-American relations and the new Irish economy.

Benedict Devlin, thorough, kind, and tough, is the kind of detective any force would be proud to have and McGilloway's well-crafted novels promise to test his mettle to the fullest.

The first volume in Ann Cleeves's Shetland Island series featuring Detective Inspector Jimmy Perez, *Raven Black*, won the Gold Dagger in 2006. It was followed by *White Nights* and *Red Bones* and concludes with *blue lightning* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.99).

Perez is a native of Fair Isle, the tiny island that is "the U.K.'s most remote inhabited island." Fair Isle boasts little in the way of attractions other than its isolation and the Fair Isle Field Center for the study of migratory birds.

Jimmy Perez, whose ancestors are said to have settled on Fair Isle when their ship sank during the time of the Spanish Armada, takes his fiancée Fran Hunter to the island to meet his

parents and see where he grew up. But the visit becomes a murder investigation when a victim is discovered at the Center.

Angela Moore, the scientist and TV celebrity who gives the Fair Isle Field Center its cachet, is discovered murdered with a knife in her back. She and her husband, Maurice Parry, run the Center along with assistant Ben Catchpole and cook Jane Latimer. Weather frequently disrupts Fair Isle's connections with the mainland, and the Center has few guests other than avid birders when the weather turns bad.

So only a handful are staying there when Angela's body is discovered.

Unfortunately the bad weather moves in and Jimmy is on his own with neither forensic support nor investigative help. As Jimmy interviews the staff and the guests (Maurice's teenage daughter, Poppy, who disliked and argued with her now deceased stepmother; the Fowlers, John and Sarah; avid birder Dougie Barr; and handsome gadabout Hugh Shaw) he discovers connections and undercurrents that make it difficult to eliminate any as suspects.

Before Jimmy can sort out the signal clue to the Angela's killing, a second murder occurs. When the weather clears enough for help from the mainland to arrive, Jimmy and his colleagues must hurry if they are to prevent further deaths.

Cleeves succeeds in making Fair Isle a fascinating place, in spite of its forbidding weather and terrain, much as she did in her George Palmer-Jones series (High Island Blues). Here she

makes the most of the foibles and enthusiasms of bird-watchers.

This is a highly polished and engrossing conclusion to a fine quartet of mysteries.

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THE STORY THAT WON



© *Myrna Yancey*

The July/August Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Kent Brown of Green Bay, Wisconsin. Honorable mentions go to Kathy Chencharik of South Royalston, Massachusetts; Alice Gilliland of Puyallup, Washington; Brian McCullough of Kanata, Ontario, Canada; Melody Street of Mulvane, Kansas; Loretta K. Rolison of Ionia, Michigan; Jason Hunt of Hopedale, Massachusetts; Ray Mileur of Thompsonville, Illinois; and Nikki S. May of Lyons, Michigan.

LITTLE DEEPER

KENT BROWN

"I thought you told me we wanted Mansfield?" Joe asked.

"Yeah, Mansfield," Tim replied.

"Better read the headstone again," Joe said.

"This is the Manfield grave," a gravelly voice announced behind them.

Joe and Tim turned. Standing before them was Patrolman Higgins. "What are you boys up to?"

It took a little prodding, but they confessed. Treasure buried in Mansfield's coffin by his eccentric grandson. "The family gold! All coin," Tim said, with a used car salesman's voice.

Higgins knew the story. And the Mansfield heir was loony as a cartoon woodpecker. "You two are about ten miles from the Mansfield resting place. And it's a crypt, no shovels needed."

Tim and Joe looked at each other, uncertain. Higgins added, "There's enough in the coffin, if it's true, to split three ways, happy-like."

Higgins took the boys' drivers' licenses, saying, "I'll catch up with you later."

Joe and Tim dropped their shovels, hopped into their car, and drove off to the other gravesite thinking they had it made,

with help from local law enforcement.

When the two buffoons had driven out of sight, Officer Higgins rolled up his shirt sleeves, took a shovel, and started digging. He tapped the shovel against the headstone and some smartly placed granite-colored plaster fell off the stone, revealing the name MANSFIELD. Higgins muttered to himself, “You gotta dig a little deeper to get the whole story for it to pay off.”

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THE WRITING WORKSHOP

JANICE LAW

"Just to recapitulate, gentlemen: Last time we discussed 'finding your topic' and 'writing what you know.' I trust you've been thinking along those lines. Yes, Tommy?" "Pharmaceuticals," he said...

A TIME TO MOURN

EVE FISHER

The funeral was at nine in the morning on that June day of 1885, and by the time everyone got back to the house, the hot prairie air had a smell like baking bread. Nell was stifling in her black bombazine, her bodice drenched with sweat. She looked over at her two boys, Bill and John, stiff in their...



THE BERSERK FEUD

MIKE CULPEPPER

When Colm got back from raiding, it was almost winter and there was little to be done on the farm. The ewe and her daughter had just gone into heat and needed breeding and there was a decision to be...

BRING DOWN ONE

JOHN H. DIRCKX

"Your end needs to go about another yard north, Chris." In the harsh glare of the working lights above the stage at Pierce Hall, Ron Reese of Aardvark Amusements and his solitary helper were struggling to assemble a dunking stool. By two in the afternoon they had already put in a long day, and it...





THE KARNIKOV CARD

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

From the start, I said it was a bad idea. I told the organizers of CelebCon Five that paying the exorbitant appearance fee for Dmitri Karnikov would backfire. Yes, Dmitri Karnikov had starred in the...

THE ALCHEMIST

R. T. LAWTON

They said they would pay me to bring the old man to them after nightfall. It wasn't to be a lot of money but enough to get my interest, especially since I needed to eat, yet my criminal talents on the streets of Paris were still, shall we say, developing. Of course, some folk in our community of...



DANCER IN A STORM

L. A. WILSON, JR.

Something woke Memphis up. He couldn't identify it at first. A stench penetrated his sleep and irritated his senses until he opened his eyes. It was putrid and revolting, stealing into his nostrils...

THE GUN ALSO RISES

JEFFREY COHEN

"So he pulled the gun out of his pocket." I stared into her eyes for a sign of uncertainty, there was none. "Yes," she said. "He aimed it straight at Jeremy." "That's right." "And he pulled the trigger." Again, not so much as a blink. "Yes." "And what happened to Jeremy?" "He got wet and started to..."



WATTS IN THE WIND

DOC FINCH

“Here we harvest the wind’s free bounty,” said Leo Albertson, the manager of the Lamancha Wind Ranch. “If only it didn’t cost so much for the tools to reap it.” He waved at the window, beyond which...

ARCHIE’S ESCAPE

WILLIAM F. SMITH

“I’m sorry, Mr. Valsivio, I just don’t have the money right now.” Archie Vernon’s pale blue eyes were wide with apprehension as he waited for the man on the other side of the counter to react to his statement. In the old days, Rod Valsivio, hearing such a remark, simply would have reached over,...

THE LITTLE ONES HAVE MORE FLAVOR

DAN CRAWFORD

“Apples, apples!” “Come away. I think she’s selling apples.” “Apples!” Polijn sang each iteration of the word with a slightly different tone, in hopes that they might ask for a song later on. If she was interesting enough, the cries could also conceal the fact that the old tree just beyond the...

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THE WRITING WORKSHOP

JANICE LAW



Art by Kelly Denato

“Just to recapitulate, gentlemen: Last time we discussed ‘finding your topic’ and ‘writing what you know.’ I trust you’ve been thinking along those lines. Yes, Tommy?”

“Pharmaceuticals,” he said.

“Excellent. And timely. Timely is good. Martin?”

“Insurance.” He gave a little smirk.

“Insurance is maybe tougher but can be, can be.”

“At the right price,” he said. “Especially health insurance.”

There was general laughter at this and I had to admit that insurance was timely too. The suggestions went around the room, and as so often, I remembered my own time in a writing workshop, the never-to-be-forgotten, two-day “So You Want to Write Mysteries” program sponsored by our local university. I think I can say that workshop changed my life, that everything that has happened subsequently unfolded from those classes.

You probably find that incredible. Teaching rarely obtains the respect great art deserves, but I often think back to those two days when the secrets of the business were first opened to me. I pass them on now, and I’ve discovered an unforeseen aptitude for teaching—even with less than promising students.

Finding Your Topic, Developing Your Voice, Mastering the Classic Plot Structures, Keeping the Action Going, Snappy Dialogue, A Touch of Atmosphere: I get nostalgic just looking over the syllabus and remembering a summer day with college girls in light dresses and tiny shorts passing beyond the windows, leafy shadows drifting across the floor, our instructors defying the heat at podium or board.

They all had funny stories about odd characters destined to appear in their novels, contretemps with editors, or the disasters of the dreaded (and longed for) book tour. I hung on every word, although I already had a few short stories published locally and a novel under my belt—where, alas, it remained,

despite encouragement from both professional and amateur readers.

I already knew how to do Snappy Dialogue and the importance of adding A Touch of Atmosphere, never mind Keeping the Action Going. What I wanted was The Secret of Publication and, voila, on the last afternoon I got it.

Destiny, surely, because I nearly cut the class to make an early start home. The instructor, gray, fat, and self-assured, had done A Touch of Atmosphere earlier without really exciting my interest. But she was well published, and the wrap-up session seemed like the best place to ask the question that was on my mind and on, I suspect, the minds of all the other attendees: How do I get published? I put up my hand.

At first she gave the standard answers: Write a good book, learn to sell it and yourself, network, network, network. Then, in almost a throwaway line, she solved my dilemma. I can still see her sitting at the instructor's metal desk—alone of all the presenters she never hefted her considerable bulk from the seat. She had protruding blue eyes behind big glasses with red frames, more than the start of a whisker, an unfortunate haircut, and an even more unfortunate permanent. Her jowls moved when she spoke and, though it was against state law and university policy, she chain-smoked throughout the session and dared anyone to object.

Yet this frumpish sibyl foretold my future in one sentence. "Of course," she said as the session was winding down, "you've

got to find a sympathetic editor. You can write a terrific book, best in the world, but if you don't find the right editor, forget it."

"And how do you find the right editor?"

"You keep trying and looking and sending stuff out. That's all you can do. You can hardly knock them off and replace them."

I joined the laughter in the room.

"Though editors," she added, "can be among the lower life forms."

More laughter. We exited on this note to sunshine and Frisbee-throwing undergrads and, in my case, to what was going to be a whole different life than my current one as office manager for a big septic system installer.

I didn't realize that immediately. I wrote another novel, incorporating everything I had learned about Finding Your Topic, Developing Your Voice, Mastering the Classic Plot Structures, Keeping the Action Going, Snappy Dialogue, and A Touch of Atmosphere. The book was good, too, and I think I can say without contradiction that my knowledge of septic systems and the excavation of drain fields added an unusual dimension to the plot. I sent it off with high hopes, and after a handful of rejections, I secured, I thought, the interest of a famous editor.

I went to New York to meet him. I sometimes wonder if everything would have been different had I remained in Connecticut and conducted the whole business by e-mail and phone. But I went in person, seduced by the glamour of the New

York publishing business, the charm of meeting a real editor, the cachet of venturing “into the city” on editorial business.

Not, as it turned out, the best idea. The editor, Simmons Loftus III, famous and experienced, was craggy of feature and cranky of demeanor, handling half a dozen extraneous matters during our brief meeting. Though he conceded that my work showed talent, he concluded by regretting that I had misinterpreted his letter of encouragement: There would be no contract.

I was stunned. I had incautiously let it be known that I would be arranging for the publication of my novel. In addition to disappointment, I was so angry and humiliated that I could not immediately face the train home. Instead, I wandered around Midtown, passing stores of every shape, variety, and price; little sandwich kiosks and white-cloth restaurants; offices, seedy and shiny; posters and billboards and ticket outlets; energetic sidewalk vendors, fanatic evangelists, and bored souls handing out ads for clubs, for bargains, for services of every imaginable sort.

I went far enough so that I realized I would have to take the subway back to Grand Central, and without realizing it, I entered the same station that I had exited so hopefully earlier in the day on the way to see “my” editor. Down the dirty stairs with a flood of workers, schoolchildren, shoppers with bags, mothers with strollers; through the turnstile, down another flight and over to the downtown line. Anxious not to miss the express back to Connecticut, I pressed close to the edge, determined to be first

into the car.

A light down the tunnel, a roar, and a draft of hot air, and then, among the crush to my left, a tweed jacket, a craggy profile, a briefcase no doubt full of favored manuscripts—"my" editor. The train was almost upon us, its light like a Cyclops eye, when I swung my hip like a hockey player and knocked Simmons Loftus and all his numerals onto the line.

A scream, a screech of brakes, a thud, white sparks.

"Someone's fallen!" I shouted, and my surprise was genuine. I had been standing there, admittedly full of anger, and then, like a spark from a Leyden jar, light and action and a deafening, unintelligible roar. Only half conscious of what I was doing, I stepped backwards into the crowd and momentarily found myself at the stair, still thronged with descending passengers. Behind me, emergency personnel rushed back and forth along the platform, and a voice from somewhere in the farthest reaches of the Bronx urged calm over the P.A.

I joined a group turned back from the platform by an alert subway policewoman and went complaining up the stairs with the rest. Out onto the street, a clear sky was darkening over the skyscrapers, and I made my train in time.

When I left MetroNorth at my stop, the now toxic glamour of Manhattan's towers and its dark subway tunnels was replaced by green lawns and suburban cars. I was in another life, and I could read the accounts of Simmons Loftus III's tragic tumble with something like indifference.

Death by misadventure seemed to be the opinion, and I couldn't help coveting Death by Misadventure for a title. I felt I'd earned it. Still, the moment on the platform might have remained an anomaly, a moment in a parallel universe, if I had not received a letter two months later from Loftus's successor who "really liked my novel" and who had "decided to take a chance" and offer me a contract.

The book came out a year later—Underground. Perhaps you've read it. It did all right but would have done better with a stronger editor, one who was better able to push for resources and publicity within the firm—something for future consideration.

Still the success, even modest as it was, led me to think that crime pays, and there was another benefit: I'd expanded my range. Write What You Know is the first law of composition, and I could now say I knew homicidal anger and the surprise of violence and the way emotion discharges in unforeseen ways. My next novel was praised for its "psychological realism," and I began writing stories with a darker tint.

I liked them a lot, but I still couldn't crack the best anthologies. Another longtime editor of great eminence and set opinions blocked my way. I met him at a cocktail party soon after my second novel came out. He was a jolly, pompous chap who knew everyone and called all his favorites by their first names. He talked to me while scanning the crowd and nearly knocked me flat when he lunged for someone of greater celebrity.

No joy there! Unfortunately for him, he was a sailor with a little ketch anchored at a Connecticut marina. I'm always surprised that people trust themselves to wave and water when there's so much that can go wrong: leaks and engine failures and erratic signals. He ventured out one day before a storm and had the misfortune to lose his engine just when the winds made sailing impossible and he needed horsepower the most. A real shame.

There were questions raised, as he was known to be meticulous about keeping the boat in repair. The mechanic who serviced the engine swore it had all been in order, and subsequently it was discovered that someone—the beloved “person or persons unknown”—had tampered with the fuel line.

There was a good deal of outrage at this, although from a professional point of view, I'm sure he'd have been fascinated. I certainly was. And talk about *A Touch of Atmosphere*! There is something about fog, as the old gothic writers knew full well. Mist rising off rivers and inlets, the warning horn in the distance, the soft splash of a kayak paddle, the scrape as it comes alongside a moored sailboat. Yes, one can go a long way with *A Touch of Atmosphere*, and I soon found that I was introducing river and ocean scenes and working up the effects of light through water vapor.

I felt something else, more reprehensible but understandable, I think, quite understandable: a certain joy in a job well done. That the famous anthologist was replaced by a hot younger writer who was no more susceptible to my oeuvre

than her predecessor was annoying but not as devastating as you might imagine.

Instead of stewing about wasted effort and neglected stories, I began devising little scenarios of doom for her. Some of the more fanciful eventually made their way into print with titles like *Death Under Pressure* (catastrophe in a car crushing plant) and *Mourning Becomes Her* (a strangling in the Civil War era).

That was when I really mastered the Classic Plot Structures. It is, as I often tell my class, a matter of relating your own interests and motivations to a sturdy formal structure. And, though I don't often mention this, the experience of plotting someone's demise in reality has a powerful and salutary effect on one's literary development. It really does.

But let us not neglect *Anthologist the Younger*. I certainly did not. Those of you with intellectual penetration will have noticed my preference for accidents. Chance rules our lives, and a certain amount of flexibility about outcomes seems to me only wise. I set to studying my new target in earnest.

This was an urban woman—no boats, no foggy mornings along the river, no slippery marina docks. The concrete jungle, then? But no. She lacked vices that I could discover, possessed a fine address, and had a habit of calling taxis—no hot subway tunnels for this lassie, either.

I was forced to place my hopes on the perils of fitness. I'd seen her photos and, even adding ten years (and who but the

very young publishes an up-to-date author picture?) I guessed this was someone who exercised. Perhaps she ran (lonely park roads beckoned) or swam (a multitude of watery possibilities) or worked on the weight machines (my mechanical fingers twitched).

Fortunately, she had a blog, convinced, as so many are, that the world was waiting for such ephemera as the tantrums of her hairdresser, the death of her Yorkie, her opinion on the best pizza in NYC, or her recipe for elderberry wine. I had a nostalgic moment thinking about Arsenic and Old Lace and the possibilities of poison, when I noticed an entry on pink running shoes. And, better yet, her ambition to run a half marathon. This meant training. And training meant opportunity!

With the improvements in my literary fortunes, I found myself in the city fairly often, and I formed the habit of buying street food and lunching in the park before strolling back to the train through her neighborhood. I spotted Anthologist the Younger a couple of times, groceries or flowers in hand, and I can assure you her photos were at least twenty years old. But fit, I could see that. So a runner, who trained early? Late? I needed to find out, and I booked hotels for a couple of weekends.

Every one of us has a weakness—I often discuss the importance of character flaws in my class. Even the superhero—or, increasingly to modern taste, the superheroine—needs a flaw. A little touch of ordinary humanity or, at least, some habit that makes them vulnerable. Hers was a taste for early morning

runs. Fog and mist after all; my heart rose as I made my plans.

What allows you to hang around a park without arousing comment? Exercise of some sort was the obvious possibility, but I detest unnecessary exertion. I acquired a pair of binoculars, added a Peterson's bird guide, and set out for an early morning ramble.

From then on it was a matter of Keeping the Action Going, as you can read in my novel *Tripwire*. A very neat job, both in the park and on the page, so to speak. I do believe that *Anthologist the Younger* marked a turning point in my life, the moment when I moved from action for the sake of my career to action for its own sake. I think so.

As I am sure this particular class would tell you, action on the page cannot compete with action in real life, where plot and action and atmosphere cohere, producing not just *One's Own Voice* but the imprint of one's whole self. Perhaps you can understand how action became irresistible, even as my growing success made it unnecessary.

And then, a mistake. I admit, a mistake. A slick new mystery magazine began with a singularly obtuse editor. We'd exchanged heated e-mails, and then words at a mystery writers' conference. Two mistakes, in truth, which I shortly compounded with a third. I put her under close surveillance, a preliminary move, you understand, strictly preliminary, that nonetheless led to an incident and my present situation.

Though loath to correct anything connected with the never-

to-be-forgotten So You Want to Write Mysteries syllabus, I've decided another topic is needed: Keeping the Boundary, as in the boundary between fantasy and reality. I think I shall add that to this course, perhaps calling it The Limits of Mystery. Perhaps I shall.

"Tommy?" Where was I? Oh, voice, as in Developing Your Voice. I realized that Tommy had been reading for a few minutes. "Just the last few lines again," I said.

"So he says to me, he says, 'I'll tear your head off, sucker.' And I says, 'I got an answer to that,' and I plugs him with the .38."

Which, though it omitted some of Tommy's more vigorous adjectives, captured his voice very nicely. "Good pulp style," I said, and I was set to elaborate before I saw the guard make the time sign through the reinforced glass of the door.

"That's it for today, gentlemen. Next week, Classic Plot Structures."

Their folding chairs scraped and rattled, steel door clanked open, and we exited single file toward the cells, as good an illustration as you're going to get, I think, of my additional topic, The Limits of Mystery.

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Next Article

A TIME TO MOURN

EVE FISHER

The funeral was at nine in the morning on that June day of 1885, and by the time everyone got back to the house, the hot prairie air had a smell like baking bread. Nell was stifling in her black bombazine, her bodice drenched with sweat. She looked over at her two boys, Bill and John, stiff in their black suits, their blond hair so wet it looked as dark as their father's. Bill was seven, but John, Patrick's spitting image, was only three, and something twisted in her, knowing how soon he would forget.

She got up and went into the kitchen, where Martha, her mother-in-law, and Pearl, her sister-in-law, were busy getting the dinner dished up.

"Sure, and you should go rest yourself," Pearl urged.

Martha nodded. "Yah sure. We got everything going good here."

"I feel better if I keep busy," Nell replied. And it was true, or it would be if she could just get out of this black, but the shock if she changed on the very day of her husband's burial would be too much for the neighbors.

Martha shrugged. "You want to take up the biscuits?"

Nell pulled out the big black baking tin. "We put them on

that platter. The one with the wheat on it.”

Nell dished up the biscuits. When your husband died, and you were left with two boys, and you yourself were an orphan, with no relatives, it was Providential to have in-laws willing to take you in. She had to show her gratitude. She had to be willing and helpful. She had to begin as she meant to go on. “What else can I do?”

“Them pies need slicing.”

Nell took a knife to the apple pies. Better here than in that crowd of people, all whispering things that made her cheeks sting with shame. Patrick Stark, healthy and strong as an ox, dying so sudden? Heart failure? Never. An overdose of laudanum. For why? What was the real story behind that? The real story, she told herself determinedly, as she’d told herself over and over again since last Tuesday, is that he’d strained himself hoisting bales of hay. He’d come in tired and sore, too tired to eat, too sore to sleep, and he had dosed himself with laudanum, despite her worries and protests. Once, twice, three times ... and then he had lain himself down and never got up again. Leaving her with the children. Leaving her without a home save that of her father-in-law. Leaving her alone.

She stood up straight. “Is there anything else I can do?”

“Nah. Now we go in and eat.”

James Stark owned one of the two general stores in Laskin, South Dakota, and three quarter-sections of land out in the county. The land he’d divided among his oldest sons,

William, Harold, and Patrick, who lived on and worked the land. Now Patrick's land was to be farmed by William and Harold, the profits split and a good share held in trust for Patrick's children. The youngest of James's sons, Graham, Pearl's husband, ran the shop under James's supervision. James Stark was in his fifties, still fit and strong, despite his white hair and beard. Martha, a Norwegian immigrant, was his third wife: he never spoke of either of his first two, and rarely of her.

It was a very quiet house. Martha, old before her time, worked like a cart horse and never spoke of anything but work, and that usually not beyond the kitchen and lean-to. Graham slid through life like a shadow, speaking only when forced to in a burdened voice. James, silent in the morning over breakfast and dinner, walled himself behind the newspaper between the two. After dinner he went out, returning late to release Pearl to help with housework. After supper, James took over the shop entirely. As the evening progressed, loud shouts of laughter from below rang upwards like echoes from a foreign land.

Nell quickly became friends with Pearl. You couldn't help but love Pearl, for her lively Irish spirits, her loving heart, her lovely face. Pearl and Graham had one son, Arthur, the dead spit of his father. The boy was barely three, and named for Tennyson's poems. Nell took charge of Arthur while Pearl worked in the shop, for it was she who really kept it going, offering advice and help and promises, while her husband stood in the back and looked dully over the goods.

"Well, and it's not really a job for a man, is it?" Pearl made

apology over her mending. "Selling things. And all those calicos and threads. He does get that bored with the ladies running in for a bit of ribbon or a choice bit of trim. Small blame to him, says I. And it's no trouble to me at all, not at all." Her wonderful smile flashed. "I've always been too fond of dress, that's what my mother would say. And now here I am, having the run of a shop. What is the world coming to when wickedness is its own reward, that's what she'd say."

She giggled like a schoolgirl, and Nell thought once more that if it weren't for Pearl, she would go distracted in this silent house. But where could she go? What else could she do? Laskin already had two dressmakers, and the only other job of work open to a woman with two small children was washing: heavy, backbreaking, disreputable.

The boys seemed happy enough, though Bill missed the farm terribly. His great joy was to be taken out to the land and allowed to follow Uncle William or Uncle Harold as he had once followed his father. But it was rare that they came to town, and never did they bring their wives. They were all busy on the land, and Nell could well understand that. She had been once. And while then there had been days when she had hated it, the endless work, the loneliness, the isolation, now she missed it terribly. When she had felt closed in, she had only to step outside. How she had loved the sweep of it, up to the greater sweep of the sky! The space of it. The air and the color of it. Sometimes the sheer interiority of her life now—walls upon walls, in the house and in the town—seemed suffocating.

But it was not only the silence and the town life that bothered her. There was a growing unease about her father-in-law. He moved as little as a rock, and that rock seemed to be always the breaker against which she must crash. When she served food, his body made no room for her laden arm, but required it to reach across him. When she cleaned, he always needed something that required him to stretch himself above and across her bent back. And in church, one Sunday, he had slumped in their pew until his arm rested hotly against hers. And his eyes ...

She could barely think it to herself, much less whisper it to anyone. All she could do was avoid him. She waited to work, or sit, or go outside, until she was quite clear where James Stark would be. One day, as she performed her little minuet, she glanced up and saw Graham looking at her, and the slight movement of his knife-colored eyes made her heart thud. He knew. But the next moment, it was gone.

The daily round continued. Autumn brought the rush of gathering, preserving, pickling, and salting what came from the garden and the pig. It was a shame, with a feast first of spareribs, then of fresh meat, that Pearl, who had to be called in from the shop to help, had entirely lost her appetite for any of it. Nell suspected it wasn't the headcheese so much as that Pearl might be again what she'd confessed she'd longed to be, with child, and Nell cheerfully took over the rest of the distasteful work. After two hard weeks of harvest labor, cellar and attic were stored to bursting and the kitchen scoured clean. The

three women could get on with the usual Saturday baking.

Nell put a second batch of bread to rise in greased pans as Pearl picked up bits of raw dough from the table and nibbled them.

"Yah, you get worms from that!" Martha called from the cookstove. She was frying doughnuts in a seething vat of the recently tried lard, and her face was crimson from the heat.

"That's but an old wives' tale," Pearl said. "And it tastes so good."

Martha shrugged. Nell covered her bread and said, in a low voice, "It's a sure sign. When are you going to tell Graham?"

Pearl's blue eyes looked sidelong through their long golden lashes. "When it quickens, when else? It's just foxfire before then."

Martha turned, a platter of doughnuts in her right hand. "When what—" Her left hand flashed her wedding ring to her heart.

"Martha?" Nell leaped forward.

Martha thrust the platter at Nell and tried to step forward. "Ach! What—" Her face crimsoned more as she fell to her knees. Her corsets held her straight the rest of the way to the floor.

It was as cold a funeral as Patrick's had been hot. The ground was iron hard. Snow fell over the black hats and veils as the minister read the service. The wind scudded little drifts of snow across the road as they walked back, pricked out tears of

cold, if not of sorrow, from every face.

Indoors, Nell headed straight to the kitchen, her black bombazine comfortingly warm. Pearl, blotchy from crying (the one thing she could not do gracefully, Nell noted), came in to help her. It was the same menu as before. Funeral food: scalloped potatoes and ham, biscuits, pie, and coffee. Afterwards, they cleaned up, with help from other townswomen, while the men smoked cigars in the parlor and rumbled about the news.

“What a mercy it was quick!” Mrs. Mortensen said only what everyone had said for the last three days, and all the women nodded. “And at least Mr. Stark isn’t left with any young children.” Someone tittered, not Mrs. Mortensen.

“What do you think Mr. Stark will do now?” Mrs. Torvaldson, the banker’s wife, asked Nell.

“I ... I don’t know,” Nell replied, startled at being asked her opinion. Mourning a husband meant a year without society, and she did not yet know the townsfolk very well.

Graham’s dull voice came from the door. “Maybe he’ll get married again.”

“Graham!” Pearl cried. “And Martha not yet cold.”

Graham shrugged and walked away.

Late that night, Nell lay in her cold bed, listening to the wind howling outside. What she had barely been able to think to herself had suddenly made itself plain. If James Stark desired

her, what was now to stop him? What if he wanted to marry her? Her whole body shuddered. It could not be. She would rather die. Surely there were laws against something as horrible, as unnatural as that. A man would ... No, it was impossible. She had to have mistaken his behavior. And if she had not, she vowed, she would move to a shanty on the edge of town and take in washing before she would become involved with her husband's father. Patrick! Patrick! She whipped herself over into a ball under the covers, and cried her heart out.

Winter days were short. The shop shut early now, and James Stark showed a surprising talent for reading aloud in the evenings: newspaper articles, novels, poetry. Graham seemed indifferent as he whittled in his corner, but all the rest, even Nell, were rapt by that fine voice rising and falling in the gathering dark. And then, by eight o'clock, nine at the latest, everyone was in bed. Coal and kerosene were too precious, even for a shopkeeper, when everything had to be imported from the East.

Rising at four thirty, Nell worked doggedly to light the kitchen fire, heat water, and get breakfast served by six thirty, usually by herself, for Pearl's condition was one of almost constant sickness. Often all Pearl could do was sit by the lean-to door in case she needed to rush out quickly. Nell did not mind: Anything she could do to help Pearl was a satisfaction. But James Stark was a very early riser, and instead of heading straight to the barn to tend the cow, he now lingered in the kitchen, starting the fire, fetching water, leaning against her as she tried—it was so cold!—to get warm over the kindling flame.

He said nothing but common words of work, of courtesy, to them both. But he had never done so for poor Martha, and Nell—"Nellie," he called her now—felt embarrassed, ashamed, fearful, and ... flattered?

And then, one morning, Graham was there, before the women. Nell and Pearl lingered on the steps, hearing the two male voices, James's low like thunder, Graham's surprisingly sharp. They stepped into the kitchen. James glanced once at her and Pearl, who shakily sat down by the door, and went out to the barn. The fire was kindled.

"I'll fetch water," Graham told Nell. "And then I'll go help Father."

He was protecting her, Nell realized. And wondered why.

Pearl's light, active body was now heavy with child, and while she was no longer sick, she sat most days, all day. Nell wished they could both have fresh air, but they were shut up in the rooms of this house, battened and ceiled as it was against the wind, with the odor of cooking and coal, sweat and manure thick in their nostrils no matter how much Nell scrubbed and washed. And the diet—bread, fried potatoes, beans, meat, with a dollop of preserves or canned fruit—was heavy as lead. Nell knew that fresh greens were what Pearl needed, and fresh milk, but the cow was almost dry, and there was no hope for anything but what they had until spring. Winter stretched out forever in a whirl of wind and snow and dark, long nights.

The two women spent the scant afternoon light sewing and

mending, looking after the three boys, although Bill spent most of his time in the shop. James Stark had given him a pennywhistle, a map, and a promise to take him to the Huron State Fair come summer. Every night, James and Bill, John, and Arthur lingered at table, the boys mesmerized by James Stark's stories of Dakota Territory as it had been when he arrived thirty years ago. As Nell washed the dishes and scrubbed the pots, she heard him talk of buffalo herds that had stretched like a dark cloud across a sea of grass, a cloud that made its own thunder. Of the great hunts that left piles of buffalo rotting under the sun, and had provided them with the buffalo hides that kept them warm this long, cold winter. Of the sod house he had built, when he decided to stay and not follow the buffalo across the Jim. It was the warmest house he'd ever known, he claimed. But no mention of the dirt of it, Nell noted, nor of the first wife who'd lived in it but a year and died giving birth to the twins, William and Harold. Or the second, who'd given him his other two sons.

But the stories were thrilling. She would glance over at her boys, open mouthed, and find his eyes upon her.

"See?" they said. "See how I've won their hearts?"

In church, Nell stood between James and Graham, her boys beside James. They loved him. Nell shared a hymnal with him. He sang well, just as he read well. He was devout in manner, sober in conduct and habits, clean in person. His courtesy—exquisite, polished, courtly—to her and to her sons drew the attention of their fellow parishioners. She knew what

they were thinking. In June, her mourning would be over, and James Stark was vigorous enough for a fourth wife. She blushed, but did not shudder.

On a cold, snowy morning at the end of March, Pearl's time came. Nell threw her shawl over her head and went racing to the doctor's, so quickly that she was back before the breakfast potatoes had time to burn. Nell ran up and downstairs with hot water, towels, and whatever else Dr. Peterson required. Soon the cries were loud enough to distress the boys in the kitchen, who dropped their forks. James Stark, who had sat like a ramrod through it all, now got up and herded the boys—with their plates—into the shop, where they joined Graham for the rest of the day.

Pearl's little girl was born by supertime.

"I want to call her Violet." Pearl's white face smiled tremulously down upon her baby. A dark-haired crown was all that could be seen above the swaddling.

"Where in God's name did you get that idea?" Graham asked from the door, his tone surprisingly hostile.

"It's a lovely name," Nell said, trying desperately to scrub away the smell of childbirth that filled the air.

"From a book by Charlotte Yonge," Pearl replied. "Mrs. Mortensen lent it me."

"Oh." He shrugged. "I'll sleep in the store tonight." And he went downstairs.

Later, as Nell, with an aching back, cleaned the last of the pots and pans in the kitchen, James Stark stood in the doorway and asked about the baby.

"She's a beautiful little girl," Nell said, without looking up from her pots. "Dark hair and violet eyes." She turned, to find his eyes fixed on her. "Pearl is going to name her Violet."

He nodded, and went into the parlor. He returned with the family Bible. Carefully he sat down, thawed the ink at the stove, and wrote down the name and date of this new member of the family.

"Children's children are the crown of old men," he quoted, "'and the glory of children are their fathers.'"

As he rose and took the Bible back to the parlor, Nell thought that he was not yet an old man.

Graham slept in the store for the next two weeks, and fell ill with a bad cold that quickly turned ragged. The coughs nearly tore him in two. James Stark had his son moved into the parlor, and kept the stove alight, water steaming away on it, no matter the cost in coal. Pearl was not allowed near her husband, nor were the boys, for fear of infection. Nell nursed him diligently for Pearl, bedding herself down in the sitting room where she could hear him in the night. But Graham got worse, despite rubbing with kerosene and dosing with camphor. Dr. Peterson feared pleurisy. He bled Graham lightly, and left a small brown bottle of laudanum to ease his cough and help him sleep.

"You'll need to be careful of the dose," Dr. Peterson said.

Nell flushed. James Stark, standing by the bedside, came to her rescue, assuring the doctor that "Nellie" would be very careful of her, sorry, his son and Pearl's husband. Nellie flushed even more.

Every four hours, Nell went into the parlor to give Graham his medicine. He would wake, briefly, swallow, and return to sleep, until awakened by another wracking cough. At suppertime she went in to feed him broth and found him trying to get up.

She pushed him back down: He was weak as a child. "Lie back down, Graham. Do you need the honey pot?"

"Pain," he gasped. "Medicine ... I need to sleep ... Forever."

Her heart cramped. "No, no, no. You need but a little more to sleep."

He clutched her wrist. "I need ... enough to sleep ... forever," he repeated.

"No, you don't. Why, in less than a month it will be May, and the sun will bake the sickness out of you. All will be well."

"Will it?" Graham asked without eagerness. "And how ... will it be ... for you? May ... June ... No more mourning ... A short time."

"It's seemed very long to me."

"I won't know you ... if you're not ... in black."

"I don't like black."

"My father ... He ... He ..."

"Hush," Nell interrupted. She did not want to discuss James Stark with Graham. "Here. Take this now, and you'll sleep like a lamb."

Graham supped his half teaspoon eagerly. "Leave it by me."

"No!" she cried. She put the bottle in her apron pocket, then put more coal on the parlor fire. "Now rest yourself. Sleep."

Afterwards, she took her apron off, setting the bottle high in the kitchen cupboard, and sat with Pearl and Bill at the kitchen table. Arthur and John were already in bed, and Violet was in Pearl's lap.

"Oh, Nell. You look so tired," Pearl said, concerned.

Nell shrugged. "It's nothing that a good night's sleep won't cure. Did I hear someone come in earlier?"

"Mrs. Mortensen called. 'Twas very kind of her, I'm sure, but she is a talker. All sorts of nonsense out of her today. Mr. Stark shooed her out at last, saying I needed my rest."

Bill looked up, with his clear blue eyes. "She said that you were to be married, Mam, come summer. Is that true?"

Nell flushed, and Pearl gave the child a sidelong glance through those golden lashes. "You see what I mean?"

"But she said everyone—"

Pearl interrupted the boy. "Bill, it's time to take Mr. Stark his

evening coffee in the shop.”

Bill leaped up. His greatest treat was to spend the last hour of the evening with his grandfather.

Once the boy was gone, Pearl asked, anxiously, “How is Graham? Truly?”

“He will be fine, I promise you,” Nell assured her. Pearl was still so white from childbirth, and her wide blue eyes were apprehensive. “I have told you before, Pearl, I would never let your husband die. I love you too well. I will do all I can to save him for you.”

Pearl nodded, her mouth fixed.

Nell lay in her pallet on the sitting room floor. Above her was the master bedroom. She heard the floorboards creaking as James Stark put himself to bed. She tried not to pay attention. Everyone expected it. Graham, Mrs. Mortensen, even little Bill. She had come to expect it herself. She had come to ... She shook herself. Were those footsteps she heard? She lifted herself up and listened. Light ... No, not his footsteps. No footsteps at all. She was imagining things. She closed her weary eyes and fell into a well of darkness.

Sounds from the kitchen. The stove lid, ashes being raked, paper crumpled, wood, coal, lid back, ice breaking on the bucket ... Nell sat up in a rush. It was morning. She did her hair and other essentials before going into the kitchen. James Stark stood by the stove, warming his hands over the fire. The boys came thundering down the stairs, followed by Pearl, holding

Violet.

"I must see to Graham," Nell said. "He's not coughing yet, that may be a good sign."

"Let me," Pearl said. "Sure and I haven't seen my own husband for a fortnight. Surely it will be safe enough just for the look."

Nell took the baby, and Pearl went running into the parlor. A moment later, Pearl gave a demon's shriek, and they all ran in. Graham was lying on his sofa bed, head thrown back, his lint-blond hair and bony face looking the sickly mirror of his father.

"He's dead!" Pearl screamed. "He's dead!"

Arthur and John began to howl, but Bill simply stared.

"The children," Nell began, but Pearl interrupted.

"And this!" Pearl snatched the little brown bottle from Graham's bedside and held it up. She turned on Nell like an avenging angel. "How could you have left this with him?"

"I ... I didn't!" Nell cried. "I took it with me ... You saw me put it up in the kitchen cupboard ..."

"How much did you give him?" Pearl hissed. "As much as you gave Patrick?"

Nell felt as if only her corsets were holding her up. The attack horrified her. "I never—"

"Everyone speaks of it. They all say that you quarreled. That he—"

"Pearl." James Stark said the one word, and she was quiet. "Bill, run and fetch Doc Peterson. Right away."

"Yes, sir." Bill was off like a shot.

"We will go into the kitchen."

James Stark marched the boys out of the room. Pearl's eyes blazed on Nell as she swept past. Nell stood where she was. What had happened? How had the bottle gotten from the kitchen to the parlor? Had Graham gotten up and managed to get past her, lying on the sitting room floor? Had she been so exhausted she did not awaken?

"Nell." James Stark's voice called her. "Come and have coffee."

She walked woodenly into the kitchen. "Where are the boys?"

"Upstairs, with Pearl." James Stark looked hard as iron, and Nell's legs gave way as she sat down. He poured her coffee. Dr. Peterson came in. "If you will follow me, Doctor."

The silent house seemed to engulf Nell. She tried to drink her coffee, but her hand shook, her stomach revolted. They would all believe that she had given him an overdose. That she had killed him. They believed she had killed Patrick, and if they had not before, they would now. Patrick, whom she'd loved. Oh, they had had terrible quarrels. But she had loved him. That was why they fought, because she loved him, and he was turning himself into a beast with drink ... And then he had tried to stop. He threw himself into his work, but his hands shook, and his

body ached, and his mind ... And it only got worse. Just a small dose, that was all. Just a small dose she had given him and then another, for he was shaking all over by then, and crying with pain. And another, when the shrieking came, scaring the life out of the boys. And another, when the shaking rocked the whole bed. And another ... And ... And he had stopped shaking. And he had never moved again ...

She looked up as the two men returned.

"Heart failure," Dr. Peterson said. "From fluid on the lungs." He shook his head. "I'm sorry for your loss, James. I'll stop in at Walworth's, if you'd like."

"I would appreciate that," James Stark replied, and escorted him out.

When he returned, Nell looked up at him, beseechingly. "It was heart failure?"

"No. But that is what he'll say, to spare us. It was laudanum." He leaned against the counter and stared down at it. "I am bitterly ashamed."

"No! I did not do it!"

"I know that." He looked out the window, at the brown street. "Oh, Nellie. You have found in this house a sorry refuge. A house of deceit and lust and lies. My grandchild is my child, Nell. Graham knew. He ... colluded to spare Martha, and then to spare you. Or perhaps to spare himself?" He shook his head. "But whether he killed himself, in despair, or she killed him, I will never know."

“Pearl!”

“She got up in the middle of the night.”

Nell gasped, suddenly seeing Pearl's little white foot slipping out of James Stark's bed ... Something twisted deep inside of her. It was all true, and she had never known ... “‘A pearl of great price.’ Too great. It has cost me everything: my self-respect, my honor, my son.” He turned from the counter, his eyes wet. “I must go up and speak with her. I have placed a notice on the door of the shop. Would you shutter the windows, and then look after the boys?”

All that day, in the dark of shuttered windows and the silence bought by the notice DEATH IN THE FAMILY, Nell watched the children, prepared food, received condolences, and thought furiously. What was she to do now? She could never marry James Stark now, and who was to say that he still wanted to marry her? Or ever had wanted to marry her? Her face was grim as she considered that he had tried to deflect attention from the truth of his liaison with one daughter-in-law by creating the illusion of desire for another daughter-in-law. And both of them murderesses, in desire, in act, in will, in result. Something he would never know, not for certain. Until, perhaps, sweet Pearl would find a need to be rid of him.

William and Harold, with their wives, came by nightfall. Sitting at supper, everyone played their roles of grief: widow, father, brothers, sisters-in-law. Nell could barely eat. After supper, Nell retreated to her room, pleading exhaustion, but truly

because if she stayed, she might scream the truth out—and no one would believe her. Instead, she packed her trunk, and the day after the funeral she and the boys went to Sioux Falls. She took in washing, she saved her pennies, she declined all help from James Stark. When she read in the newspaper that Pearl had died of blood poisoning two years later, she trembled for fear that James Stark would come for her. But he did not. She never heard from him again. She never went near Laskin again. Years later, when her sons came into their inheritance and farmed up there, she learned that James Stark had found a fourth wife, a young German woman who bore him three daughters: The first he had named Nell.

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THE BERSERK FEUD

MIKE CULPEPPER



Art by Tim Foley

When Colm got back from raiding, it was almost winter and there was little to be done on the farm. The ewe and her daughter had just gone into heat and needed breeding and there was a decision to be made about whether to geld the young ram or not. “I waited for you to come back,” said Gwyneth. “I didn’t want to decide without you.”

“Then I’m glad to be here,” said Colm, “but what are your

thoughts?" In truth, he would have supported any decision of Gwyneth's and called it perfect; he could not question the choices she made in his absence—better he had been here to make them himself!

"Well, sometimes I think one way, then I think the other." She glanced at old Edgar who sat down the bench, studying his bowl as though to raise more skyr within it. Edgar had been a slave long enough to know that he should speak only when spoken to.

"Do you have thoughts on this, Edgar?" The old man still seemed hesitant. "After all," Colm nudged, "you have more experience in these matters."

Edgar cleared his throat and began a long discussion of the pros and cons. He was toothless and his words were sometimes difficult to understand, but the choice was clear enough. A ram to impregnate the ewes would mean not having to ask for this service from another's animal; on the other hand, every flock required a wether or two to protect it and show some sense to the ewes, who were taken up with lambs and milk, and the rams, whose brains were all balls. There was no question, this year, of slaughtering the animal for meat—that must await the time that there were so many sheep that this kind of decision would be a simple, everyday occurrence. Then something Edgar said caught Colm's ear.

"You say that Ketil has a good ram?"

"He has a spotted brown. Both its parents were spotted

too. His dam bears twins two times in three and gives an extra week's milk. His sire had many offspring, good wethers and breeders, too."

"You think we should breed to this ram?"

"Oh, aye ..." Edgar shrugged. Colm knew there was more to be said.

"What else?"

"Well, Ketil has some doubts about breeding to this ram. Last season, many births were strange, including a two-headed ewe."

"Is the ram cursed?"

Edgar shrugged, "Who can say? But ..." He shrugged again.

Colm called up patience and wheedled old Edgar into speech.

"Well," said the old man, "the old ram, this one's sire is gone. Oh, that was a feast! He was heavy with meat." A trickle of saliva ran from Edgar's mouth as he recalled feeding on whatever scraps were allowed him.

"So all of Ketil's sheep are from the one ram?"

"Aye," said Edgar, "and now this young one's doing all the tugging."

"Ah!" said Colm. "You think he needs to breed out."

"Well, I believe Ketil thinks so. These things happen when

there is no new blood. Or when the animal is cursed, of course.”

“Of course.” Colm’s mind raced. “You think he might trade this ram for mine?”

Edgar raised guileless eyes. “Well, now, that would be a good trade!” He shook his head. “You are a smart one to come up with that idea.”

Colm smiled. “Gwyneth, is there more skyr? I see Edgar’s bowl is empty.”

Laughing, Gwyneth went to fetch the old man some more food.

Colm had been surprised, when he returned from raiding, to find Gwyneth at the Trollfarm. He had thought she would stay at Bjorn’s steading. And at first, Gwyneth had lived there, working at chores around the place. But Gwyneth finally determined to stay in her own house and she was a free woman, free to go wherever she wished. She got Edgar to help at the Trollfarm and live with her after the sheep came down from summer pasture. There was not enough work at Bjorn’s farm during the winter for all his slaves, and Edgar staying at the Trollfarm meant one less mouth for Bjorn to feed.

So Colm was surprised to find Gwyneth and the old man at the Trollfarm when he returned. He wasn’t jealous. Edgar was far past the age to threaten any woman’s honor—not that Gwyneth would have been blamed if she had taken a lover—but he was also too old to defend a woman, as well.

Colm had said so much to Gwyneth and she blazed back

at him, "You think I am defenseless? No man enters this house unless I allow it!"

Colm recalled that Gwyneth had killed a man two winters past, something they never spoke about. And he spotted the spear placed near the doorway, where the house was easiest to defend. And he noted the spearhead, sharper than a dagger, placed near Gwyneth's workplace, where she spun what wool she had. Still, he recalled the broken Frisian women taken as slaves and knew how futile her defense would prove against a gang of raiders. But he loved her when she showed spirit and decided not to say anything that might cause her to feel weak.

Gwyneth had spun the wool she gathered from the three sheep they owned and traded the thread for a hen and now the yard was full of chickens. There was a dog, too, from somewhere, always ready to bark a warning at any and every intruder on the place, so Gwyneth named him Gagarr. Colm had been surprised when he returned to the Trollfarm, to see it looking like a real farm with life everywhere. Some hay had been harvested, though much of the crop had been left to rot in the cold rain of autumn. Colm cut it down so that it would not choke the new grass in the spring. He saw that far more had been harvested than old Edgar could manage alone, and Colm supposed that Gwyneth had picked up men's tools and done work that, strictly speaking, was forbidden her. Not that women were ever punished for unlawfully doing men's work or handling weapons. It would take a courageous man to ever bring such an action and risk the wrath of all women everywhere for the rest of

his days! So Colm said nothing about the matter. This was another of those things that both knew but neither mentioned.

Ketil came by to examine Colm's ram. The animal gratified his owner by bleating and butting against the fence that kept him from the ewes that he could smell. Ketil said, "Well, he seems lively enough. I suppose he's up to the job."

The ewes were well along in heat now and Colm wanted to breed them soon, but he wished to avoid seeming anxious or in a hurry. He thought Ketil was willing to trade even up, but if he sniffed out an advantage, he would take it and demand that the deal be sweetened. Now Ketil said, "Of course, my ram is a proven breeder."

Colm nodded. "Yes. How are his lambs anyway?" He knew very well that several were deformed and hadn't survived long past their birth. Ketil chewed on an answer and Colm added, "Just how old is he?"

"Only four. Well, this will be his fifth breeding."

Colm nodded thoughtfully as though calculating how many years the ram had left. "Hmm ..." He already knew how old Ketil's ram was, and its complete pedigree too. Edgar was a fount of knowledge.

"Ah, well, this ram seems well enough," said Ketil. He sighed a great sigh. "I'll take a chance and swap mine for yours."

"Well ..." Colm acted reluctant. "He does have five more years of breeding in him than yours." He glanced sideways at

Ketil, watching for a sign that there was an advantage here that he could work.

“Four,” said Ketil firmly, “And my ram is proven.”

Colm sighed, paused, nodded. “I suppose this is a trade then.”

They slapped palms and agreed to meet the next day, halfway between their farms, and exchange rams. Both men were secretly pleased though neither let any sign of it show.

The new ram proved energetic and responsive, going straight to his work on being introduced to the ewes. Colm and Gwyneth watched him perform for a time, then felt a pressing need to go back inside the house. Old Edgar had already determined that this was a time for privacy and gone off on some errand or other.

Soon it was time for the autumn sacrifice. Colm was a bit nervous. This would be his first attendance as a free man and he was uncertain how to act. Also, this was his second harvest at the Trollfarm and his rent was due. The first harvest was not of much account—some hay, that was all—and the second wasn't much better, since Colm had been raiding and unable to work the place. Still, the flock increased from one to three sheep and there was a little wool, all spun into thread now by Gwyneth, and hay enough for the winter. Oh, and Gwyneth's chickens, more every time he looked, and eggs, though Gwyneth traded most of the excess for cow's milk and the tools she required to handle the wool. She had card and comb,

distaff and spindle, and lacked only a loom to begin weaving. Colm kept an eye out for proper sized wood to make one. So Colm was apprehensive when he approached Bjorn and Thorolf about the rent.

“Not much of an increase this season,” said Thorolf.

“No,” Colm agreed.

“My fault,” said Bjorn, “for taking the man away from his farm.”

Thorolf shrugged, “Faults are easy to find and one can’t spend blame. Well, there are some chickens, I believe?”

“Yes,” said Colm, “A little wool, some hay, two lambs ... Oh! And these.” He pulled the three pennies, his raiding loot, from his purse and held them out. “I think this one’s bad metal.” He pointed to the thick Frankish coin. “But the other two seem good silver.”

“Ah.” Thorolf took the Arab dirham and bent it between his thumb and forefinger. He examined the crease. “Looks good,” he said. “Suppose this penny and two chickens for the year?”

Colm nodded, relieved at not having to pay more and embarrassed at paying so little. A good farm should pay sixpence or more in rent.

Bjorn cleared his throat. “That sounds right.” He was also owed a tenth. He would take the same amount named by Thorolf so as not to put his chieftain in the wrong. He reached for the Frankish coin.

"No," said Colm, "Take the good penny. I'll keep this one as a souvenir." And to remind me of truth and counterfeit, he thought. So the three men slapped hands and, business done, set to drink and talk.

Colm was only a freed man but he had a certain status in the community. Magnus honored him for avenging his son, and others were interested in hearing about his raiding adventure. He spoke with Ketil for a time, and though neither man bragged about the ram he had gotten from the other, both had pregnant ewes and were satisfied with the trade. Gwyneth, too, found women she could talk to, though she had harder going than Colm, for women tend to be very serious about status. But both felt good about their reception at the feast. Colm made hearty toasts to the gods, especially Frey, who brought abundance. Gwyneth made silent pledges to Frey and Freya as well, praying that she would soon be with child. Both drank a little too much but neither was sick or foolish or embarrassed. It was a successful feast for them.

Winter drew on. The wolf ate the sun and daylight lasted only a few hours. Cold darkness waited outside, a great emptiness, and they spent hours huddled near the smoky fire pit, doing small chores and talking of this or that. There was some gossip, of course, and they knew some tales remembered from the places they had been born and others that they learned from the Norse. So they talked and told stories until they had said everything they had to say several times over.

One morning, Gwyneth rose, went into the yard, and killed

a cockerel. She pitched the bird into a stewpot and set it cooking. "The sun is coming back," she announced. "The days are getting longer." And Colm and Edgar breathed in the cooking aroma and felt warm and glad.

They ate the chicken, sucking the bones clean before they threw them to the dog. They laughed and told their tales again and defied winter and were happy to be alive in the cold season of death.

The days did get longer and the ewes' wool began to tug away as the lambing time approached. Three lambs birthed successfully! Again, Colm's first ewe had twins. He loved that sheep almost as much as he loved Gwyneth! Gwyneth had named the ewe, something in her own tongue. She never called its name in front of other people, but Colm heard her muttering to it once as she pulled wool from its fleece. Colm never asked her about it, since he thought this might be woman's magic and something he should not know. He left this to Gwyneth and never called the sheep by name himself.

So the spring came on, the first green showing, the air warming as the sun grew stronger. Colm was pleased and thought himself a lucky man. Then he shuddered and caught himself, for the elves delight in turning a man's brag into a curse. At least he hadn't said it aloud, he thought, and glanced over his shoulder to make certain no grinning spirit was watching him.

Colm was in a somber mood as he went into his house. He

found fault with everything and soon angered Gwyneth. They quarrelled and it was a while before they managed to make it up. There was something coming, Colm knew, something ominous, and he cursed himself for lacking the foresight and intelligence to see what it could be.

Edgar returned to Bjorn's stead and took up the chore of watching the flock at the summer shieling, Colm's few sheep as well. Colm set himself to repairing the Trollfarm. He was hauling stones to mend a fence, dragging the stoneboat by hand, when he saw the riders in the distance. He studied them, wondering if he should go back to the house and take his sword from the chest where it lay wrapped in rags. But he recognized one of the riders as Bjorn and after they came a little closer saw that the others were Thorolf and Magnus. Colm shouted to Gwyneth to make ready for visitors, then walked toward the riders, his hands spread in greeting. "Come to the house. We will have some refreshment."

But Magnus leapt from his horse and began chattering. The words came so fast that Colm couldn't take them in. He saw Thorolf and Bjorn exchange a glance. "Well enough," said Colm, "but let's go indoors and speak of this." In fact, he didn't yet know what the man was going on about.

His words brought the man up short. "You're a cool one," Magnus said, shaking his head, "Pure courage through and through. I swear, if I had a young son I would foster him with you!"

"I'm sure I would be honored," murmured Colm. In reality, he could think of little he wanted less than to be attached to this man's family.

Thorolf cleared his throat. "Yes, let's sort out the horses and go inside." It was while he was forking hay for the horses that Colm began to wonder: What was Magnus saying that should have caused him to be afraid? And right then he felt a chill clutch in his guts.

Gwyneth served them skyr and retired to her workplace, close enough so that she could hear whatever was said. Magnus started in again, but Thorolf raised a hand and quieted him. "You recall," he said to Colm, "at the Althing where Gunnlaug was outlawed that he had a cousin who spoke for him."

"Yes. Grim was his name. But he was alone."

"Well, he is alone no longer. His cousins have been in Norway and they are returning to Iceland. They are twins, Glum and Glam, and swore brotherhood with Grim in childhood."

"And the berserk!" Magnus burst in.

"Yes," said Thorolf, "They bring a companion with them who, it is said, is a berserk." All three men paused to consider what this meant. Berserks were unstoppable warriors of inhuman strength who fearlessly charged everything in their path.

"There are many things said about berserks," said Colm.

Thorolf nodded. "And some of them may be true. Anyway, it is thought these four—Grim, his cousins, and the berserk—may try to avenge Gunnlaug." Colm nodded. He understood this meant he would be their target.

Bjorn said, "I will offer them something. There is no penalty for killing an outlaw, of course, but ..."

Thorolf said, "Of course, we will offer gifts for their friendship, but—"

"Why offer anything?" Magnus shouted. "We can take them! And others will help! You've proven yourself," he gestured at Colm. "Berserk or not, you're a match for any man!"

Colm stared at the red-faced man. Magnus's eyes were angry, almost popping from his skull, spittle flew from his lips, and he flailed about in the air with his hands. All bluster, thought Colm, and no brains.

"As I said," Thorolf continued, "we will try to mend this situation, but you should know that it is said that these men have already forsworn any wergild. They demand blood."

"It is said ...'?" Colm inquired.

"All is rumor now. But the cousins and the berserk are expected to arrive in time for Althing. We will seek them there."

Colm nodded. "I am in your debt."

"No," said Thorolf, "you killed the man who murdered my daughter's intended husband. It is not you who owes me. Nor do you owe anyone else." He looked at Magnus. "We should all

consider the service you did us and then think what the best outcome of this matter should be.”

Magnus shrugged and muttered, “We owe them, I think. We owe them a blade between their ribs!”

“That may be,” said Thorolf, “and it may come to that, but let’s see if there may not be another solution.”

“Pah! This is women’s counsel! We can take them! What say you, Colm?” Magnus gripped Colm by the shoulder.

“I say,” Colm spoke deliberately, “that I will listen carefully to the wisdom of those older than I.”

Magnus released him. “I thought you had more ... Never mind! They will be here soon enough, and then you’ll be fighting!”

“Then I will be glad to have strong men aiding me.”

“Oh, I’ll be there! But these two ...” Magnus glared at Thorolf and Bjorn, then leapt up and stalked out the door. The other men sat silently until they heard the sound of Magnus’s horse galloping away.

Thorolf asked Colm, “Has Magnus ever rewarded you for avenging Gunnlaug?”

Colm shook his head. “No, but his other son gave me a handsome sword.”

“May you never need to use it,” said Thorolf. “Well, different men have different ideas of honor, I suppose.”

Colm shrugged. “I won’t judge the honor of someone

whose sword I may need to rely on.”

Thorolf laughed. “You are wise indeed. Well, let us wise men see what plan we can come up with.”

“More skyr? ” asked Colm as he beckoned to Gwyneth.

In the end there wasn’t much to say. Thorolf would speak to those men that had helped outlaw Gunnlaug. They would all gather at Althing and make an intimidating show for Grim’s party. Then Thorolf would try to placate them with gifts. Also, he would speak with Grim’s godi and try to insure that, if things did come to blows, the conflict would be confined to the four men they knew about and not become general.

Bjorn and Thorolf left and Colm faced Gwyneth. He forced a smile. “Don’t worry. This will all come right. You’ll see.”

Gwyneth shook her head. “If only you had never killed that man.”

“But look what it got me—a farm, my freedom, and, let’s not forget, you!”

“No. I had my freedom from Aud. Perhaps I could have gotten yours somehow. Then we could still be together without this.”

“Well, this is my fate. I did the one thing, other things followed. I think I am better off.”

“Which is better: To have nothing and know only hope? Or to have everything and see it taken away?”

“Ask a scholar. That’s too much for me. I’m only a poor

farmer.” He took Gwyneth in his arms and tried to comfort her and make her laugh, but she held hard to her despair. She had these moods occasionally when, to her, everything appeared black. Sometimes Colm could jolly her out of them, other times it seemed to him that she resisted and stubbornly clung to hopelessness. This irritated him but he never shouted at her. How could he demand that she be happy?

Colm waited until Gwyneth was occupied with her chickens before he opened the chest that sat just beside the entryway and took out his sword. He unwrapped the rags that covered the weapon and put them back into the chest. A spear stood ready near the entryway for use against unwelcome visitors. Colm put the sword on top of the turf wall near the spear, where he could get to it quickly if need be and where he could find it easily when he went out to work, for Colm meant to have a weapon always near from now on. He pushed the sword back into the shadow under the roof, hoping Gwyneth wouldn't see it.

The spring was warm and sunny with just enough rain. The sheep fattened and the hay crop was growing well. The Trollfarm looked like a real farm now, not abandoned and unkempt, but messy with life. This should have been a good time for Colm and Gwyneth, but both were nervous and withdrawn, brooding over things unspoken.

Colm was working in the home field when he heard Gagarr barking. There were four riders in the distance. He put down his rock lever and walked slowly and deliberately to the place he had left his sword. The riders were close enough now so that he

could see one of them was Grim, Gunnlaug's cousin. He didn't recognize the other three. Colm stepped into the angle where a hayguard jutted from the stone fence. He didn't want them to be able to come at him from all sides at once. He wiped the sweat from his forehead so that it wouldn't run into his eyes and waited. He stood erect and motionless, though his heart was pounding.

The four men reined in about ten yards in front of him. "That's the one." Grim pointed at Colm.

"Well, look! It has a sword!"

"So it does! Perhaps it means to use it. Do you think?"

The two men were as much alike as Colm's two hands. They were pink faced and plump, with sweat-matted hair the color of hay turned sour. Glum and Glam, thought Colm. He looked past them to the fourth man who sat silently on his horse.

"Oh, well, it doesn't care for us."

"No, it only wants Snaekulf. Is that so, you slave scum? Do you want Snaekulf to play with?"

Colm said nothing, but studied Snaekulf. Tall, the berserk's feet hung far past his horse's belly. He was lean and hard and strong looking. Colm thought he looked quick as well. He stared back at Colm with unblinking blue eyes that had pupils small as if they were picked out by needles. Snaekulf's lips were pulled back from his teeth as though he wanted terribly to smile but was unable to raise the corners of his mouth. He was fearful to look at and Colm almost trembled, but then he thought of other

fearsome men he had seen. He remembered Grani Lopear and thought, all things being equal, he would sooner face this man than Grani. An involuntary smile twitched at his lips. The twins caught it and turned red, both at once, like a conjure trick. Colm's smile widened.

"Are you laughing at us?" The twins' eyes widened in anger, all four of them.

"Slave dog ..." sputtered one twin, "I'll swat you like a fly! Crush you like, like ..."

"A bug!" shouted the other.

Grim pulled his horse in front of theirs. "Not yet. I have promised to speak to Thorolf the godi first. After, we'll see." He glared at Colm. "Where did you get the sword, slave?"

Colm made his voice steady. "I am a free man. This sword was a gift from someone whose brother had been murdered."

Grim nodded, still glaring. "Well, should there be a settlement for my cousin's killing, that sword may be part of it. Or maybe I'll let you keep it so that I may have the pleasure of removing it from your corpse. Because, settlement or no, I mean for you to die."

"So you mean to take money for your cousin's death and then to dishonor the settlement?"

Grim spat on the ground. "If I agree not to kill you, then I will keep to the agreement. And Glum and Glam will as well." He closed his mouth, still staring straight at Colm.

Colm took his meaning. Snaekulf was the man delegated to murder him. Colm raised his eyes to Snaekulf's and slowly spread his lips in a wide grin, showing all his teeth. He said nothing. A little shock rippled over the twins' faces and they both rocked back in their saddles. Gutless, thought Colm, and felt some satisfaction. But Snaekulf never changed his expression and Grim snarled, "Laugh now, laugh later, die laughing! Then we will laugh as well!" Then he turned his horse and rode off, the others following. The twins glanced back at Colm, both at once, but Snaekulf never turned his head.

"Hush, Gagarr. They're gone now." The dog had kept barking throughout the confrontation.

Colm picked up his tools and walked back to the house. He felt shaky on his legs and had a great urge to sit down in the cool of his own place. Gwyneth awaited him in the doorway. She gripped the spear. Colm decided not to try to joke with her.

"Are those the ones?"

Colm nodded.

"The tall one in back, is he the dangerous one?"

"Any man can be dangerous ..." began Colm, but he saw Gwyneth's eyes blaze up and reversed himself. "Yes. But the others bear watching as well."

Gwyneth furrowed her brow. "I'll find out where they are staying. We'll go at night and kill them in their sleep!"

Colm shook his head. "No. We'll follow Thorolf's plan.

Perhaps we can avoid killing anyone.”

“I doubt it.”

Colm said nothing.

Gwyneth asked, “Did you really laugh at them?”

“A little,” said Colm. “Those twins are really funny. One does something and the other is already doing exactly the same thing like they were attached somehow. You know, I bet they even fart together!”

Gwyneth sighed and shook her head. “You and your smart Irish mouth.”

Colm thought, you and your dark Welsh heart. But he didn’t say it.

“Well, I’m glad you’re my husband anyway.” She gave him a sudden fierce look. “But don’t forget I’m your wife. And I can help kill these bastards!”

Speechless, Colm could only nod. A great crowd bustled about Althing: chieftains come to make law or settle disputes, farmers arranging business deals, boys and girls flirting under the eyes of parents considering the future marriage of their offspring, and conjurors, jugglers, gamblers, and fortune-tellers persuading people to part with a coin or two. Not only was Althing government, it was a great social event where people affirmed the bonds of loyalty and friendship that shaped the community.

Most important families had specific areas that they used

year after year. They had raised walls of stone and turf on these places and, after repairing winter damage, they raised cloth and skin roofs to make a pavilion or booth where they received visitors.

Thorolf addressed the group of men in his booth. "I have spoken with Olaf, Grim's godi. He says that Grim has no other kin in Iceland than the twins he fetched from Norway."

Bjorn nodded. "Good."

Thorolf went on. "He says that if Grim should start a feud in our quarter he would feel no obligation to assist the man. And Olaf says that berserks are dangerous to have around and he would feel friendly toward any man that could remove this one."

The men all glanced at Colm. There were seven of them: Thorolf, Bjorn, Magnus, Egil Bloodhead, his cousin Thorgils, Ketil, and a farmer named Svart. Colm realized that he was the most experienced fighter in the room. Egil Bloodhead and his cousin were thought strong and fearsome, but neither had been tested. Colm had wielded a sword in battle and killed a man with it, and he had killed an outlaw, stood next to the man, and shoved a knife in him. None of these others had ever done anything like that. Colm had carried a small, cold lump of fear in his guts for weeks, and now he felt it growing. He was to be the fighter in this group.

Thorolf said, "Remember, we are not just one man." The farmers had free men they could call on for help and a number of slaves too. Probably they would outnumber Grim's force by

six to one. "We are more than just one man," said Thorolf, "But this Snaekulf is only one."

Colm nodded. He decided that he should speak. After all, he had actually seen the berserk. These others had only heard rumors. "He looks like a strong fighter, but no man is strong when he is surrounded."

"What of the others?"

"Well, you know Grim." The others murmured assent. They had never thought of the young man as a fighter. He was just a local like themselves. Most of them imagined they were his match. They looked a little less worried. "And the other two, well ..." Colm grinned. "You'll have to see them to believe what I'm going to tell you: The worst that could happen to you in a fight with them is that you split your side laughing!" He chuckled. The other men perked up at his words. Colm resolved to keep their spirits high. He described the twins, exaggerating a little, and when he said they probably farted together, the room erupted in laughter. The others all built on his joke. They imitated these men they had not seen. They speculated on their sex habits. Suppose one was with a woman, would the other know it? Suppose they were apart and one made water, would the other piss himself? And so on.

Bjorn egged them on, laughing uproariously at the feeblest joke. Thorolf smiled and kept quiet, watching for a time. "Well," he said finally, after things had quieted a little, "We've disposed of three of them, so that only leaves the one for us to handle. We

will take him as a group and he will not stand before us.” The men turned serious and nodded, mouths set. “Anyway, we shouldn’t have to fight the others. It appears that Grim is after taking what payment he can for his cousin and leaving the vengeance to this lone man.”

“Not a penny!” shouted Magnus. “Give the bastards nothing but sharp steel! That thieving Grim, pretending this is about honor and not his purse! And those fat twins! Gut them and leave them for the ravens!”

Silence followed Magnus’s outburst. Colm and Thorolf had reduced the tension by reducing the threat they faced, but now Magnus had restored it. Four armed men, at least, not just one.

Thorolf raised his hand and wagged a finger at Magnus. He said, “It is agreed that I will speak for us. I mean to end this and spill as little blood as possible. But—” He clenched his hand into a fist. “—one way or another, I mean to end this!” He glared at Magnus and swept his gaze over the others. “I will not have any man ride into my gothord and threaten one of my followers—especially one that has done us a service by eliminating an outlaw. But that aside, each and every one of my followers has my backing.” He glanced around the group, pausing to look into the faces of Egil, Thorgils, Ketil, Svart, and Magnus. “And I will not have foreigners disturbing the peace of my land! You may think two of these are jokes and the third a monster, but I tell you, they are all three fools to come here and trouble us. And werewolf or whatever he may be, this Snaekulf who has come into my country will stay here forever and I

personally will roll a stone on his grave so that he will never walk above the earth again!"

There was silence. Magnus swallowed hard and looked at the ground. Finally, Bjorn sniffed the air and said, "You know, I think I detect the scent of a barrel of beer somewhere about." Thorolf erupted in laughter, the first time he had laughed all evening, and a well-timed laugh it was, causing the others to laugh as well and break the tension.

The cask was breached, the men laughed and drank and talked. Only Magnus sat quiet, nursing his anger with swallows of beer.

The next day, Thorolf's group met up and walked among the booths, greeting friends and making a show of strength. Thorolf took them near Olaf's booth and left them outside while he went in to talk with the other chieftain. The men strutted and laughed. They kept their chins high and their chests out, but Colm detected a nervous shiftiness in their gaze. They were standing about when Grim and the twins came upon them.

"Well, look who we have here," said Grim. "Have you come to visit?"

Colm said, "We accompanied Thorolf. He speaks with Olaf now."

"Ah. Deciding what you can afford to pay for my poor cousin, is he?"

Colm shrugged. One of the twins spoke. "Who ever heard of a slave paying wergild?" The twins snickered.

Bjorn made a farting noise with his mouth. The twins looked at him, looked at each other. Svart said, "Hey, don't accuse your brother! You both done it!" Bjorn erupted in laughter. All the others began laughing as well. All except Magnus, Colm noticed. Magnus's mouth was pressed into a hard line and he stared coldly at Grim.

The twins turned red simultaneously and seemed to swell and become fatter. Bjorn and the others laughed harder. Grim shifted his angry eyes about the group. "That will cost you!" he finally spat out.

"No one will pay you a penny!" Magnus leapt forward, his hand twitching for a sword hilt. "Selling your cousin's life and pretending it is a matter of honor! Scum like you have no honor! If you were any kind of man you would have sought vengeance long ago! Yes! And met your death doing so!"

Grim's face went white, then red, then white again. "I will take no settlement from you, now or ever! And we will see who meets his death when I avenge my cousin. I cared little about you before now, I was seeking other targets." Grim nodded toward Colm, then turned back to Magnus. "I thought you had dishonor enough with a whore for a daughter-in-law ..."

Now Bjorn stepped forward, no longer laughing. "I am to marry Gerda and proud to do so ..."

"You think marriage will make her any less a slut? She was to marry one man but slept with another. Yes, Magnus! Your son wasn't man enough so she came to my cousin for her needs!"

Thorolf stepped out of the booth into the sunlight. Olaf was behind him. Grim kept on. "There's the man whose fat daughter screwed away his honor! Are you really going to fight for that slut? Why, every farmer and his slave has probably had his way with her!"

The blood ran from Thorolf's face and his eyes blazed. Colm knew then that there would be no settlement now, not ever. Sometimes fighting broke out at Althing, even though weapons were not allowed. He thought of his sword, laid aside in Thorolf's booth, and considered how long it would take him to fetch it.

Olaf stepped forward. "You speak like a fool!" he told Grim. "Don't count on any help from me!"

"I never expected ought from you since you failed to seek justice for my cousin!"

"The man was outlawed! He went into hiding! If he had come to me before the sentence was pronounced ..."

"Ha!" Grim spat on the ground.

Olaf started to speak, then fell silent as he caught sight of Snaekulf, standing behind the twins. The berserk was silent. There was no telling how long he had been standing there. All of Thorolf's group quieted as they regarded him. Snaekulf was a fearsome sight. His unblinking eyes with pinpoint pupils and teeth bared in a not-grin chilled them all.

Colm wanted to say something that would rally the other men's spirits, but could not choke up a single word.

Grim's eyes glittered. "Well, not laughing now? Tell me, Olaf, when we are done, will you help me or hunt me?"

"I urge you not to ..."

"Enough of that! I am your follower! Will you come after me?"

Olaf spoke quietly. "No. But if you act in this foolish way, I will not stay the vengeance of others. And these three—" He waved his hand at Snaekulf and the twins. "are nothing to me. In fact, I blame you for bringing them here and for causing these problems."

Grim shrugged, turned on his heel, and stalked off. Glum and Glam wheeled as one and followed but no one laughed at them. Snaekulf regarded the others for a moment, then also turned and left.

"That is a hard-looking man," said Olaf.

"He is only one and we are many," answered Thorolf.

"Yes," said Olaf. "Well, make certain you are as many as possible when you take him on. You cannot be too many for that man."

Thorolf nodded. And Colm silently agreed.

When Althing ended and the men took up their weapons, they traveled in a group back to their farms. It was a tense caravan. The men clutched their sword hilts and studied the rocky slopes for signs of ambush as they rode along. The women caught the mood and muttered nervously in their

wagons. Magnus wanted everyone to ride at once to Grim's farm and attack whoever was there, but Thorolf's scouts reported that the place was empty. It was decided that each one would return to his own farm and make ready to regroup as soon as Grim or any of his party was spotted. Then they would all attack together.

Egil and Thorgils had adjoining farms near the river. It seemed to Colm that they were pleased enough to leave the group. He wondered how much use they would be in a fight. He saw again, very clearly, that he was the main warrior here and that the outcome of the fight would depend on him. He gathered himself and thought how he would strike at the berserk. He saw his sword slashing down and cleaving Snaekulf's skull. There would be no speeches, no taunts or boasts, just rush in and kill the man. Colm set his mind to this and played it before his mind's-eye over and over. Rush, slash, strike!

They turned up the valley where the rest of the farms were situated. The first stop was at Svart's farm. They ate there and spent the night. The next day Thorolf dispatched some slaves and farmhands to the ridgetops to scout for movement by their enemies. Svart stayed at his farm and the rest travelled on to Ketil's place.

Magnus was next, still grumbling at not being able to fight yet. Then the group rode on to the Trollfarm. They searched the place carefully to make certain that no one was hiding there. It was then that Thorolf changed the plan.

"I think it best we all stay together now. They may be waiting at Bjorn's place and, if he shows up alone, they will be too many for him." The others nodded. "We will leave the women and some hands at each farm, then ride back for Magnus and the others and search these men out." And so they agreed.

Two slaves, good runners, were left with Gwyneth at the Trollfarm. They would watch the approaches and, if they saw anything, would run to get Thorolf and Magnus. Marta and her daughter Gerda dropped off at Thorolf's farm. Watchers were posted there as well. Bjorn had no family to look after his farm. He named a man as steward but all the other hands were sent out to scout the area. Some went up the mountain to the shieling where old Edgar watched the flock. Some were sent inland to the desolate lava fields. The rest fanned out around the farm. Thorolf had now set up sentries from the Trollfarm on all along the valley. He and Bjorn and Colm settled in for an uneasy night.

Magnus was eating when a runner brought him news that the berserk had been spotted. He was on the ridge above Svart's farm, spying out the place. Magnus immediately sent a man to warn Svart and others to ride to the Trollfarm and to the river to fetch Egil and Thorgils. Then he rode to Ketil's farm.

It was dark when Magnus arrived. Ketil welcomed him in and the two of them began drinking beer and plotting how they would tackle the berserk. Around midnight there was a commotion at the door and they grabbed their weapons. Svart

stumbled in. Clearly he was frightened of staying at his farm alone. The three men sat up drinking until dawn.

Just after sunup, Magnus's man returned from the Trollfarm. He reported that Colm wasn't there but that he had sent another runner on to Thorolf's place. Magnus was angry and stalked about his place yelling and shouting. After a while the others brought him back inside and gave him more beer. There was no word from Egil and Thorgils.

One of Thorolf's scouts reported seeing Glum and Glam just below Bjorn's farm, riding south. Another, breathless, came running with word that Grim was camped just past Thorolf's farm, waiting there. Then the runner came with news that Snaekulf was far to the south, above Svart's steading.

"They split up and waited for us," said Colm. "They were watching to see where we would go."

Thorolf nodded. "Now they will gather and go after the lone men—Magnus, Ketil, Svart ..."

"We could take these three on now," said Bjorn. He told them of a way to get to the road where the twins would meet Grim. There was a path down past the cliffs, then up over a rocky hillside. "They will be in sight of one another when we come down the slope, so we will be fighting all three."

Better than meeting four, thought Colm, especially considering who the fourth is, but he said nothing.

The men gathered their weapons and rode out. Four farmhands and three slaves went with them. No one really

expected the slaves to fight.

When Magnus heard that none of the men were at Thorolf's farm, he was furious. He struck the runner who brought him the message and yelled at the others gathered around. When the slave got up from the ground, Magnus hit him again, a great backhanded blow that set the man flying. The slave raised to one knee. He did not stand up again but knelt with his head bowed. Blood dripped from his nose onto the ground.

Svart and Ketil grabbed Magnus and pulled him onto the bench where he sat, breathing heavily. Suddenly he raised his head, light flashing from his eyes. "Where is the man now?"

There were eight men, five slaves and three hands, on the ridge now, watching the berserk and reporting his every move. One of them was careful to kneel before Magnus before he spoke. "He is building a fire in the sauna."

"The sauna!" Snaekulf was camped near a pool where people bathed. Svart had constructed a sauna nearby. "The sauna." Magnus slowly grinned. His eyes were red and bright as coals. "I have a plan," he said.

Colm, Thorolf, Bjorn, and the others made their way carefully along the path that ran down the cliffside. Huge basalt pillars, octagonal in section, rose on either side. Far below they could see the scattered rubble of fallen columns. Small rocks fell from the path and rang against the stone like bells, echoing all the way down. Sometimes a horse's hoof would slip on the rocky path and then ears tensed for the possible screams of

horse and rider going over. No one spoke. Everyone concentrated on the descent.

At the bottom of the cliffs, the horses picked their way through the broken rocks and finally reached the apron of hard-packed gravel and earth that edged the grassy hillside sloping above. Perhaps a stream had once flowed here and now had found another course. Perhaps, someday, that course would be blocked or a volcanic eruption would send a surge of snowmelt roaring through this channel and it would be a river once more.

The riders made their way past the eroded banks where the meadow margin had collapsed leaving walls of raw earth a yard high. Then finding a way onto the slope, they began galloping up the hillside, quick now, exhilarated at finally being loosed from caution.

At the summit, they paused and looked at the road below. They could see clearly two riders coming down from the north at a fair clip and to the south a lone man standing near a small fire pit. Colm saw right away that it was Grim. Grim raised his arm in greeting to the riders who were still a few hundred yards away, then caught sight of the men on the ridgeline above him. He dropped his arm and ran to his weapons, lying on the ground nearby.

Colm kicked his horse into action and shot down the hillside straight at Grim. He didn't pause to think, but let himself uncoil like a spring wound tight. He was on Grim in a moment, and past him. Colm yanked the bridle and dragged his horse's

head around to charge at his foe before thinking to draw his sword. Grim swung at him as he rode up, slashing a piece of his cloak. Colm had his sword free now and brought it down hard. Grim pulled his head back but his belly stuck out and the sword point caught his torso and sliced a line down his middle. Grim grabbed his stomach and stabbed at Colm, who recovered and brought his sword up hard. He caught Grim's arm on the back edge and cut off his right hand. Grim staggered back, clutching his guts with one hand and swinging the stump of the other. Blood sprayed from the wound and Grim looked at it, missing for the first time the weight of a sword in his hand. He looked up at Colm, then fell to his knees. His head bowed and his left hand dropped away from a spill of blue and grey and red intestines. Then he pitched forward onto the earth.

Colm looked up. Two slaves and one of the farmhands sat on their horses clutching their weapons. Their jaws were dropped and their eyes wide with fear as they looked at him. Colm glanced down the road. Thorolf and Bjorn were closing in on the twins and Colm galloped to join them.

Glum and Glam jumped from their horses and thrust spears at the riders coming at them. One man came too close and Glam caught him in the side. The man grabbed the spear shaft and fell from his horse. Glam yanked his weapon free and the wounded man rolled onto his face, pressing a hand against his bloody side.

Meanwhile, Glum almost caught Thorolf, who wheeled his horse away at the last moment. Glum's spear pierced the

horse's belly and it screamed and reared, pitching Thorolf onto the ground. Glum stepped forward to finish him, but Bjorn struck down with his sword, splitting Glum's head open.

Glam screamed then, louder than the horse had done, and charged forward with his spear and drove it into the guts of a slave who had come too close. A farmhand charged up behind Glam and chopped at him with an axe. Glam dropped to the ground, his split skull the mirror of his brother's.

For a few moments the men circled the corpses, breathing hard. The horses were skittish, eyes rolling white in their heads. Thorolf's horse was still screaming, trying to stand. A loop of gut protruded from the horse's wound, and it had tangled its hind hoof in it. The farmhand that had killed Glam walked over to the horse, bloody axe in hand, and split its skull the same way he had the man's. Now all was quiet except the men's labored breathing.

Thorolf said to Bjorn, "That was a fine blow you struck. At least, I think so." Thorolf gestured at Glum's corpse. "He may have different thoughts."

Bjorn said, "I'll listen hard for anything he may have to say." He grinned. He stood tall and thrust out his chest. He glanced at Colm with bright eyes. Colm nodded at him. Bjorn was proud now. He had killed a man in a fight and could stand tall beside any man. He gestured at the twins' bodies. "They may have looked foolish, but they died well." It behooved a man to praise his fallen enemy.

Thorolf walked over to the fallen farmhand but the man was dead. Something had been pierced inside and he had bled to death. The slave was still alive. The spear was still in his body. It had gone through his guts and, judging by the length of shaft protruding, had jabbed right into his pelvis. The man was doomed. Belly wounds meant a lingering and painful death.

Thorolf said gently, "Shall I remove the spear?"

The man's eyes widened. He knew that pulling the spear from his body would hasten his death. Then he closed his eyes and nodded. Thorolf grasped the spear and pulled it free in one strong motion. Blood poured from the wound and men could smell shit and see some on the spear and they all knew that was an end for this man. Thorolf motioned the other slaves over. "Stay with him until he dies. Make him as comfortable as you can, but don't give him any food or water." Thorolf looked up at the sky. "Shelter him from the sun." The slaves nodded. "Take the bodies back to my farm. Use those horses that the twins rode. I will take Grim's mount." He gestured toward the farmhand. "When we are finished I will go by and speak to that man's widow. Did ... does this slave have family?"

"He is married to a slave named Braga."

Thorolf nodded and walked over to the dying man. "Braga shall have her freedom. You have earned that for her."

The man's mouth opened but he could not force out any words. Only a low moan issued from his lips.

Now Thorolf addressed the farmhand who killed Glam.

“What is your name?”

“Adals.”

“Well, Adals, you have done well and I won’t forget you.”

The man smiled.

Colm surveyed the scene: the killers in their pride, the dying and dead men, the excited horses. His nose was full of blood-stink. His thighs began to tremble and he felt as though he might vomit. He remembered his charge down the hill at Grim when he had not thought at all but given himself over to violence. This is what the berserk has with him always, he thought. He is always in violence.

The berserk! Colm spoke, “We must head south. Snaekulf will be after Ketil and Svart, then he will come for Magnus.” He thought of Gwyneth but dismissed the idea. Not even Snaekulf would attack a lone woman. That was a crime so contemptible that only a monster with no humanity at all would commit it.

Magnus crouched behind a boulder, watching Snaekulf prepare the sauna. The room was carved directly from the hillside. Turf walls bulged out for a couple of feet. The fire pit and heating stones were just within the doorway. The benches were further back inside and higher up. Smoke rose through the roof hole.

Snaekulf filled a bucket at the pool and set it inside the sauna. He stripped off his clothes and stepped inside. He pulled shut the heavy, hide-lined door. Magnus stood up then. “Now!” he shouted.

The men ran to the sauna and levered a huge boulder against the door. Svart brought a bucket of water from the pool and poured it into the smoke hole. A great cloud of steam rose from the sauna. Inside, Snaekulf screamed. Then he howled like an animal and the door shuddered as he slammed against it. It had taken four men to roll the boulder against the door, now it moved back an inch. Magnus motioned the others forward and men crowded against the stone, holding it fast. The upper edge of the door cracked and Snaekulf punched it and broke it until he could wrap his fingers about it and rip it away. Cool air was rushing into the sauna now through the hole in the top of the door. The berserk would not be cooked alive as Magnus planned.

“Hold fast!” yelled Magnus. Svart pulled out his sword and raised himself onto the boulder with his left hand. He stabbed into the opening but hit nothing. He drew back and stabbed again. Snaekulf’s hand darted out above the blade and grabbed Svart’s wrist and squeezed it. Bones crackled and Svart screamed. He released the sword and Snaekulf pulled him shoulder deep into the sauna. He broke the man’s arm. Then he broke it again. The men pressing against the boulder heard the bones snap both times. Snaekulf howled in rage and triumph.

“Hold fast!” yelled Magnus again, but a slave fell away from the stone, his eyes rolling in fear. Another man followed. The slaves and one of the farmhands fled. Magnus, Ketil, and the other hand backed away, reaching for their weapons. The

boulder shot forward and the door flew after it. Snaekulf roared out, dragging screaming Svart by his broken arm. The berserk was naked, bright red from the steam. He opened his jaws wide and howled in rage and snapped his teeth together. He grabbed Svart's belt, lifted him overhead, and smashed him against the boulder. Svart's back was broken and he lay moaning on the ground.

Magnus thrust at Snaekulf but he was afraid and backed away even as his sword poked forward. Snaekulf dropped and dodged the ineffective blow, then rose with Svart's sword in his hand. He stepped forward and swung the weapon. The blade caught Magnus just above his ear and sliced across and down. Eyes bulging, the top of Magnus's head went flying off and his open jaw flapped against his neck.

Ketil and the farmhand turned and ran. Snaekulf came after them. He overtook Ketil and cut his leg off below the knee. The farmhand ran faster and Snaekulf threw his sword at the man. The blade flew between the man's legs and he tripped and fell down. Snaekulf was on him immediately. He grabbed the man's head and twisted it back, breaking his neck.

Snaekulf ceased howling. He surveyed the scene: Four men lay scattered about the meadow. He growled once, then slouched up to the pool where he washed the blood and sweat from his body. From time to time he shivered a little. His hands shook and he raised them out of the water and stared at them, willing them motionless. After a while, he rose from the pool and fetched his clothes and weapons. He never looked toward

Svart, who lay whimpering, unable to move, or down the hill toward Ketil, still alive but bleeding. Snaekulf mounted one of the horses and rode away from the sauna.

Magnus's wife, Ingveld, stood stone-still outside her house, arms folded and eyes hard. Thorolf questioned the slave who knelt before him shivering in fear. "How many of you were there? Did you actually see Magnus die?" The man's teeth were chattering too hard for speech. He nodded yes to every question, whether that made sense as an answer or not. Thorolf stopped interrogating the slave. "We'll find out nothing here. Come on, we'll ride up to the sauna."

Colm and Bjorn hadn't dismounted. They kicked their horses into action. Thorolf mounted and galloped after. Adals and the other two farmhands followed. Two slaves brought up the rear. Ingveld watched them ride off, her mouth pressed into a hard line.

They came upon the dead farmhand first, then spotted Ketil. The man was unconscious but still alive. Bjorn wound a strap around his leg and stopped the bleeding. Svart was alive, too, but there was nothing to be done for him. He was paralyzed and, one way or another, would die soon. Thorolf straightened his body out on the grass and tried to make the man comfortable.

The slaves and farmhands were transfixed by the sight of Magnus's body and the head lying on the grass that seemed to watch them with bloody eyes. Thorolf saw them exchanging

frightened glances and knew they would be no use in a fight. He called the men over and instructed them to make litters and transport Svart and Ketil, each to his own farm.

The horses were tired and foam flecked. The men caught fresher mounts from those left by the others. Thorolf said, "We will go tell Ingveld."

"No!" said Colm. "We will go to the Trollfarm. He will seek me there." He didn't wait for an answer, but rode off down the hillside. The others followed. Colm, Thorolf, Bjorn, Adals—they were four, just as many as those the berserk had left for dead.

Gwyneth came outside when she heard Gagarr barking. She recognized Snaekulf from a distance and went back inside the entryway to the house. Carefully, she dried her hands on her apron, then took up the spear and waited there.

Snaekulf dismounted and Gagarr snapped at him. Snaekulf kicked the dog, not terribly hard but enough to send him howling. He kept his eyes fixed on the doorway the entire time.

Gwyneth heard Gagarr's yelp but could not see what had happened. She tightened her grip on the spear. Snaekulf suddenly filled the doorway and Gwyneth lunged at him. Snaekulf caught the spear behind the head and yanked it from her grasp. He snapped the shaft and threw the piece with the spearhead behind him into the yard. He prodded Gwyneth back inside with the blunt end of the broken shaft.

Gwyneth backed into the house, shamed at being herded

like an animal, like the slave she once had been. Her eyes blazed but she kept backing up, past the fire pit to the raised woman's platform at the end of the longhall. Here she kept her distaff, her spindle, other women's tools, and the bundle of wool she was spinning. Snaekulf poked her onto the platform and she sat down hard.

Snaekulf sat on a bench and looked about. "Your husband is gone." It was not a question. Gwyneth kept silent. "But he will be back. I will wait."

"Don't expect hospitality!"

"No. I could not accept it anyway, not in the house of a man I am going to kill." He glanced up at her. "Even a berserk has honor, you know."

"That remains to be seen. What honor can there be in a life dedicated to murder?"

"It is true I deal in death, but there is honor there. I once served King Haakon but he is dead now, and I have fought against Harald Greycloak and his brothers too long to ever serve them."

"And just how does a faithful berserk manage to survive the death of his lord?"

Snaekulf looked at her and for a moment Gwyneth thought he might smile, but his expression never relaxed from the fixed mask of bared teeth and staring eyes. "I was in the south when it happened, fighting other battles. Otherwise, yes, I would have died with Haakon."

They were silent then for a time. The fire smouldered in the pit before them, the pungent sheep-dung smoke rising to fill the roof space. Gwyneth reached for her distaff. Snaekulf's eyes followed her but he did not tense. He does not fear me, thought Gwyneth. The thought reassured her and troubled her. She was reassured because experience had taught her that frightened men are unpredictable and sometimes violent, but she was troubled by her own weakness and ineffectiveness. She thrust the pointed end of the distaff into her belt and took up the spindle and began twisting a thread from the hank of wool. Even with death in the house there was no use sitting with idle hands.

The thread lengthened. The only sounds were the whir of the spindle and an occasional pop from the fire. Gagarr thrust his muzzle into the room and whined.

"Ah, Gagarr! You are all right?" In answer the dog flopped onto the floor and nipped at a flea on his backside. "I thought you had killed him," said Gwyneth.

"There is no honor in killing dogs," said the berserk. "I only kill men."

Gwyneth was chilled by his words. "How does one become a berserk, anyway?"

"I was born so. My grandfather was a berserk, they say. I am named for him." Snaekulf shrugged. "It is my fate."

"You served a Christian king. I didn't know Christians could be berserks."

"I don't know either. I belong to Odin. When he is ready for me he will strike me down in battle—I may see him then, or he may take the form of my enemy. Anyway, the Valkyries will take me to his feast hall where I will meet other heroes that have fallen. We will drink and make poetry until Odin calls us to the final battle where all will die, even the gods themselves."

Gwyneth had nothing to say to this, so she attended to her spinning. They were silent again. Gagarr began to snore and Gwyneth smiled in spite of herself.

"This is pleasant," said Snaekulf. "Pleasant and peaceful."

"Have you never thought of marrying?"

"Who would marry me? I am no use at anything but killing."

"Someone married your grandfather."

"Ah, but things were different then, I think. In those days warriors were appreciated. Now, everyone wants to be a farmer."

Gwyneth's spindle was full of thread. She snipped it free with the small scissors that hung from her apron. The thread was wound on a sleeve of bark that Gwyneth slipped from the spindle shaft. She placed the spool of thread with a row of others in the box beside her. Under the finished thread lay a sharp-pointed spearhead. She let her finger touch the hard steel briefly and firmed her resolve. She placed another bark sleeve on her spindle, drew a strand of wool from the distaff, twisted it onto the spindle, and began spinning again. After a

few minutes, she let her hand stray over to the box of thread to touch the spearhead again.

Snaekulf said, "Sometimes I think I am a large animal with other, smaller creatures all about." He looked at Gwyneth. "Like a cat in a barn full of mice. My world is no larger than theirs, but I am supreme in it." His lips pulled back from his teeth and, once more, Gwyneth thought he was going to smile, but he only grimaced. "Of course, small creatures may be crafty; they may try to take the large beast by surprise. I suppose it happens. I suppose a swarm of mice might bite open a cat's belly. Or perhaps, while the cat is distracted, one might go for his throat."

Snaekulf stood up. "So the cat must be wary, too, and always watch the mice." He leapt forward and Gwyneth recoiled, gripping the distaff while the spindle bounced against her platform and snarled the thread.

Snaekulf grabbed the thread box and turned it over. "Ah. What do we have here?" He held up the spear point. "Is this to clip thread?" He sat back down on the bench and turned the weapon over in his fingers. Gwyneth sat silently, looking into her lap. After a time she picked out the snarled thread, moistened the strands between her lips, and rejoined them. Then she began spinning again.

No one spoke. The dog slept. The fire smouldered. The spindle buzzed. They sat that way for a time—less than an hour—when Gwyneth heard the horses. The berserk heard them too. He stretched and pulled his shoulders back. Gagarr began

barking. Outside, Colm called to him, "Quiet, Gagarr!" The dog recognized his voice and ceased barking and wagged his tail.

Snaekulf rose from the bench. He held the spear point in one hand as he turned away and reached for his sword hilt with the other. Gwyneth slid the distaff from her belt and lunged from the platform. She thrust the distaff forward and up with both hands, as though it were a spear, stabbing with all the strength she could muster.

She meant to catch Snaekulf under his ribs and plunge the distaff up in his guts, but she did not connect there. The pointed end of the distaff skimmed up past his spine and struck the back of Snaekulf's neck just under his skull, pierced inward an inch or so, and broke off. Gwyneth stabbed again with the splintered shaft and pushed it into Snaekulf's back as hard as she could until her weapon lodged in bone. The berserk tried to turn toward her. "Oh," he said. "My." Then his face smoothed and his lips went slack and closed over his teeth. He fell straight down, like a hanged man whose rope is cut, face forward into the fire pit. His shirt caught flame and his hair blazed up.

Gwyneth took up a bucket of water and threw it on the fire. The room filled with the stench of burnt hair and wet dung. Gwyneth looked down at Snaekulf's body but she could not call up the strength to drag it from the pit. She collapsed back onto her platform and watched the doorway, waiting for Colm to come in.

BRING DOWN ONE

JOHN H. DIRCKX

“Your end needs to go about another yard north, Chris.”

In the harsh glare of the working lights above the stage at Pierce Hall, Ron Reese of Aardvark Amusements and his solitary helper were struggling to assemble a dunking stool. By two in the afternoon they had already put in a long day, and it wasn't nearly over yet. Reese fervently wished the gaggle of nitwits gathered around them would go away and let them do what they had to do in peace instead of plying them with idiotic questions.

“How cold is this water going to be?” asked Vance Ballard.

“About as cold as it is when it comes out of the faucet,” Reese told him. “There's no heater in here, if that's what you're asking.”

People from Hollywood didn't impress Reese, particularly this middle-aged piece of beefcake whom he remembered as the class idiot at Matthew Arnold High about twenty years ago. Ballard—they had called him “Moe” back then—didn't seem to remember him, and Reese didn't bother to refresh his memory.

“I've got the hose connected to a cold-water line.” That was Don Studebaker, the chunky, self-important stage manager who

showed about as much interest in helping with the project in hand as a union bricklayer who'd been asked to hang a door. "The water heater can hardly handle the demand from the rest rooms during a show. If we ask it for a hundred gallons of warm water at one go, it'll break down for good and all."

"Is this thing safe?" asked Mandy Follette, Ballard's ditzzy wife, who would have been even more stunningly beautiful without all those layers of rouge and mascara.

"It will be, once the tank is filled up to the line with water." Reese held two tubular steel struts in alignment while Chris Stollard ran a long bolt through them and started threading a nut on it. "Provided," he couldn't resist adding, "that your diver is over eighteen and sober and doesn't have any physical impairments."

"I've got a gimpy knee and a bad shoulder," said Ballard. "And I've got the surgery scars to prove it. That's why I'm wearing a suit for this gig instead of swimming trunks."

"Vance, you're not wearing that suit to get dunked in a tank of water."

Mandy's comment was no mere idle remonstrance but an unconditional mandate from mission control.

"Well, you're right about that, I'm not. That's why I brought that old greenish gray thing you said makes me look like the Creature from the Black Lagoon. So when did you start worrying about the drycleaning bills?"

Mandy's reply, liberally salted with street language, was cut

short as yet another showbiz bimbo appeared on stage. This one was wearing a maroon blazer and a lime green scarf. Reese recognized him as Ballard's campaign manager, Malcolm Garner, who had been at Aardvark yesterday to arrange for the rental of the dunking stool.

"You guys really need to watch the feuding in public," said Garner. "Marital discord may not hurt anybody's image in Hollywood, but it doesn't work on Capitol Hill."

"Speaking of images, was this your brainstorm?" Ballard pointed to a freshly painted sign lying on the stage in readiness for mounting.

BRING DOWN THE BOMBER

ONE BALL \$20 — TWO BALLS \$35 — THREE BALLS \$50

"I thought we agreed we were trying to get away from the picture of the muscle-bound moron in a football jersey."

"Vance, you're paying me to do that kind of thinking for you, remember? The vast majority of your voting public are morons. They find it easier to identify with a guy in a football jersey than with a shifty politician mouthing clichés and doublespeak.... Okay, don't blow your top. That's just the way things are."

Reese and his assistant had finished attaching the top edges of the vinyl water tank to the framework. "If you'd like to start running in the water now," Reese told Studebaker, "we can check for leaks and do a test run." He looked at his watch.

Studebaker positioned the end of a hose in the tank and disappeared somewhere into the wings. By the time he returned, water was cascading noisily into the tank, gradually pulling the wrinkles out of its vinyl skin.

“How much water is going to splash out of the tank if he gets dunked?” Studebaker wanted to know.

“Some,” said Reese. “That’s why I had you put down the tarp.”

“This stage goes back to the days of vaudeville. It’s got more holes and cracks in it than an English muffin. There’s some scenery stored right below here, and a lot of electrical wiring—”

“Your tarp should take care of that. You’ll have a better idea after we run the test.”

Reese uncoiled a fifty-foot power cord. “Want to plug that in somewhere?”

Studebaker took the cord and examined the heavy three-bladed plug. “Why two hundred twenty volts if there’s no heating coil?”

“That’s the way they made it,” said Reese with a shrug. “It takes a powerful solenoid to release that perch when somebody’s sitting on it. Plus you’ve got the lights and the sound effects.”

A remote television crew was wheeling equipment down a side aisle. One of the three men came forward and mounted the

stairs at stage left.

"Why, here's our champion skater," said Garner.

The face of Hi Crivelli, the local TV news anchor, was all too familiar to Reese. He thought he detected in Garner's tone a trace of the mild scorn with which most residents of the metropolitan area, Reese himself included, regarded Crivelli.

"Just passing through," Crivelli said breezily. "Want to get the lay of the land. Gotta do a live news spot at three." He made Vance and Mandy a fawning obeisance, cold-shouldered Garner, and totally ignored Studebaker and the men from Aardvark. After peering into the tank, he dipped a finger into the glittering, restless water as if to test its temperature. Then, shading his eyes with one hand, he struck a pose while he peered around the empty hall as if planning where and how to stand so that the camera would catch him at the most flattering angle.

By the time Reese gave Studebaker the signal to turn off the water, his colleague Chris had made two trips to the truck parked in the alley, bringing in a cement block on a length of polypropylene rope and a net bag containing about two dozen softballs. Reese positioned the cement block on the triangular metal perch above the water and they all gathered around for the trial run.

"You'll want to measure off a line for the pitchers to toe, about twenty feet back from the target," he said. "Unless you plan to do a lot of swimming." He handed a ball to Vance

Ballard.

“Don’t give it to me,” said Ballard. “I’m the dunkee.”

“No comment,” said Mandy. Her fourth ball, thrown underhand from a distance of about a yard, struck the target squarely, allowing the cement block to crash into the tank. A plume of water shot upward, a bell like a fire alarm jangled stridently for a few moments, an ah-oo-ga horn joined in the din, and a display of red, white, and blue lights flashed on and off in the backdrop of the perch. Mandy clapped her hands.

While waiting for the turbulence of the water to subside, Reese walked around the tank looking for leaks. Then he fished out the cement block while Chris packed up the tools.

“Aren’t you guys staying around for the fun?” asked Garner. “What if we have a malfunction?”

“You won’t.” Reese gave him a receipt to sign. “We’ve got a truckful of tables and chairs to set up for a wedding reception by six thirty. Just let me check your power supply before I go.”

Garner, Crivelli, and Studebaker left the stage in a group, closely followed by the Ballards. “The doors open at four,” Garner reminded them all as they separated in a rear passage. He waited while Ballard and Crivelli engaged in a brief but animated discussion at the door to the loading platform. Once Crivelli had dashed off to the television studio to do his three o’clock live news update, Garner steered Ballard across the alley to the Skyliner Hotel for a conference.

After finishing his dinner and filing pans, dishes, and

silverware in the sink for future reference, Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn tried to remember whether he'd brought his bowling shoes in from the car last week. When the phone rang, he immediately gave up the inquiry, on the assumption that he wasn't going to make it to bowling tonight. He felt even more certain of that when he found that the caller was his immediate superior, Lieutenant Savage.

"You a Vance Ballard fan, Cy?" asked Savage.

"Not exactly."

"Stamaty just called in from Pierce Hall. He's got a fatal electrocution over there, possibly a homicide. The victim is Ballard, and his wife, Mandy Follette, is in the hospital in a coma."

Auburn closed his eyes to aid reflection. Not once during his three years in pro football, much less during his eight years in films, had native son Vance Ballard condescended to return to his hometown. Now that his acting career had stalled and he'd decided to try his hand at politics, he was suddenly very much in the public eye locally.

If Auburn remembered correctly the agenda that had been sketched out at report this morning, Ballard's dunking stunt at Pierce Hall, a fundraiser for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, had been sandwiched in between a luncheon at Republican Party headquarters and a black-tie dinner, a fundraising function of a different sort, that evening. Dunking stunt ... fatal electrocution, possibly homicide ...

The southbound traffic in the 200 block of DeWire had been reduced to a single crawling lane by a dense phalanx of police cars, rescue vehicles, ambulances, and TV trucks massed in front of the Civic Auditorium, better known as Pierce Hall. He had to park more than a block away, and at that he barely beat the police evidence van to the spot.

As a boy, Auburn had attended Saturday morning cartoon festivals at Pierce Hall for fifty cents. Even in those days the city council had been trying to decide whether to upgrade and remodel the place, sell it, or tear it down and build a municipal parking garage on the site. So far, none of the above had happened. Dark, drafty, and dirty, the hall eked out a humble existence as the official venue of the local philharmonic orchestra and the Civic Theater Guild. Otherwise it was used only a few times a year for miscellaneous celebrations, ceremonies, and public meetings.

Auburn made his way with difficulty through a dense throng of onlookers on the sidewalk, which included TV cameramen and reporters. A uniformed patrolman let him in one of the tall doors of tarnished brass that flanked the box office. In the dimly lighted lobby police officers, rescue personnel, and civilians of indeterminate status milled around in ill-defined groups, all talking at once.

Lieutenant Savage broke off from one of those groups and collared Auburn. "Up on the stage, Cy. Stamaty's in there somewhere."

The presence of the lieutenant at the scene after hours was an indication of the gravity of the case and the repercussions it was likely to have in the press and elsewhere. Auburn knew better than to suspect Savage of turning up just to make sure he got his name and picture in the paper.

“What’s this about Mandy Follette being in a coma?” Ballard’s endless squabbles with his actress wife were perennial fare for the tabloids and scandal sheets.

“They found her unconscious in the center aisle, up near the back, right after this happened. The paramedics took her to the hospital. I think she probably just fainted, but don’t quote me on that. Temporary loss of consciousness isn’t my department.”

In contrast with the lobby, the cavernous auditorium was silent and nearly empty. The green velvet curtain was down. Between the front row of seats and the stage, three men stood hunched over a TV monitor. If Auburn had been mildly surprised to find Lieutenant Savage at the scene, he was positively dumbfounded when he saw that G. Lawrence Lodewick, the county coroner, was one of the men watching the monitor.

A once-prominent local surgeon now semiretired, Lodewick had been coroner for more than thirty years. In Auburn’s seven years as a detective, he’d never seen the coroner outside a courtroom. Certainly Lodewick had never turned up at a death scene before. Eventually it dawned on him that the coroner had been present for Ballard’s dunking stunt because of his political affiliations and his alignment with

Ballard's sponsors.

As soon as he recognized Auburn, Lodewick had the TV technicians run the tape back to the beginning for a replay. After a preliminary jumble of junk and another two or three minutes of inane burbling by the emcee, Hi Crivelli, the show got under way. Auburn watched Vance Ballard squirming on his perch while three pitchers in succession hurled balls in the general direction of the target, obviously with no intention of hitting it. The fourth, an athletic type with an arch and determined look, missed the target with his first ball but connected solidly with the second.

The sound effects provided by the dunking machine briefly drowned out the roar of the crowd as Ballard plummeted out of sight amid a gush of water. His head appeared again almost immediately as, smiling grimly and clinging to the ladder with one hand, he reached up with the other to grip the perch, which by now had sprung back to its horizontal position. Abruptly his head flew back, his upper body went rigid, and he disappeared again below the surface of the water.

For about two seconds the audience maintained a stupefied silence. Then the auditorium erupted in a storm of confusion and horror. Crivelli, the emcee, stood mute for perhaps the first time in his career. Then a stocky man in a yellow coverall appeared from nowhere, plunged both arms into the tank, and pulled Ballard's head and shoulders above the water level. Crivelli, dropping his microphone, now came to the other's aid. Almost immediately the scene was crowded with

more rescuers. The videotape ended as the curtain came down.

"We don't experiment on human subjects with electric shock the way the Nazis did," said Lodewick in his pompous, droning voice. "The animal protection groups won't even let us do it on monkeys. But it's not as if none of us had ever seen what a strong current of electricity does to the human body. We still use electric shock to treat depression. A few of us have even had the revolting experience of watching films of judicial electrocutions that had been made for legal documentation. I don't think there's any doubt that Ballard took a massive jolt of electricity as he was trying to climb out of the water."

"I understand there's some concern about the possibility of homicide," remarked Auburn.

"To me," said Lodewick, "this looks like just another freak accident designed to give the coroner a few more gray hairs. Nowadays politicians rely on smear campaigns to demolish their opponents. They don't resort to homicide—at least not in these latitudes.

"That being said, we're still going to go the distance to prove that this wasn't first-degree murder. After all, Ballard grew up here in town. He may have left somebody behind who's been waiting all these years to get back at him for something. You know the saying: Man is the only cold-blooded mammal." After that exit line, Dr. Lodewick marched up the center aisle with pontifical dignity and left the auditorium.

Auburn turned toward the stage. “Nick?” he called. “You back there?”

“Come through the door on your right, Cy. Then up the iron stairs.”

Auburn emerged from among dusty and moth-eaten hangings onto the stage, where every available floodlight and spotlight seemed to have been turned on. Having watched the video of Ballard’s death, he found the scene here almost anticlimactic. The dunking apparatus, looking like a hybrid between a pinball machine and a children’s wading pool, occupied center stage.

Between it and the curtain lay Ballard’s body, his hair and clothes still sopping wet and his face mottled an intense shade of lavender. The paramedics had ripped up his shirt and attached monitor pads to his chest before retiring in defeat to run Mandy Follette to the hospital.

Nick Stamaty, the coroner’s investigator, was kneeling beside the body. In addition to the regulation pair of rubber gloves, he was wearing a disposable plastic apron to protect his trousers from the film of unsavory gray muck on the stage that had resulted when several gallons of water had mingled with several generations of dirt.

“Don’t touch that,” he warned, as Auburn approached the dunking tank. “We don’t know exactly how he got shocked. If he did.”

“Did you watch the video? The guys who pulled him out—”

"Even so ..." Stamaty stood up. "Absolutely nothing in his pockets. I guess he was figuring on getting dunked at least once. Know what that reminds me of?" He pointed to the sign hanging above the dunking machine. "Bring down the bomber?"

"Not offhand, but I'm sure you won't keep me in suspense for long."

"Arithmetic. 'Eight minus five leaves three, bring down the seven.' Can I call the mortuary crew, or is Kestrel coming over to test the water for cholera germs?"

"He'll be here eventually. I think I beat him to the last parking place this side of the river."

Almost immediately Sergeant Kestrel, the evidence technician, appeared on the stage with his field kit and camera case. Stamaty dutifully repeated the warning about electric shock just as if Kestrel weren't a perennial thorn in his flesh.

"Somebody's going to have to go over it eventually," objected Kestrel.

"The people from the rental agency are on their way in."

"Did anybody think of unplugging it?"

A hefty middle-aged man in a paint-splashed yellow coverall emerged from the wings. "Long ago," he said. "Which one of you is Sergeant Auburn?"

Auburn showed identification.

"I'm Don Studebaker. The other detective officer said I should give you a statement."

Auburn got out a three-by-five-inch file card and his pen. "I was just watching you on videotape," he said. "You took quite a chance, pulling Ballard out of the water."

"Fools rush in," said Studebaker, with the synthetic affability of a compulsive extrovert or a born salesman. "I was at the switchboard there in the wings when it happened. I couldn't see Ballard—all I knew was that something had gone wrong. I hit the switch to drop the curtain and ran out here onstage. Everybody was standing around with their faces hanging out, and there was Ballard completely underwater. I thought maybe he had a heart attack from the sudden cold, or hit his head when he went down."

"What's your position here, Mr. Studebaker?"

"Don. Stage manager. It's just a part-time job. I'm retired Navy. Spend most of my time selling real estate. Can I show you something down below?"

"Sure," said Auburn, hoping he wasn't setting himself up for a sales spiel about a lakefront retirement cottage in Tennessee.

He followed Studebaker down a ramp leading from the wings at stage left to a subterranean storage and work area, a mysterious place of dust and deep shadow. "I came down here to check on the wiring under the stage," said Studebaker. He switched on a flashlight and led the way among an indescribable jumble of props, lumber, canvas, rope, and buckets of paint. "And here's what I found." He shone the light upward to reveal gleaming patches of wetness on the

undersurface of the strongly braced stage, on which Kestrel and Stamaty's footfalls resounded like drumbeats. "Now take a look down there." He offered the flashlight to Auburn.

"Thanks, I've got one."

They were standing at the brink of a dark and cobwebby pit, about eight feet square and at least eight or ten feet deep. Its walls were lined with brick, its floor carpeted with rubbish, among which a heavy electrical cable lay coiled like a python in its terrarium at the reptile house. A stream of water had run down one wall and formed a puddle on the floor.

"When they built this place," explained Studebaker, "it had a pipe organ, and the wind supply came from a blower down in this pit. The organ wore out years ago and they sold it for parts."

"Surely that cable isn't live after all these years?"

"I don't know about that. I'm the last of a long line of stage managers here, and I don't think some of those other guys could even read, let alone wire up a spotlight the right way. There must be about three miles of wiring in this place that I've never been able to trace out. That organ cable comes out of a piece of underground conduit, and God only knows where the other end of it is, because I sure don't." He started back toward the ramp.

"But even supposing the cable is live," objected Auburn, "there's no way the water that spilled out of the tank could have run all the way down here fast enough to pick up any current from it."

"Ah, but there is," said Studebaker. He stopped at the foot of the ramp and switched off his flashlight. "A couple of hours before he got dunked, we did a trial run with a cinder block on the seat, and four or five gallons splashed out onto the stage."

"Wasn't that sheet of plastic under the tank then?"

"Yes, but it isn't plastic, it's canvas, and there's a big slit in it. Probably army surplus from the Civil War. On my annual budget, a family of one could starve. I guess I don't have to explain that to a fellow city employee."

"You say you did a trial run?"

"Not personally. The guys from Aardvark ran the test, but I was up there with them."

"Who else was there?"

"Mandy Follette—she threw the ball—and a guy named Garner, that's Ballard's campaign manager, and Hi Crivelli, the emcee. And of course Ballard himself."

"Are you acquainted with any of these people?"

"Never saw any of them in person before this afternoon, except Crivelli. Everybody in town knows Crivelli, but he doesn't know me."

"They did this practice run a couple hours before the public event?"

"It must have been around two thirty or a little after, because Crivelli said he had to get back to the studio in time to do a live news spot at three."

"What time did the dunking program start?"

"The doors opened at four and the curtain went up at four thirty."

"Where were you in the meantime?"

"Right here. I had to hang the sign over the machine and change a burned-out spot up in the balcony."

"What about the rest of the people you mentioned?"

"They all left."

"Together?"

"Pretty much. The rental guys had their truck parked by the loading dock out in the alley. The others left that way too. Ballard and Crivelli were having some kind of argument as they went out."

"What were they arguing about?"

"Something about payback time, percentage. Maybe some kind of business deal that went sour. I only overheard about ten seconds of it."

"Did they all come back together for the program?"

"Ballard and Garner did, but Mandy Follette wasn't with them. She must have come in late through the lobby. The people who ran out that way to call the paramedics found her at the back of the center aisle, unconscious."

"What are the chances that somebody tampered with the dunking machine between the test run and showtime? Did you

see or hear anything unusual before the show started?"

"I certainly didn't see anybody. But you don't pay any attention to noises in an empty theater. You've got nylon ropes and steel cables under tension, you've got lights with reflectors that expand and contract as they heat up and cool down. There are acres of canvas hanging up in the fly."

"In the which?"

"The fly." Studebaker started up the ramp. "The space above the stage. It's about four stories high and it's full of thermal air currents. Things never stop swinging up there. Pulleys creak, battens squeak, and sometimes a bird or a squirrel gets in. When you don't hear anything in a theater you go to the doctor to see if you need a hearing aid."

As they reached the top of the ramp, Stamaty appeared in the wings at stage right. "The guy from the rental agency is here," he called to Studebaker. "He wants to empty the tank and he's looking for a drain."

The man from Aardvark, with a vigilant Kestrel at his elbow, was uncoiling hose from a portable pump.

"I don't know how safe it is to touch that thing," Studebaker told him.

"Should be okay as long as it's unplugged."

"We think there's a possibility," Auburn explained, "that some current is getting into the machine through the spilled water from some wiring down below."

The Aardvark man wore a black plastic clip-on bow tie, and the name patch on his short-sleeved white shirt read RON. "That could be," he conceded, "but I doubt it. There'd have to be a complete circuit." He gnawed at a ragged mustache and kept his back turned toward Ballard's body, while with Studebaker's help he started pumping water from the dunking tank.

"Were you the one who rigged up this machine earlier this afternoon?" asked Auburn.

"Along with a buddy, Chris Stollard."

Auburn got out a file card and recorded the full name of Ronald Edward Reese and other particulars.

"Were you personally acquainted with Ballard?"

"Yes and no. We went to high school together at Matthew Arnold, back in the eighties. But I don't think he remembered me. At least, he didn't let on if he did. Of course, I didn't have this bush on my lip back then."

"Have you ever had any accidents like this with a dunking machine before?"

"Scratches and bruises. Never heard of anybody getting a shock. And I don't believe Ballard got one, either. The grounding prong in the plug is intact and the polarity of the outlet is okay. That means that, as long as it was plugged in, all the bare metal was grounded. And all the wiring and relays inside are double insulated."

"That remains to be seen," said Kestrel. "The wiring will

have to be examined, either here or at headquarters.”

“This is the only one of these things we’ve got,” objected Reese. “It may already be scheduled for another rental in the next couple days.”

The appearance of Lieutenant Savage on the stage squelched the minor tiff that was brewing between Kestrel and Reese.

“Public Safety will have to impound your machine,” he informed Reese in a tone of finality. “If we don’t, the coroner’s office will. There’s too much at stake here to do things any other way.

“A man just died in mysterious circumstances. Your company is going to be facing liability issues, and so is the city as the owner of the auditorium. Ballard’s life insurance company is going to want to know what happened to him. Even if nobody presses criminal charges there’ll be suits and claims and counterclaims. Besides, he was a public figure. The national news services have this by now. Everything we do will be scrutinized, analyzed, interpreted, and packaged for mass consumption by the media in their usual warped and cynical style.”

Reese had finished draining the dunking tank and was coiling up hose again. “Do what you have to,” he said. “I don’t own the business, I just work there.”

“Sergeant Kestrel will give you a receipt for the machine,” Savage told him, “and you’ll have it back just as soon as he’s

finished with it.”

Savage drew Auburn aside as the mortuary squad came in to remove the body. “Mandy Follette is in satisfactory condition,” he said. “Just a fainting spell, like we thought. I let Crivelli and the two TV guys go. They said they had urgent commitments elsewhere, and we don’t want to ruffle the feathers of any of our local media people right now.

“We’ve got everything Crivelli saw and did on videotape. The camera crew says they spent the whole afternoon together, most of it up the street at the Sahara Club. You can track them all down tomorrow, but I want you to get a statement from Garner tonight—Ballard’s manager, or agent, or whatever he is.”

“Where is he?”

“In the lobby. If you can’t pick him out, you go back on patrol duty tomorrow. I’ll give you a little hint: He’s the only one out there wearing a green scarf.”

As it turned out, Garner was practically the only one out in the lobby, period. A compact, mobile man in his fifties with a salt-and-pepper mustache and a scotch-and-brandy complexion, he slipped on a pair bifocals briefly to examine Auburn’s ID with a vaguely theatrical air.

“I can’t tell you what an ordeal this has been,” he said. “Look how I’m shaking.”

“I know it’s been a rough evening for you,” said Auburn. “I won’t take any more of your time than I have to.”

"What can you tell me about Mandy? The hospital isn't giving out any information."

"I understand she's doing okay."

"Does anybody have any idea what happened to Vance? Heart attack and electric shock seem to be the obvious possibilities."

"We won't know anything until after the autopsy and a thorough examination of the dunking machine." If then, thought Auburn.

They sat on an ornamental built-in bench, hard as flint, at the side of the lobby while Auburn recorded basic identifying data on Garner. "How long had you been working with Ballard?" he asked.

"As his campaign advisor, about four months. But I've known Mandy for years, and I met Vance before their wedding."

"Did you fly in with them this morning?"

"No, I got in yesterday to make arrangements for all the activities we had scheduled for today." He looked at his watch. "About now, a lot of people in formal attire are finishing a very expensive dinner at the Dockside Restaurant. But the guest of honor's chair is empty."

"What can you tell me about what happened here tonight?"

Garner's account added little to what Auburn already knew from the video and his interview with Studebaker. He said he'd spent the interval between the test run with the dunking machine

and curtain time with Ballard in the latter's room at the Skyliner Hotel across the alley from the theater. They'd reviewed plans for the dunking stunt and touched up Ballard's address for the dinner.

"Whose idea was this dunking?"

"Ballard's. He was the kind of guy that'd do anything to get his name in the paper and his face on TV screens. At different times he was a professional athlete, a movie actor, and a politician. Those three breeds of cat all have one thing in common: king-sized egos. What else do you need to know?"

"About Ballard's relations with the people who were here tonight?"

Garner nodded with a humorless, introspective smile. "Well, his marriage was one long series of temperamental clashes. As long as he was a starting linebacker and Mandy was Hollywood's favorite ding-a-ling, they got along fine together. But after one too many injuries put an end to his athletic career, Vance turned up in Hollywood himself, playing a former football star in a movie called *Running Back*. It didn't get any Oscar nominations, but it pulled down megabucks at the box office.

"Mandy resented that, felt like she'd been upstaged, and she's been fighting it ever since. The battle of egos got worse with each picture Vance made, and things really went sour after they made one together because that was a flop, and suddenly nobody was sending either one of them any more scripts.

"But don't try turning that into a motive for murder. Vance's death was obviously an accident, and Mandy's one and only offensive weapon is her tongue. As for the rest of the people here tonight, they're all local. Vance didn't know them from Adam."

"What about Crivelli?"

Garner emitted a faintly contemptuous chuckle. "Oh, yes, Vance knew him, all right. He was an old flame of Mandy's, and he presumed on that to weasel some kind of favors out of Vance."

"I understand they had an argument this afternoon. Were you there at the time?"

"I wouldn't call it an argument," said Garner. "Just an exchange of good-natured ragging, as they were leaving by the stage door. I didn't hear enough of it to tell you what it was about."

Garner denied any knowledge of significant conflicts involving Ballard or of threats against him. His plans for the immediate future were highly uncertain, but he expected to be in town for at least the next couple of days.

Auburn set out on a tour of exploration so as to gain a better understanding of the comings and goings of the principals. At the rear of the building, huge overhead doors opened out to a loading dock on the same level as the stage. He nearly locked himself out of the building while ascertaining that the steel fire doors could be opened from outside only with

a key. Six parking places just off the alley were empty except for a large panel truck with the Aardvark logo and a cruiser pulled in obliquely with its lights flashing, where the hearse had just left. A few onlookers lingered in the alley but kept their distance. The April night was cool and damp.

Kestrel was puttering with the dunking machine. Auburn stood for a long time looking up into the lofty space above the stage, which Studebaker had called the fly, where canvas backdrops swung gently in the shadows, cables dangled, and rows of lighting fixtures sprouted like nightmare flowers from tubular steel boughs.

At eleven that night, he watched Hi Crivelli bleat forth the latest sensation during his regular newscast. "Well, it wasn't just a publicity stunt, but was it murder? That's the question that has police baffled as they try to put together exactly what happened at Pierce Hall this evening, where Hollywood hunk and aspiring lawmaker Vance Ballard died after tumbling into a dunk tank during a benefit appearance for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society ..."

The victim's widow was reported to be resting under heavy sedation in her hospital room.

Next morning Auburn was up an hour earlier than usual. As he'd expected, the death of Vance Ballard had become a media circus, preempting topics of graver import from the national news. The local paper contained a hastily assembled summary of Ballard's career, still shots from some of his films,

and a picture taken at his and Mandy's wedding. Although the results of a midnight autopsy didn't make it into the morning papers, every TV and radio station blared forth the news that Ballard had almost certainly died by electrocution.

Ordinarily Auburn had to construct a picture of a homicide victim from what others told him, with hints gleaned from an examination of the corpse. In this case, he already had an overabundance of mental images of the victim from his many appearances on the movie screen. Was the real Ballard anything like the naive and charmingly inane ex-football star who couldn't adjust to life after college in *Running Back*? Or the wealthy stockbroker in *Mousie! Mousie!* whose inability to accept his child's mental retardation drove him to alcoholism and suicide? Or the senator who committed one fatal indiscretion in *The Slippery Slope*? Or the evil wizard outwitted by leprechauns in *Charmed, I'm Sure*?

Before leaving home, Auburn called headquarters to verify the preliminary autopsy findings. Burns on both of Ballard's hands and an absence of organic disease strongly supported the conclusion that he had suffered a fatal electric shock. At two A.M. a team of troubleshooters from the power company had descended into the pit under the stage at Pierce Hall and traced the old organ cable to a fuse box hidden behind piles of scenery. A safety inspector from the city engineer's office was now at the scene checking for evidence of code violations or recent tampering.

The death of Vance Ballard looked to Auburn more like an

accident all the time, but he wasn't getting paid to cut corners by following cozy preconceptions.

He started his day with a visit to Mandy Follette at Chalfont Hospital. Several local media people were lurking in the lobby and corridors of the hospital, but Auburn managed to get past them without being recognized. He conferred briefly with a uniformed policeman standing guard in a lounge before knocking and entering Mandy Follette's room.

He was on the point of expressing his condolences to the new widow, but at his first sight of her the words froze on his lips. Sitting up in bed breakfasting on dry toast and mineral water, she seemed the picture of placid contentment. By some miracle of cosmetics and stagecraft, she looked more like a new bride than a new widow. A bedside stand was buried in flowers.

Auburn showed identification and apologized for intruding.

"I'm all right," she said. "When this stuff they've got me on wears off, I'll probably come apart at the seams, but I'm okay for now. Ask me what you have to."

The newspapers strewn over the bed seemed a logical point of departure. "I believe you're aware that we're investigating your husband's death as a possible homicide," he said. "Was there anyone at the theater yesterday who you believe might have had a reason to kill him?"

"You mean besides me?" Mandy Follette the movie star was known for her lilting laugh, her captivating pout, her general

air of brainless vulnerability. None of those features were in evidence this morning. "Vance was arrogant, vain, and selfish. But that's an occupational disease that all public figures suffer from, myself included. He could be just as charming in real life as on the screen, and thoughtful, and sincere. I can't imagine anybody wanting to kill him."

"I believe you were at the theater while the dunking machine was being installed and tested?"

"Yes. In fact, I threw the ball for the test."

"Where did you go after that?"

"We all went across the alley to the hotel. Vance and Malcolm Garner were working on Vance's speech for the dinner last night, so I went out for a walk. Just around town, watching the rush-hour traffic. I've never been here before and I wanted to see the town where Vance grew up." She sank back against the pillows. "And I got lost."

"When did you get back to the theater?"

"I was just coming through the lobby doors when I heard the bell and the horn from up on the stage, and I knew Vance had gotten dunked. So I hurried on through the lobby, and as I was coming down the middle aisle I saw them pulling him out of the water, and everybody was yelling that he wasn't breathing and his heart had stopped. I'd been rushing along the sidewalks for the past ten minutes, and I hadn't had much lunch. Anyway, the next thing I knew I was in the ambulance."

"How well did your husband know Hi Crivelli?"

“Hardly at all. Hi and I went to grade school together. He turned up in Hollywood three or four years ago and I introduced him to Vance.”

“Did you hear them arguing at the theater yesterday?”

“No, but if they had an argument I can tell you what it was probably about. Vance helped Hi get a job as a sportscaster at one of your local TV stations. I wouldn’t want this to get into the papers, but, well, Vance made a business proposition out of it. Hi promised to pay him a commission, a percentage of his salary for the next five years. Vance knew Hi had moved up to doing the weather, and then become a news anchor, and he expected Hi to come up with bigger payments.”

She was looking paler by the minute under her makeup. Auburn finally got around to expressing his condolences and left her to grieve in solitude.

He phoned Crivelli from the lobby of the hospital and found him at home. In twenty minutes he was ringing the doorbell of Crivelli’s bachelor condo on the south fringe of downtown.

Everybody in town, as Studebaker had put it, knew Hi Crivelli. A former Olympic skater, he had attained increasing prominence and exposure in the past two or three years as a local television personality, master of ceremonies at public functions, promoter of popular causes, judge of talent contests, distributor of prizes, and all-around social climber.

Crivelli came to the door wearing a terrycloth bathrobe and about eight dollars’ worth of hair spray. “You the detective who

called?"

Auburn showed identification.

Crivelli showed more teeth than a ten-speed bike. "Come on in. Place is a mess. I had three reporters here at six o'clock this morning." He moved cups off the coffee table. He didn't offer Auburn any coffee.

"I'll try not to take too much of your time. I'd just like to get your input on what happened at the theater yesterday."

Crivelli knew nothing and took twenty minutes to say so. After the test with the dunking machine around two thirty he'd rushed to the studio for the three o'clock live news spot. When he left the theater, Ballard, Garner, and Mandy were walking across the alley together toward the Skyliner Hotel. The men from the rental agency were already gone. As far as he knew, that left only Studebaker and the remote camera crew at the theater.

"How close were you to Ballard?" he asked.

"Me? Not close at all. You can't get very close to a guy who's that madly in love with himself."

"I understand you had some business arrangement with him. Something about a recommendation for a job?"

The plastic smile turned into a sullen frown. "That's confidential. I don't know where you got that, but it's confidential. The program director at Channel 4, Carl Hagan, was an old buddy of Ballard's. Ballard got him to hire me to do live

sportcasts and fill in the rest of the time with odd jobs around the studio. But since Ballard was as mean as a snake, all his favors had price tags.

“He charged me a commission, a percent of my salary from the station. Handshake agreement, payments in cash, nothing in writing. That was okay with me till I found out I couldn’t deduct the commission payments for income tax purposes without a canceled check or a receipt.”

Crivelli professed to believe that Ballard’s death was accidental and declined to name any candidates for the role of murderer.

The ground floor at headquarters swarmed with reporters Auburn had never seen before. On his desk he found a heap of documents from Records, including background checks on the principals in the case. Besides standard law enforcement and credit agency probes, information for these reports had been gleaned from local newspaper files, Who’s Who in America, and the Internet.

Vance Ballard, 38, had been born and raised locally but had moved to the West Coast fifteen years ago to play NFL football. Auburn already knew the rest of the story—marriage to a starlet, disabling athletic injuries, the move to Hollywood, a meteoric rise to fame, a decline in popularity as his hairline began to recede, a return to his hometown and a bid for a seat in Congress.

Mandy Follette was the professional name of Mary

Amanda O'Fallon, 33, whose springboard to stardom had been a television commercial for cat food. Her popularity with screen fans had risen steadily with each picture until the one she made with Ballard. Their history of conjugal feuding probably owed its most colorful details to the tabloid writers.

Malcolm Garner had been born Melvin Gordiner forty-six years ago in Chicago. During a variegated career that had led him back and forth across the country several times, he'd sold household appliances, managed a nightclub, played walk-ons off Broadway and bit parts in TV sitcoms, and auditioned performers for a theatrical agency. His California driver's license was currently under suspension for DUI, but otherwise his police record was clean.

Don Studebaker, 57, had retired from the Navy with the rank of chief petty officer. As an electronics technician working with weapons control systems, he'd had a top-secret clearance. He and his wife sold commercial real estate. The Better Business Bureau had no complaints against them.

Anthony Crivelli came from the same small midwestern town as Mandy Follette and they were exactly the same age. Crivelli had been so busy training as a skater for the Olympics that he'd flunked out of two universities in three years, and he hadn't even won a bronze.

Nothing was known to the prejudice of Patterson and Kempe, the TV camera crew who had idled away most of the afternoon at a tavern a block away from the theater, or of Reese

and Stollard, the men who had installed the dunking machine. Reese, like Garner, was divorced, and he had filed for bankruptcy five years earlier when his appliance repair business failed. Stollard was a lay minister at his church.

If Vance Ballard's death was due to homicidal electrocution, the killer had had a relatively short period of time in which to make his lethal arrangements on or under the stage of Pierce Hall. At a little past two thirty P.M., the freshly installed dunking machine had functioned properly and those handling it had been unharmed. At a little past four thirty P.M., the machine had ostensibly given Ballard a fatal shock. During the interval, water that splashed from the tank during the test had soaked through the stage and trickled into the pit with the forgotten power cable.

Don Studebaker had a background in electronics and had supplied the tarp with a slit in it through which the water had seeped. He'd been alone in the theater until four P.M., when he unlocked the lobby doors to admit the public to the fundraiser. He said he hadn't heard anything unusual during that time but would probably have ignored any random noises around the stage. There was no known link between him and Ballard to suggest a motive for murder. And a few seconds after Ballard's fatal shock, Studebaker had stuck his arms into the dunk tank up to the elbows.

Reese, who had installed the dunking machine, had known Ballard in high school. Garner claimed he'd spent the interval at the hotel with Ballard, but Ballard was no longer available to

confirm that. Mandy said she'd been wandering around downtown and had gotten lost, again without independent confirmation. Only Crivelli, an "old flame" of Mandy's who had a quarrel about money with Ballard, appeared to have a solid alibi for the interval in question, which he'd spent traveling to the TV studio to do his live news brief at three P.M. and then back to the theater.

Auburn hadn't been so dazzled by Mandy Follette's allure as to overlook the card accompanying the huge bouquet of roses in her room. The flowers had come from a florist on Sixth Street, just four blocks from headquarters and almost across the street from Pierce Hall. The card had contained some conventional expressions of admiration, but had been unsigned. He walked through bright spring sunshine to Connie's Blooms, which occupied a deep, narrow storeroom sandwiched between a video rental and a coffee shop the vice squad had been watching lately. Connie interrupted work on a funeral arrangement to serve him at the counter.

Auburn showed identification. "I'd like to get some information about the flowers you had delivered to Mandy Follette this morning at Chalfont Hospital."

"Wasn't that awful what happened yesterday? Can you imagine?"

"Would it be possible for you to tell me who ordered those flowers?"

Connie rolled her eyes as if he had asked her age. "Well, I

don't know about that ...”

“They did come from here, didn't they?”

“Oh, yes, they came from here, all right. I took both orders myself. The first one was for four dozen long-stemmed roses, two red and two white, to go to the Dockside Restaurant, where they were having a banquet last night. Then, after what happened at the auditorium ...” She was so caught up in the drama of the thing and her own involvement in it that she couldn't resist spilling the beans.

“Were they ordered by phone?”

“The second order came in by phone this morning—just a bouquet, to the hospital. But I took the first one right here across the counter just before closing time yesterday.”

“What time would that have been?”

“We close at four thirty on Thursday. She just got in under the wire.”

“She?”

Connie looked over her shoulder and threw discretion to the winds. “A little Irish lady, with a brogue you could cut with a knife. She had sunglasses on, and a plaid scarf around her head. You remember how windy it was.”

“Do you have a record of her name?”

“Well, I guess it's no secret, since she used a credit card.” She leafed through the pages in an order book on the counter and turned up one bearing the name of Mary O'Fallon.

He thanked her and went away, convinced that she'd never seen *Charmed, I'm Sure*, in which Mandy Patinkin played an Irish witch. Although it wasn't his job to establish alibis for murder suspects, finding out that Mandy had been arranging a floral tribute for herself at the time when any electrical tampering at the theater must have taken place at least narrowed the list of suspects.

As he walked back to the office, he asked himself if he wasn't missing something. What conceivable motive could Garner or Studebaker have had for murdering Ballard at that particular time and place, in that particular way? Did Crivelli really have an unshakable alibi? Channel 4 had confirmed that he'd appeared live on TV at three P.M. How long would it have taken him to get from the parking zone behind the theater to the studio during the mid-afternoon traffic?

Back at headquarters, he went to the dispatchers' room and looked at the big colored map on the wall there. Crivelli could have used any number of routes, but they all led through the thick of downtown traffic. It was remarkable enough that he had managed to be on camera at the studio just twenty minutes or so after leaving the theater. But it would have taken a miracle for him to be able slip back into the theater after the others had seen him leave, set an electrical trap, and make it to the station on time.

Auburn was getting in the dispatchers' way. He went back to his office, found a city map, and unfolded it on his desk. Something was wrong here. Different, anyway. He looked at the

date on the map. Then he went to the window and looked west along the river, counting the bridges.

The railroads! They'd been there before most of the streets were laid out, and the streets had to wind around them, over them, under them. Now the tracks through town had been torn up, and the old roadbeds converted to a system of bike paths and jogging trails. And one of those went, as straight as a die, over a viaduct from the corner of Second and DeWire to within fifty yards of the Channel 4 studios. A man on a bicycle could make the distance in half the time it would take him to drive it in the afternoon traffic. And Crivelli was ... a skater.

Auburn had gotten up an hour earlier than usual and had skimped on breakfast. By ten thirty he was feeling hollow inside and weak in the knees. He fetched a granola bar from a stash in his desk and, while gnawing on it, read the riddles printed on the wrapper.

Q. Why did the short guy ditch his tall girlfriend?

A. He didn't like her altitude.

Q. Why did the schoolteacher go to the eye doctor?

A. She couldn't control her pupils.

Q. What do you call a half-wit who directs a symphony orchestra?

A. A semiconductor.

Kestrel wasn't in the forensic lab on the top floor. A call to his cell phone found him in the police garage around the corner

on Gates Street. Auburn put another granola bar in his pocket and set off on the five minutes' walk, by way of a tunnel leading out of the basement of headquarters, to the garage.

This facility, which served for the maintenance and repair of Public Safety's fleet of cruisers, vans, and unmarked cars, had a couple of bays set aside for the forensic examination of stolen vehicles and those that had been involved in fatal accidents or criminal activities. Late last evening the dunking machine had been delivered there for study.

Kestrel and an assistant were disassembling it and taking photographs at each step. The vinyl tank liner, the lighting display, and the release mechanism for the stool lay in perfect order on a workbench the size of a ping-pong table.

Kestrel showed Auburn the heavy three-pronged plug, which consisted of a single piece of molded rubber continuous with the power cord. "The grounding is apparently okay," he said. "If there's any doubt later on, we may have to cut the plug apart, after taking some X-rays."

An access panel had been removed from the back of the device, exposing a row of metal boxes connected by lengths of heavily insulated cable. The covers of some of the boxes had also been removed. "Anything wrong with the works?" asked Auburn.

"I wouldn't use the word wrong at this stage." Kestrel's reluctance to make categorical statements, especially on the witness stand, was legendary. "But apparently some of the

wiring has been changed since the machine left the factory.” He went on with the task of dusting an interior metal surface for fingerprints, which Auburn’s arrival had interrupted.

Auburn’s second granola bar was long gone before he headed back toward the canteen in quest of more substantial fare.

At two thirty he met with Lieutenant Savage, who had retreated behind a locked door to escape reporters. Savage had just received a report from the power company on their inspection of the wiring at the theater. What began as a review of progress on the investigation of Ballard’s death quickly evolved into a planning session.

Auburn laid out four file cards in a row on Savage’s desk and started making phone calls. Studebaker, whom he called first, agreed to meet him at the alley door of the theater at four o’clock. Miraculously, Auburn also succeeded in reaching the others and securing their promises to cooperate.

Patrolman Jake Schottel drove him to the Skyliner Hotel in a cruiser and went with him to Malcolm Garner’s room. The newly unemployed Garner, unshaven and evidently in the process of digesting several ounces of distilled spirits, squinted at his watch. “Didn’t expect you for a few minutes yet,” he said. “What’s this all about?”

“We’d like to look around your room if you don’t mind,” said Auburn. “We don’t have a search warrant, so you’re free to refuse.”

Garner shrugged in bewilderment. "I don't know what you're looking for, but go ahead."

"Thank you, sir. Just routine."

Besides the expected changes of clothing and toilet articles, they found a compact leather kit at the bottom of Garner's suitcase containing screwdrivers, pliers, a pocket knife, a set of small wrenches, and other hand tools.

"What's this, sir?"

Garner was meandering none too steadily around the room while shaving with an electric razor. "Emergency equipment. Never know when something's going to come apart on you. Watch strap, umbrella handle ..." There was no umbrella in the room.

They left the hotel by the back door and crossed the alley to Pierce Hall, Patrolman Schottel carrying Garner's toolkit. Studebaker, in a suit and tie, was standing outside on the loading dock talking to Crivelli. Just as they arrived, the truck from Aardvark Amusements drove in and parked next to Kestrel, who was sitting in the evidence van working a crossword puzzle.

Auburn shepherded them all into the theater and up onto the stage. Reese and Stollard, having brought in their toolbox as instructed, registered perplexity on seeing that the dunking machine was gone.

"Your machine is still at headquarters," Auburn told them.

"Then what do we need our tools for?" asked Reese.

"I'll explain that. It's been established that Ballard died of a fatal electric shock. The source of the current was apparently an old forgotten power cable down below here. The electricians who inspected it during the night found that the tape covering the cut ends of the wires had recently been peeled off with some kind of tool, probably a pair of pliers. I think you'll all agree that that suggests homicidal intent. Anyway it's something Public Safety can't ignore.

"Since all of you were here in the theater yesterday, we'd appreciate it if you'd let us examine any pliers or other tools you have for traces of tape. Just as a routine way of ruling out your involvement. We could get a warrant easily enough, but we're hoping you'll help us expedite matters by complying voluntarily."

Chris Stollard, wiry and naturally taciturn, had something to say about that. "You talk about traces of tape. All our tools could have that. We use tape every day to splice power cords and patch things that are coming apart."

"Not this kind of tape. This isn't vinyl, it's antique stuff—what they used to call friction tape. Linen mesh impregnated with asphalt."

"I don't think I belong in this game," said Crivelli. "I haven't even got a toothpick on me, let alone a pair of pliers."

"Did you drive from the studio?"

"Yes, and I'm due back in one hour, tops."

“Officer Schottel will go to your car with you and bring back any tools he finds.”

Kestrel had carried in a case of equipment and set up a field lab in a dressing room behind the stage. Auburn and Schottel, carefully keeping each man's complement of tools separate from the others, delivered them to Kestrel one at a time for examination. Kestrel started with Garner's and after he had finished with them he sealed them in a heavy pasteboard envelope, which all three Public Safety officers signed, before proceeding to the next batch.

Crivelli's car yielded only a standard set of basic tools supplied by the manufacturer. These were still sealed in the original plastic bag, which Kestrel slit open without hesitation and proceeded with his testing. Studebaker had inherited a whole shopful of tools, many of which were broken or worn out, from a long string of predecessors. Auburn and Kestrel went through the work area under the stage and chose about a dozen tools to take upstairs for examination.

Reese volunteered the information that the truck in the alley contained a lot of tools besides the ones in the case that Stollard had brought in. Again Auburn and Kestrel selected some for examination, particularly a worn leather holster full of electricians' tools, most of them marked "Reese" with a vibrating etcher.

Whatever Kestrel was doing to all those tools in his improvised lab seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of

time. Reese and Stollard idled on the loading platform smoking and talking shop in undertones. Garner and Crivelli paced restlessly up and down different aisles in the dank and cavernous auditorium, which was illuminated only by the red exit lights above the doors. Studebaker, fully at his ease, sat on a tall padded stool in front of the lighting board in the wings reading a newspaper.

Finally Kestrel called Auburn in to report his findings. Their conference was short because the information Kestrel had to impart was clear-cut, unequivocal, and subject to only one interpretation.

Auburn had been drawn to a career in law enforcement by its positive aspects. He liked the idea of making the streets safer, quelling social unrest, upholding the Golden Rule. He viewed every crime that was committed as a failure of the system. That was why, even when he'd brought off a particularly astute piece of detection, he found making the arrest a tarnished pleasure, like kissing a smoker.

He assembled the four suspects backstage. "I misled you about the kind of evidence Sergeant Kestrel was looking for," he told them. "That cable under the stage is dead—has been for years. It had nothing to do with Ballard's death. He got a shock when he completed a circuit between the dunking stool and the metal ladder in the water, because somebody had tampered with the wiring inside the machine. When we stripped it down at headquarters we found two relays in the main circuit box that didn't belong there.

"When a ball hit the target and the seat dropped, one of those relays sent opposite charges of two hundred twenty volts to the seat and the ladder. The other cut out the ground line leading from the outlet to the machine."

Studebaker folded up his newspaper with meticulous care. "Then why," he asked, "didn't these guys get a shock when they ran their test? And why didn't I go up in a puff of steam when I climbed in there after Ballard?"

"Because the relays hold for only about twelve or fifteen seconds. After that the circuitry goes back to normal."

"So what was all this business of putting our tools under a microscope?"

"At the factory," explained Auburn, "the cover of the box where the relays were installed had been closed with one-way screws to discourage tampering. The person who opened that box stored the one-way screws inside temporarily and replaced them with standard machine screws."

Garner stood vacillating in the shadows like a man who has either had one too many or needs one more. "Excuse me, Officer," he said, "but ... one-way screws? To me that sounds a bit like left-handed screwdrivers, and glass hammers, and such."

"Maybe so, but it's no joke. One-way screws have their heads partly cut away from alongside the slots. You can drive them in with an ordinary screwdriver, but if you turn the screwdriver the other way it can't get a grip. Rides right up out

of the slot.”

“So how do you get them loose?”

“You can use a special tool, if you have one. They’re expensive, hard to find, and they don’t work all that well. Or you can back the screw out with pliers, but that’s even harder. Unless you’ve got a good pair of locking pliers that you can clamp onto the screw head and turn like a doorknob. That’s what the killer used.”

Chris Stollard had followed Auburn’s explanation with intense concentration. “How can you tell that?” he asked.

“Because the tool left marks—one clean set of marks on each screw head. A regular pair of pliers would have had to be repositioned many times, and it would have scratched and chewed those screws like a dog gnawing a bone. As you probably know if you watch much TV, the marks left on wood or metal by a tool that’s been used a few times are as distinctive as a fingerprint. Sergeant Kestrel took a print of each of the tools he examined by closing it down tight on a plug of soft alloy. And one of those tools matches the marks on the screws from the box with the foreign relays.”

He read Ron Reese the statutory warning and asked him to put his hands on top of his head and face the wall. Schottel searched him and found a wallet, keys, cigarettes, a disposable lighter, and a roll of antacid mints.

“I’m not going to remain silent,” said Reese, turning to face Auburn and lowering his arms. “It’s not such a great feeling,

knowing you killed somebody—even somebody you hated as much as Vance Ballard. That muscle-bound creep made my life miserable day after day during four years of high school. He used to call me Sunshine to torment me. He'd bump me off the sidewalk and then pretend it was an accident.

“His father had his own drugstore, and mine was a painter at a body shop. Ballard thought I was some kind of a nerd because I could do algebra, and he couldn't even spell it. He was so pathetically stupid he flunked art three years in a row, but they kept him in school because he also led the football team to the state championship finals those same three years in a row.”

Oblivious of Stollard's shock and the embarrassment of the others, Reese recited his catalog of grievances with hanging head and whining delivery, manifesting a passive, obsessive, paranoid personality that must have been fully established before he ever met Ballard.

“He and I were on the debate team. Every time we came up against each other I'd choke up, and he'd butter up the judges with his silly grin and his line of bilge, and he'd win. In our senior year a girl broke a date she had with me for the prom and went with him instead. That just about did me in. I spent graduation day in bed with the covers over my head.

“Sure, that was a long time ago, but that kind of pain stays with you for life. All that abuse from Ballard back then had a permanent effect on my mental health and self-esteem. It's put a

blight and a shadow on every day of my life since. It wrecked my marriage. Two years after I started my own business, I was bankrupt. I spend half my income on counseling, which does me about as much good as herbal tea.

“When I found out he was coming home to get dunked on the machine from Aardvark, nothing in this world could have kept me from doing what I did. I’ve still got a garageful of parts from my business that went under. At three o’clock yesterday morning I went out to the warehouse and installed those relays in the machine.

“If it had been anybody else who died, the whole thing would have been written off as an accident. But because it was Bomber Ballard, the home-grown idol and superstar, you guys had to ... go the whole nine yards ...”

By the time the inevitable breakdown came, Studebaker and Garner had moved out of earshot and Crivelli had reclaimed his tools from Kestrel and left the theater. Only Stollard stood by in mute distress as Auburn and Schottel formally arrested Reese, cuffed him, and led him to the cruiser.

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THE KARNIKOV CARD

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH



Art by Andrew R. Wright

From the start, I said it was a bad idea. I told the organizers of CelebCon Five that paying the exorbitant appearance fee for Dmitri Karnikov would backfire. Yes, Dmitri Karnikov had starred in the biggest science-fiction films of the 1990s. He was a megasuperstar, whose megawattage hadn't just faded, it had imploded after a series of scandals that made Mel Gibson seem like a nice, well-spoken boy.

After all, why else would someone of Dmitri Karnikov's stature be willing to make an appearance at a science-fiction convention?

But Fandom is what Fandom is—which is, at its heart, a collection of fans (fen, we call ourselves). We not only believe the best of our heroes, we want their signatures in our books, on our DVDs, and across our navels. Even if we have to overlook a few stink bombs to do so.

The stink bomb I was worried about wasn't a potty-mouthed movie star on a rampage. It wasn't even some wild party in which some poor fen got both deflowered and disillusioned.

I was worried that Dmitri would take our upfront fee (which was half of last year's CelebCon revenues) and vanish without a trace. In the few years of its existence, CelebCon, held in Los Angeles, had tried to out Comic-Con Comic-Con. Comic-Con had been the go-to convention for Hollywood types, comic-book aficionados, gamers, and random sf people. It had become so big that every single hotel room in San Diego sold out a year in advance—and so did most of the cheaper hotel rooms in Los Angeles.

Deals got brokered, movies got sold, and a lot of professional writers/artists/creative types got rich on that very weekend.

CelebCon, held in March, was attracting the same kind of numbers that Comic-Con had had during its growth spurt, and

there was talk—a lot of talk—that it would be the Next Big Thing in entertainment.

If Dmitri Karnikov stiffed us, we'd be out more than his appearance fee. Our reputation as the next Comic-Con upstart would vanish; we'd be the laughingstock of Fandom for a generation to come.

No one in CelebCon's concom (convention committee) cared that we could lose our rep. They didn't believe that folks would laugh at us, and they figured the fen would return even after a disastrous year. This concom had no real money people, so they didn't understand that the loss of so much revenue would put the convention into a hole that it couldn't recover from.

So they went ahead against my wishes, and booked Dmitri Karnikov.

I stayed on, not because I had any loyalty to CelebCon, but because I wanted to be around for the I-told-you-so. There were a few folks who really needed to hear it, and they were going to hear it from me.

Only when the time came, I couldn't go through with it.

Because I hadn't told them so—at least, not about this.

Most of the time, I enjoy the respect I get from Fandom. Everyone calls me Spade. Hardly anyone knows my real name anymore, primarily because I don't use it.

The nickname comes from my detecting ability. Ever since the mid 1990s, I've solved all kinds of minor (and not-so-minor)

mysteries at science-fiction conventions. After I solved the first one, some wag called me Spade, for Sam Spade, and the moniker stuck.

I didn't have the heart to tell the guy that the better handle would've been Nero Wolfe. I'm six six, four hundred pounds, and set in my ways. I don't have orchids or an Archie Goodwin, but I do possess a sharp eye for detail and a critical understanding of the dark side of human nature.

So Spade it is. And in the way of the fannish, my success has become my downfall. So many young fen want to spar with me, trying to prove they've gotten the best of the Great Spade.

I don't joust very often, and when I do, the battle is verbal. The young fen have no hope of besting me in the verbal arena, just like I have no hope of besting them in the physical one. Occasionally they take a vote, like this concom did in the Karnikov matter. They thought that outvoting me was like taking me down in battle.

But the battle hadn't even begun.

This year's con shaped up badly from the start. We lost our venue two months in, and had to book another place with only eighteen months' notice—which, for a convention of this size, was quite literally the last minute.

We sent payment to Dmitri Karnikov, locking him in as the celebrity guest of honor, and two dozen of our most beloved celebrity guests quit in protest. Some of us wanted to cancel Karnikov right there, but the bulk of the concom balked. They

pointed out that preregistration was off the charts—in fact, we'd sold out the new venue five hours after announcing Karnikov—so they really didn't care that a lot of our old faithful celeb friends weren't coming. Clearly, the concom wasn't thinking of next year. Next year, when the two dozen faithful refused to be associated with CelebCon. Next year, when CelebCon would need—and wouldn't be able to get—a guest of equal drawing power to Karnikov.

However, it was my job to worry about this year's disasters, not next year's. And I was involved in a few disasters in other parts of the country, so I didn't really notice how CelebCon was shaping up.

I'm what's known in fannish circles as a Secret Master of Fandom. There's an entire group of us. We run conventions, especially the big ones. We make certain the small ones get off the ground.

We protect Fandom. I don't know about my fellow SMOFs, but I see my job this way: I keep conventions safe. I want young fen to feel like I felt when I started in Fandom. I want them to feel like they belong, like nothing bad can ever happen to them at a fannish gathering no matter where it is.

But I don't run security at conventions. I'm the Lord of Finance. My trusty computers and I manage the money for the biggest events of the year, and I teach a lot of the smaller events how to set up their financial system. Annually, I run the finances for about twenty different conventions. I'm never home, and I

stop answering my cell whenever a concom implodes, which is about one out of every ten. I figure the locals can work it out for themselves.

This is a long way of saying that after the preliminary planning meetings and the one emergency session about the lost venue, CelebCon wasn't really on my radar.

Until I arrived two weeks before the convention and found a disaster on my hands.

The big problem was that Dmitri Karnikov wanted more money. He demanded we renegotiate his contract or he'd bail out of the convention.

I did a little Web-surfing, found out he had just settled a multimillion dollar lawsuit with a major Hollywood studio, and it was going to cost him a wad of cash.

He wanted a lot more money from us, but it didn't appear that he had another group of idiots who wanted to outbid us for him that same weekend. So if we canceled his contract (claiming we were going to renegotiate it), he had to pay us back three-quarters of his upfront appearance fee, since appearance is based on, you guessed it, appearing.

But the concom wasn't savvy to the ways of business and panicked when I mentioned canceling his contract altogether. Then when I said it would be a good negotiating ploy, they hit the ceiling.

The fans of Dmitri Karnikov didn't not want to piss off His Greatness. In fact, they wanted to offer him more money just so

that he wouldn't skip out on them.

At that point, I thought I could head off disaster. The only disaster I saw was continued extortion by the unnecessarily impoverished Dmitri Karnikov.

I volunteered to negotiate with him to make sure that he would honor his contract.

The concomm made me swear that I wouldn't cancel his contract, and I swore I wouldn't unless there was already a new deal in place. Of course, I didn't tell the concomm that the new deal wouldn't be in writing. Cash-starved Karnikov would bend to my will or I didn't know my overspending celebrities.

The concomm gave me permission to speak for them with Karnikov, and I had my people contact his people for a meet.

I'm no slouch in the negotiations department, nor am I some starstruck impoverished fan willing to do anything for my idol.

So I had no illusions as I headed to Karnikov's. I knew that I'd find dozens of hangers-on, yes-men, and so-called security guards, and I did. I also knew I'd find an out-of-control star who hadn't had someone set limits with him in thirty years.

Karnikov had a rental in Malibu, although I hesitate calling anything that goes for 100K per month a rental. To me, that's like calling the Taj Mahal a McMansion. But he had to rent because most of his properties got seized in one lawsuit or another. The rest were sold off for quick cash.

As I drove through the windy roads to Malibu, I reflected on that. And my involvement with this conglom. They were dumb enough to make an agreement with a man being sued by half the planet, and that was just the half of the planet who could afford lawyers. The other half would probably sue him as well, if only they could pony up the initial court costs.

I had a rental, too—a high-end Lexus SUV befitting my bulk. Unlike Dmitri Karnikov, I'm good with money, which is a bit like saying Superman is good at flying. Decades ago, when Microsoft was an upstart company that no one had ever heard of, the illustrious Bill Gates decided to give his employees the option of being paid with cash or in company stock. I took the stock, making me a thing still known in the Pacific Northwest as a Microsoft Millionaire.

So many Microsoft Millionaires handled their money like Dmitri Karnikov handled his that there aren't many of us left. Most who remain don't work for a living, but they're not really wealthy either. Only a select few of us translated our millions into more millions.

I don't talk about money much, except to acknowledge that I have some, but there's a reason I handle the finances for more than twenty science-fiction conventions nationwide.

I know what the hell I'm doing.

And Dmitri Karnikov didn't. His handlers probably did, but his handlers wouldn't get the last word. He would.

Which was why I wasn't even nervous going into this

meeting. Not as I used the GPS to take me along the goat paths up the hills overlooking the ocean, not as I turned on the driveway, deliberately graveled to look as if it led nowhere, not as I passed through the giant stone gate with the prominent security signs and the poor schlub manning the gatehouse who actually had to check me in as if I were entering a studio lot.

I didn't get nervous until I walked up the marble stairway leading to the marble entry designed to impress with its breathtaking waste. At the moment, I wondered what the hell I was doing, representing a concomm willing to give in to a man who wasn't willing to negotiate.

Then I squared my shoulders, tucked my CELEBCON ONE T-shirt into my good black jeans, and followed the majordomo who led me into the deliberately stunning living room.

Even a man determined not to be impressed had to pause to look at the view. The floor-to-ceiling glass walls extended over the beach, making you feel like you were floating over the ocean itself. The Pacific was its usual beautiful blue, made even more beautiful by the matching blue sky. Usually the smog extended all the way out here, but on this afternoon, the air was so clear that everything had the razor-sharp edges you usually saw only in photographs.

I had to remind myself not to gape, but by then it was too late. I was gaping, and someone was talking to me.

That someone was Dmitri Karnikov himself.

I hadn't expected that either. I had expected some lawyer or financial minion or bouncer to deal with me—at least initially.

But Dmitri Karnikov was standing just past the blazing white grand piano, a clear drink in one hand and an apple in the other.

“Stunning, huh?” he asked.

The voice sounded out of place in this room. It was a famous voice, a familiar voice, one that belonged in the darkness of a movie theater or narrating some high-end car commercial on my television. I had experienced this dislocation before with other celebrities, and I never ever got used to it.

“One of the most beautiful I've seen,” I said as I turned toward him.

As usual, I dwarfed him. I dwarf most people, but I dwarf actors most of all. Male actors are generally short—dunno why, just a fact that I didn't believe when I first read about it in one of screenwriter William Goldman's books. Goldman, who is tall, has made a game out of discovering an actor's real height, since most of these guys wear lifts (even, Goldman claims, in their socks).

But Karnikov was barefoot—so no lifts. He wore shorts and a Spider-Man T-shirt depicting the comic book Spider-Man, not the Tobey Maguire movie version of Spider-Man.

And it was the damn T-shirt, along with the bare feet, that also threw me.

I had never considered the idea that Dmitri Karnikov wanted to come to CelebCon because he was a fan. Actors, writers, artists, and other celeb types will often finagle invites to various events not because they need the face time but because they're a fan of someone attending or of the event itself.

Which meant I had forgotten one of my own rules: At heart, every single American is a member of Fandom. Most of them just don't know it yet.

I recovered enough to surreptitiously wipe my palm on my jeans before extending my hand.

"Mr. Karnikov, it's an honor—"

"Cut the crap," he said. "You're here to talk about the money."

He sounded sour. I didn't exactly blame him. No one likes to talk money, especially when they know they're being unreasonable.

"I'm afraid so, sir," I said. "Although it is an honor—"

"Yadda yadda yadda," he said, waving a hand as he used the outdated Seinfeld reference. "Can you pay the extra or not?"

"No, sir." I didn't add anything else. I didn't make excuses; I didn't remind him about the already existing contract.

I already knew I had the upper hand. Why? Because there were no handlers here. Either they'd been fired, let go because of financial reasons, or they weren't willing to make this

argument for their very famous employer.

“Damn,” he said, “you were my only hope.”

The wistfulness with which he said that line made it a veiled Star Wars reference, echoing the holographic Princess Leia’s line in the original movie: “Obi-wan Kenobi, you are my only hope.”

I studied Karnikov for a moment. His thick blond hair was mussed and he had a bit of peanut butter on the collar of his T-shirt. He wasn’t looking at me; he was looking at my reflection in the window.

In that moment, I gained some respect for him. The bare feet, the T-shirt, the Seinfeld reference followed by the Star Wars reference—he was playing me, and doing it in a very sophisticated way.

He wanted me to think we had common interests, that we were both fans, putting me at ease and giving him the upper hand. And that was why he was doing this alone.

It’s easier to manipulate someone one-on-one.

It might have worked, too, if I were ten years younger and twenty years less jaded. Or maybe if I had been a True Fan in the first place (meaning someone who really, really, really was a fan, not just someone who liked Karnikov’s work).

But I wasn’t a True Fan and I was pretty damn jaded.

“Sorry,” I said. “We just don’t have the extra funds. But we will pay you the second half of your appearance fee by direct

deposit right after your final panel, if you like. That's less than two weeks away, and the money will be instantly liquid."

I had checked our books before I arrived and saw that we could pull off the direct deposit thing—barely.

He looked at me sideways and for a moment, I saw the actor unmasked. There was avarice in those cobalt blue eyes. That was the one thing that put famous actors at a disadvantage. We had already seen every single expression they had on screen and knew how to read their faces as clearly as if they were a member of our family.

That look of avarice lasted only a half second, but that was a quarter second too long. He covered it quickly, but not quickly enough.

I had him.

"You can?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Can you do it now?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," I said. "We won't be getting the last of our money until the convention starts."

"I thought the thing was sold out," he said.

Thing. No fan would call CelebCon a thing. It would be the con or CelebCon or the convention. But never ever "the thing." Thing was what other people called our tribal meeting places. Thing bordered on a term of disrespect.

That one word was as revealing as the look, but I got a

hunch he really didn't care.

"It is sold out," I said, irritated he had caught me in the lie. So I made up another one. "But we only take deposits. We collect the rest when the attendees show up."

"Stupid way to run a show," he said.

I shrugged, pretending a nonchalance I didn't feel. "That way we keep the deposits of the no-shows and sell expensive at-the-door tickets."

It sounded believable to me, and apparently to him as well. Which also proved he wasn't a fan. He would have known that prereg people not only paid in full, they got a discount for signing up early—something I would have argued about changing had I known we were going to sell out at prereg prices five hours after we announced Karnikov's presence.

"When's my last panel, as you call it?" he asked.

I was prepared for that too. "Sunday morning."

"Sunday ... morning?" he asked, as if I had told him I was going to dip him in chocolate and sell the licking rights to the highest bidder. "I don't do mornings."

"You had no restrictions in your contract," I said.

"And," he said, "you can't transfer funds on Sunday."

"I know," I said. "But the money will be in your account and available first thing Monday morning."

He made a face. "How about we blow off Sunday? When's my last appearance then?"

“Saturday night,” I said, trying not to smile. He had come prepared to negotiate. So had I. I had asked programming to tentatively schedule him Sunday morning, with the idea that we could cut that panel. If we got him to do it, fine. If not, it was a bargaining chip—a chip that was working now.

“I’ll have the money Monday morning when banks open?”

“Yes,” I said.

“You can’t do better than that?” he asked.

“No, sir, I’m sorry.”

“What about charging for autographs?”

“We pointedly advertise that we don’t let anyone charge for autographs.”

“Change that,” he said.

“No,” I said. “It’s also in your contract. It’s a deal breaker.”

He crossed his arms and frowned. His eyes met mine. I recognized that look, too—the look of presidential steely determination that he had used in at least three films.

“I don’t believe in deal breakers,” he said.

“I’ve noticed,” I said. “That’s why you get sued so much.”

“You fat bastard,” he said. “You should show a little respect.”

“You first,” I snapped.

He looked at me in surprise. Apparently most people didn’t

demand respect from him.

I continued, "I have the authority to cancel your contract altogether, and if I do that, we'll demand you repay the appearance fee in full. And we'll put the entire fiasco on tonight's news so your fans know it's not us breaking the deal."

His cheeks pinked delicately, as if the makeup department had snuck in and added just a touch of color. I saw a whole new look on his face, one he had never played in all of his films.

"You think you're important. You think that you can upset my fans," he said.

"No," I said. "I don't think I'm important. I think we have a business arrangement, and I expect you to live up to your side of the bargain. Honestly, all you have to do is sit on two one-hour panels, and give a speech you've probably given a hundred times before on Saturday night. You have to sign a few autographs, wave politely, and then vanish in your limo. For that, you'll make more than most people make in an entire lifetime. You don't do it, no skin off my nose."

"Your convention will collapse," he said.

Probably. But I didn't care. And that I-don't-care attitude showed in my shrug. "We had four CelebCons without you. I think we can manage a fifth without you as well."

I turned and walked away, not sure if I wanted to make it out of the room before he said something or not.

"What do they call you, fat boy?" he asked.

I continued toward the door. I'd been called fat boy in school, and I hadn't answered to it then. I certainly wasn't going to answer to it now.

"What's your name?" he asked with more than a little desperation.

"Spade," I said, and walked through the door into that grand foyer.

"Spade what?" he asked, following me.

I had him.

"Just Spade," I said.

"Well, Spade," he said. "You guys pay for my limo and my meals and get me the hell out of there the second that I'm done talking and we have a deal."

That was already in our contractual deal, but I didn't say that. Instead, I nodded.

"Done," I said, and left.

Celebrity assholes always make me feel dirty. It's like a love affair gone bad. Or maybe something even worse—like you've discovered that your beloved is a gold digger or worse, a hooker.

Even though I wasn't a true fan of Karnikov, I had liked his movies. I knew, as I walked to my rented Lexus, that I would always watch them now and hear his famous voice calling me fat boy.

I was mad, deep down mad, not so much at him—I had

read the press; I knew he was a piece of work, even for an entitled celebrity—but at me. I had volunteered to handle him. I had been prepared for his nastiness, but I had forgotten the consequences.

And the consequences struck me in my innocent fan-boy self.

I thought I had calmed myself by the time I got back to the convention site. I parked as close to the building as I could get and got out of the Lexus.

I took a deep breath, hating the dryness of the L.A. air, hating the heat, and headed toward the building.

“Spade?”

The female voice sent a shiver down my spine.

I turned, half expecting to see nothing at all.

Instead, Paladin stood in front of me. I hadn’t even seen her as I drove up, which showed just how distracted I was.

She was slight, athletic, and beautiful in a way you normally didn’t see in science-fiction fandom. Some of the professionals—the writers, artists, actors (the pros, as we call them)—achieved that kind of beauty, but not the fen. Not usually.

But Paladin was a fan. She wore faded jeans and a T-shirt with one of artist David Cherry’s tough females from some book cover. It showed the depth of my distraction that I couldn’t immediately summon the book’s title and author.

I had barely come up with the name of the artist.

Paladin was a legend in fannish circles. I'd heard of her long before I met her. I'd initially figured she was a guy with delusions of grandeur, naming himself after the Richard Boone character in the long-lost fifty-year-old Have Gun, Will Travel television show. I expected this fannish Paladin to be dressed in an Old West costume and to hand out business cards that said,

Have Gun

Will Travel

Wire Paladin

San Francisco

And it turned out she did have a card, and the only difference from the original was that it now said "E-mail Paladin@paladinsanfrancisco.com."

I didn't contact her in order to meet her. In fact, I'd never contacted her. We first met when she wanted to consult with me on one of her cases at FleshCon a few months before.

I figured (hoped) we would stay in touch, but we hadn't. Or she hadn't.

I was too scared to contact her. Not because she was scary, but because she was female, and I was attracted to her.

I had forgotten how small she was. More than a foot shorter than I am, thin in an ethereal way, like the elves in the Lord of the Rings films. She was strong, but her muscles weren't her dominant feature.

Her eyes were. Big and beautiful and filled with

intelligence. Although I was also partial to her ears. She was blessed with real fannish ears, small with a bit of a point on top.

“Paladin,” I said, too hot, tired, and discouraged to come up with a witty greeting. The last time we’d gotten together, we’d had a witty repartee. I wasn’t sure I was repartee-ready. I certainly wasn’t feeling witty.

“I can’t believe you’re involved with this mess,” she said.

My shoulders slumped. “I get involved in a lot of messes. It’s part of being a SMoF.”

She shook her head. “I don’t mean the standard convention mess. I mean the whole Karnikov thing.”

I sighed. I was going to get it from all sides. “It wasn’t my idea to invite him. I opposed him being guest of honor.”

“But you didn’t quit when they invited him anyway.”

“If I quit every convention where I disliked a guest of honor, I wouldn’t work on more than five per year,” I said.

It was a sign of how tired and dejected I was that I even admitted that. Usually I kept my dislike of some of the people in sf prodom to myself. Multimillionaire celebrities didn’t have a patent on obnoxiousness. Some five-figure writers and even no-figure fans could be assholes as well.

Paladin tilted her head a little, as if she were studying me. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“You could never offend me,” I said, deciding truthfulness was the mode of the day.

She smiled at that. "I'm sure I could."

"I'm not going to dare you to try," I said. "I have a hunch you can achieve anything you set your mind to."

"I wish that were true," she said. "But I learned long ago that I can't do everything."

I'd learned the same thing. And I couldn't stand in the heat and dry air, feeling dejected in front of one of the most beautiful women in the world any longer.

"If that's all," I said, "I'm in desperate need of air-conditioning and an iced coffee."

"I'll buy," she said, and pulled the door open for me.

"Paladin," I said in a chiding tone. She didn't have to buy me anything. In fact, she should never buy me anything. I was the Microsoft Millionaire. She worked hard for each and every dime.

"Give a girl a break, Spade," she said. "The last time I asked you for a favor, I was going to buy breakfast and you stole the check."

"You're asking me for a favor?" I said as I walked through the open door into a frigid interior. Someone wasn't following the environmentally friendly air-conditioning rules and I was grateful.

"I'm asking you for a favor," she said. "And I want you think hard before you say yes."

"I promise I will," I said. "So long as I can think with an iced

coffee in front of me.”

“Done,” she said.

And in a moment, it was.

Paladin had found a little coffee bar inside the convention center, a bar that I hadn’t even noticed. It was small, it was dark, and it was attractive, not usually things found in a convention center. It had lovely wood tables, maroon walls covered with black-and-white Ted Croner New York at Night photographs from the late 1940s, and an actual bar with a top made of polished walnut. This little place had so much class that I doubted it would be in business the next day, let alone when the convention started.

She ordered me an iced coffee and herself an iced tea. Then she bought two pieces of lemon cake, a cinnamon bun, and a gigantic chocolate-chip cookie. I would have protested, except I had watched her eat once before. I had a hunch most of those calories were for her.

She brought me two tall glasses of water even though I hadn’t asked for them, and stood over me while I drank one. Then she took the glass back to the coffee bar just as our order came up.

I smiled at her concern. Apparently, I looked as bad as I felt.

She rested the tray on one hand, removed the drinks first, and then the food. She waved a piece of lemon cake at me.

“You don’t have to have it,” she said, and I couldn’t tell from

her tone whether or not I would disappoint her if I ate it. Maybe she wanted it.

I took the cake. Breakfast had been a long time and one nasty celebrity ago.

She straddled the chair across from me, and picked up her fork like a weapon. Then she looked at me, as if daring me to comment on all her food.

I didn't. I took one dainty bite of the lemon cake, which was better than expected, and slurped some of the iced coffee.

By the time I'd done that, she had already eaten the cookie.

"Thanks for this," I said.

She nodded, halfway through the cinnamon roll.

"You mentioned a favor."

She nodded again, finished the cinnamon roll, and pushed the cake aside, as if she were saving it for later.

"I want to head security," she said.

"The convention center takes care of security," I said.

"For the convention itself," she said.

"We have a security director," I said. I liked the director, Doris Xavier. I trusted her. She was another SMoF. We'd worked dozens of conventions together.

"I know," Paladin said, "but I think it's better if I'm in charge."

I wasn't so certain. The last time we ate together (on our

first and only case together so far) she had described herself as a bulldozer. In fact, she had asked me to work with her because she liked my finesse and thought herself incapable of the same thing.

We resolved the case—rather, I resolved the case—with that finesse.

A lot of times, convention security required a delicate touch. We were dealing with paying guests, after all, as well as some well-known people. One bulldozer moment could create a crisis that would reverberate through Fandom for years to come.

“Why don’t you just tell me what’s going on?” I said.

Paladin looked over her shoulder, then glared at the barista behind the counter. The woman moved to the other side of the tiny coffee bar. Paladin took her lemon cake, and cut off a piece, staring at it.

“I’ve been trying to get Karnikov for years,” she said.

“Excuse me?” I hadn’t expected that. “Get him for what?”

She stared at me as if I should know. Then she raised her eyebrows.

“Okay, I know he’s an ass.” I felt the reverberation of that “fat boy” comment all over again. “I know he’s broken dozens of contracts, drinks too much, and is uninsurable. I know he can be violent on set. Everything the tabloids know, I know. And I have no idea why you would want to get him.”

"You should have a list," she said, and there was crispness in her voice I had never heard before, as if just talking about Karnikov disgusted her.

"I had a file," I said. "I made it up when the concom was considering Karnikov. I did have a list—more than a hundred reasons not to book this guy. But—"

"Not that kind of list," Paladin said. "Don't you SMOFs have a list of the people to watch at conventions?"

It took me a moment to understand her, primarily because I didn't handle security. She meant The List, passed from convention to convention, of troublesome adults. Science-fiction, gaming, and comic-book conventions attract kids. Any place that attracts kids also attracts their predators.

Unfortunately, some of those predators were Big Name Fans and professionals in the field. The people we couldn't throw out of a convention without cause, so we didn't. We also didn't let them give us cause. We usually assigned security people to dog these troublesome adults, and to never, ever let them alone with a child or a teenager. We also made sure these troublesome adults stayed away from the childcare areas and the places where kids went unsupervised, like the gaming wing and the movie room.

"Of course we have the list," I said. "But believe me, Karnikov isn't on it. I know. That was the first thing I checked when the concom wanted to book him. If he was on the list, I would have made sure that we had no guarantors for the hotel

or the convention site.”

“He should’ve been on the list,” she said.

“He never came to a convention before,” I said. “He’s not on the list because he hasn’t needed our tiny level of money before.”

“Grow up, Spade,” she said. “He’s not coming here because he’s broke. He’s not that broke. He’s got more residuals than you can imagine. He’s coming because he’s running out of venues where he can get his hands on kids.”

My breath caught in my throat. Could she be right? How could I have missed that? “I saw no evidence of that in the press.”

“You’re not dumb, Spade,” she said. “Why do you think the press doesn’t have any of this?”

I grew cold. It was an internal coldness, not caused by my iced coffee or the air-conditioning. I was appalled.

“He bought them off,” I whispered.

“Or threatened suit,” she said. “And those suits can get ugly, especially if the press doesn’t have a lot of evidence.”

“But you do,” I said.

She shrugged one slender shoulder. “I would have evidence, if it weren’t for his damn money.”

I had finished my iced coffee, and somewhere in our conversation, she had finished her final piece of cake. I stood up.

"I'm getting more coffee. Do you want anything?"

"The entire contents of the sweets cabinet," she said, then raised a hand. "Kidding."

But she didn't sound like she was kidding, and I understood stress eating. So I bought her a piece of marble cake and got me another iced coffee. I still had my lemon cake, which I wasn't sure I could eat—at least not during this conversation.

"Okay, you've got to tell me what's really going on," I said as I slid the marble cake toward her.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and said, "You're not going to like this, Spade."

"I already don't like it," I said. "I doubt anything you tell me will be worse than the things my imagination can conjure."

But it was. Oh, it was.

And I was very glad I hadn't eaten any of that lemon cake. Paladin ate it, along with her piece of marble cake, and two shortbread cookies that she bought when she refreshed her iced tea.

All the while, she told me things I didn't want to know and would certainly never forget.

The PG-rated version went like this:

A large part of Paladin's business came from distraught parents whose kids were missing. These parents had tried everything to find the kids—or conversely, the parents were

really famous/upscale/visible and wanted a discreet investigator, someone below the radar to track down the missing kid.

The parents in the second category usually had runaways who were acting out, kids who had trust funds and lots of access to cash, kids who really wanted to get away from Mommy and Daddy. Paladin and I met over a case like that.

But a handful of these kids were last seen in the company of Karnikov. Initially, he met the kids at big celebrity events and invited them to his place for an afternoon, something starstruck parents couldn't say no to. And by kids, Paladin meant prepubescent teenage boys, aged ten to thirteen. They were all good looking in a teen model sort of way, and they were all Karnikov fans.

Until he spent time alone with them. Then they hated him, and for good reason.

But they often couldn't leave his house. Paladin rescued two from hotel rooms, five from the house itself, and five more from limos. She prevented half a dozen kids from leaving a public venue with Karnikov.

Since a lot of these events happened in San Francisco, she got one of the district attorneys there to hold grand jury hearings on a group of cases.

The problem was that by the time it came to testify about Karnikov, the kids had either left the country or they wouldn't talk to her anymore. In all of the cases, she could prove that the

parents had come into a large sum of money. But she couldn't prove where the money had come from, even though she knew.

Until she could prove who was paying off the kids, the D.A. wouldn't press charges. And with Karnikov, it was his word against theirs.

"Wouldn't he recognize you?" I asked when she finished.

"No," she said. "He's never seen me. And he changes his security people all the time. Some of the older ones would recognize me, but the new ones have no idea who I am."

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

"I want to set up cameras all over his hotel suite. I want to bug it as well. I want images. I want to catch this bastard in the act."

She struck her clenched fist on the table, nearly knocking off the stack of dessert plates beside her. I grabbed them, got up, and handed them to the barista.

Then I came back to the table. The movement didn't help. I still felt profoundly disturbed.

"I don't want to catch him in the act," I said softly, "because that means a child gets hurt on our watch, at our convention."

At my convention.

"I would never allow him to touch anyone," she said so fiercely that a few people looked over at us in alarm.

"I know," I said, "but even a hint of an allegation could hurt the child involved. You know that the less scrupulous members

of the press will broadcast the kid's identity. You know that they'll trash the kid and his parents in any forum they have."

Her cheeks reddened. It was a lovely color that set off her eyes.

"I hadn't thought of that," she said. "I was just thinking O.J., you know? They caught O.J. in a hotel with his own words."

Former football star O.J. Simpson, who later confessed to murdering his wife, got brought down by his own voice on a digital recorder, threatening a man he wanted to do business with.

It was a good model, but not good enough. People didn't hate Karnikov as much as they hated Simpson. And this time, there were minors involved.

Not to mention the reputation of all of Fandom. We have perverts and creeps, just like any gathering of adults. We probably have them in fewer numbers than most places, just because our group is so uniformly shy. And we have arranged for the arrest of several, including a former SMoF who, last I heard, was serving a decades-long sentence. Those we can't arrest, we monitor.

All the time.

But Paladin was right; Karnikov was different. He had more money than anyone who had ever been the guest of honor at a convention and he had more fans—the loony kind, who believed everything he did was all right, even when it wasn't.

Even if Paladin's plan occurred, and even if the kid wasn't harmed, the kid and his family would be destroyed. CelebCon would be ruined, and Fandom might never be the same.

I shook my head. "I can't let you work security, Paladin."

"Okay, Spade, at least let me go after Karnikov," she said. "This is my best chance."

"No." I used my firmest voice. "I don't even think you should come to the convention."

She looked startled, then hurt. "Spade, I can buy a damn membership if I want."

"And I can block it," I said.

"You'd protect a man like Karnikov just because he's your guest of honor?"

That hurt me, but I let it slide because I knew how angry she was.

"No," I said. "I think you're going at this like a bulldozer. And right now, what you need is a little finesse."

She paused. The anger left her face, replaced by a puzzled frown.

"What're you thinking?" she asked.

"I'm thinking you were on the right track with the district attorney," I said. "You just didn't take it far enough."

"I took it as far as I could," she said.

"But you need a forensic accountant," I said.

“A what?”

“Me,” I said. “You need someone like me.”

It took some finagling. First I had to explain to the San Francisco district attorney that I am a certified forensic accountant in California, even though my residence is in Washington State.

Over the years, I've gotten certification in every state that offers it. I'm licensed in all but Hawaii because I've never run a convention there.

I make sure I can testify in court, which means getting whatever each state needs to make me a legitimate witness.

Mostly, though, I'm so well known in the fannish community that any time a con committee hears I'm investigating their finances, they panic and tell me everything they know.

I haven't lost a case yet.

Paladin knew that Karnikov was bribing the parents of these kids he hurt. She just couldn't prove it. The district attorney couldn't afford the money to fight and track down all of Karnikov's financial dealings.

But I could. Mostly because I could do it myself—so long as we had the proper warrants, which I left to the D.A.

I had Paladin supply me with pizza, Chinese take-out, huge breakfasts, and lots of donuts, as well as coffee, iced coffee, and the occasional bottle of water (but only because she insisted).

I locked myself in my hotel room with my bank of computers and went to work.

But not before I talked to the other SMOFs. Because my actions were about to make CelebCon a disaster.

We were going to time Karnikov's arrest so that he would be in jail instead of attending CelebCon. Which meant that the convention would either have to shut down or have some kind of equivalent guest.

Which we couldn't find. Not ever, not because of the short notice, but because celebrities of Karnikov's stature—megacelebrities, the press calls them—don't go to Comic-Con, let alone to an upstart convention like CelebCon.

But the SMOFs called in every chit they had, pulling in some of the lesser celebrities who had initially left the convention, offering signing bonuses, all kinds of perks that a con never normally offered.

The idea was to salvage at least a small percentage of the attendees, so that CelebCon would at least make its nut.

And if we timed Karnikov's arrest to the very last minute, then CelebCon wouldn't be blamed for his absence, or for demanding our money back, since everything was based on his actual appearance.

But all of that meant I had to work hard and fast, and most importantly, accurately. I needed to document everything, and because we were doing this on the QT, I couldn't have help.

Which meant that I couldn't have sleep.

I got crankier and crankier as time went on, so cranky that I didn't even care if I snapped at Paladin. She was doing her best to keep me upright, hydrated, and thinking clearly.

She also, bless her, never once asked me how I was doing.

Because it was pretty clear that I was doing poorly.

Karnikov had some good money managers, and it took me five days to realize that money managers were human, and could be bought like everyone else. I sent Paladin to the manager who hadn't handled Karnikov's most recent transactions. I figured two things: Karnikov had probably fired the guy, and in that circumstance a bulldozer might be exactly what we needed.

Especially a beautiful bulldozer with a killer smile.

What I wanted from the manager seemed small enough: the names of the dummy corporations that Karnikov used or, failing that, the names of the offshore banks where he kept his accounts.

Paladin got both things, but wouldn't tell me how. She did shudder when she handed me the disk with the information. Then she took a long hot shower.

It was only later I realized that she'd bullied the guy into letting her drive him to San Francisco to make a deal with the district attorney. She said being alone with the creep in the car

was more than enough to make her feel slimy.

Leave it to my prurient imagination that she had done more to get the information. I blamed my lapse on lack of sleep, and that damned attraction I had for her.

Two more days, one illegal maneuver that I would have to cover with a legitimate one before we went to court, and I finally had the information we needed: Karnikov had indeed paid off the families. All of them.

And from the same numbered offshore account.

After a short argument (“But I can drive!” “You’re in no shape to walk, let alone drive!”), Paladin drove me to San Francisco to present the evidence to the district attorney myself. I slept the whole way—and had nightmare after nightmare of Karnikov trolling the halls at CelebCon, searching for victims.

I woke up in a cold sweat, ready to nail the bastard to the wall.

The arrest made international news. In fact, it fed the twenty-four-hour news cycle for weeks and got revived every time there was a legal action. The trial had a little more dignity than I would have expected, only because it was held in San Francisco, and not in Los Angeles, home of the celebrity nutball trials.

CelebCon didn’t lose as much money as I thought it would. Everyone there spent the weekend discussing Karnikov anyway. His fans needed a place to gather, and they had already paid for this one. We only gave back five percent in

refunds which, considering I was expecting seventy-five percent, was pretty damn good.

My I-told-you-so's weren't nearly as satisfying as I'd hoped they'd be. Mostly because I kept thinking about how close we really had come to megadisaster.

If I hadn't stayed, then Karnikov would've preyed on kids throughout the convention.

If Paladin hadn't tried to bulldoze her way into security, we might've been facing lawsuits ourselves for fostering the wrong kind of atmosphere for children, something the fen never-ever-ever wanted to do.

As disasters went, this one was not nearly as bad as it could've been.

It could've been the end of the fannish world.

But it wasn't.

And as Paladin said to me one giddy afternoon before I gave my eighty-fifth deposition (actually just my third, but it seemed like eighty-five at that point), we'd also taken a major predator off the streets.

"You did it," she said, clutching at my arm. "You're a genius."

I shook my head. I usually accept the genius label, but not this time. This time, I still felt like a chump who should've fought harder to keep Karnikov away from my beloved conventions.

"I'm not a genius," I said.

"Oh, but you are," she said. "You're the Eliot Ness of science fiction."

I frowned at her. I'd been called a lot of things, but never that. "How so?"

"Al Capone," she said. "They got him on tax fraud, not for all the murders and stuff. But he still went away forever."

Bribery. Buying off witnesses. Interfering with court cases. Certainly not the same league of felony as the charges of child sex abuse that Karnikov could've faced.

But, as my beautiful bulldozer pointed out, those charges were alleged anyway. Mine could be proven.

"And," she said in that same joyful tone. "We all know how well child abusers fare in prison."

We did know that. Just like we knew that meeting our idols wasn't always a great idea. They didn't all turn out as bad as Karnikov, but they rarely lived up to our ideals either.

As we went into the last day of CelebCon, I was actually thinking of no longer running conventions. I had done enough. I thought I might even take a vacation from Fandom, go live in the real world for a while.

Then I ran into Doris Xavier, the head of security, outside closing ceremonies. Doris was a muscular woman the size of The Rock, and she always spoke her mind, even if you didn't want to hear it.

"That Paladin is something," she said. "Think of all the kids

she's rescued. She's risked her life dozens of times. Now, she's a true hero—and we don't even know her name. Just like the real Paladin.”

I almost corrected Doris. First, there was no “real” Paladin. He was a fictional character, and we did know his name.

But Doris was right. You could look at the worst side of human nature, or you could look at the best of it. Karnikov was the worst.

Paladin was the best.

And she came to me when she needed help. Which was better than any I-told-you-so.

It was enough to restore your faith in human nature. Or at least to restore mine.

I'm still working finances at too many conventions per year. I had to take some time out to testify. I could've become a celebrity in my own right, but I didn't think I'd be a good interview, no matter what the producers on CNBC's various money shows told me.

Instead, I've been going to panels in my spare time, participating in fannish discussions—the kind that got me into the field in the first place—and I've decided to trust my instincts.

If I think a guest is going to be bad for a convention, I'm going to make sure that guest never ever attends.

I'll play the Karnikov card.

And considering how long fannish memory is, playing it

once should be more than enough.

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THE ALCHEMIST

R. T. LAWTON

They said they would pay me to bring the old man to them after nightfall. It wasn't to be a lot of money but enough to get my interest, especially since I needed to eat, yet my criminal talents on the streets of Paris were still, shall we say, developing. Of course, some folk in our community of outcasts argued that my sleight of hand skills were so raw as to border on incompetent and there was no developing them. But, what did those people really expect from a young orphan recently graduated from Mother Margot's School for Pickpockets? I merely needed a little more time to settle into my new profession.

And contrary to current rumors, Mother Margot did not throw me out just to get rid of me. Ha, given half a chance, I'd lift the purse of Louis the Fourteenth himself and show them all, but then our Sun King's guards would scarce let a dirty street urchin like me get that close to his noble person.

So I guided the old man, a rich merchant, along the path winding from the banks of the Seine, out across the open dark land where ancient Romans had quarried building stones, an area riddled with pits and tunnels, and which was now used as a dumping ground for refuse, both the castoffs of men and the human outcasts who drifted here. Bull's-eye lantern in hand, I

led the merchant onward, up the slope of the Buttes Chaumont northeast of Paris proper and into an outbuilding in the ruins of the old Roman villa where most of our little community made our home. Here was our sanctuary from the king's bailiffs.

I didn't know if the men paying me were aware of it or not, but this greedy little merchant stumbling over the chalky gravel behind me did not appear to be a total fool. Evidently assuming that he might be sticking his head into a den of thieves, he had brought two bodyguards with him for his personal safety. And these two retainers were not coachmen or common house servants, but rather had the appearance about them of professional hired swords. I wondered where the old man had gotten them, as they were no one I recognized from the streets I worked. Something was afoot here, but I'd been left completely in the dark by both sides.

At the blanket covering the doorway into this part of the ruins, I barred the entrance with one outflung arm and inquired as my employers had requested. "Excusez-moi, monsieur, did you bring the silver coins as agreed?"

The merchant pushed my arm out of the way. "My business is with those inside, not a stripling like you."

He and his two bodyguards thrust the blanket covering aside and entered the room, where a small blaze in a stone fire ring provided the only light inside. Erratic shadows played on the fitted stone walls and upon a second blanket-covered doorway near one of the rear corners.

I squeezed in behind them, as I was curious, plus I'd not yet been paid.

The merchant brusquely addressed one of the men across the room.

"Père Duval, I am here. I assume you have everything ready to show me?"

I looked to the opposite side of the room. There stood Jules, our self-proclaimed king of the Paris underworld, the one all in our little community paid tribute to lest we come to physical harm. On his right stood Blondel, one of his grim-faced assassins, slowly rubbing his gloved hands against each other as if the skin on the backs of his hands tingled and he wished to calm the twitch. An unconscious habit he had acquired of late whenever any kind of action might be required of him. And, there on a pile of rags in one corner lay Lebel, with his eyes closed as though sleeping or drunk. I saw no Père Duval.

Then Jules stepped forward a pace. "Oui, Monsieur ..."

The merchant thrust out his palm. "Do not use my name, lest the walls have ears."

Jules paused but a second. "As you wish, a wise precaution on your part. All here is in readiness, but I fear that time grows short." He gestured toward Lebel lying on the rags. "Unfortunately, the alchemist is dying and I don't know how long he will be with us."

The merchant's demeanor now quickly changed to one of disappointment and maybe even distress.

“How long do we have?”

Jules shrugged his shoulders. “It is difficult to say. Notice the yellow cast to his face. He is an old drunk, perhaps it is the liver disease that kills him.”

I peered at the man lying on the rags. It was true that Lebel consumed much wine, and his features did appear slightly yellow tonight in the flickering firelight. But then Lebel had been fine all of this morning and into the afternoon. With my own eyes I'd seen him moving around in good health. I opened my mouth to reassure the merchant, except that Jules grabbed my arm in a tight grip and moved me back to the doorway.

“We won't be needing you anymore,” he said.

“You haven't paid me yet,” I protested.

“See me tomorrow and payment will be yours,” he replied in a reassuring voice. Then he thrust me back out through the blanket covering.

As soon as he released my arm, I rounded back to face him. It was on my mind to argue, but Jules slowly drew his right index finger across his throat, and I knew what that meant. More than one of our little enclave had met with his hard-faced assassins after dark on the path along the refuse pits. I took two steps backward.

He grinned and closed the blanket over the doorway so no light spilled out.

Muttering curses under my breath, I stood undecided for a

moment. If Jules thought to cheat me out of payment, then I needed a way to get even. And, to do that, I needed to find out what scheme Jules had going on with the merchant. If I was not to get paid, then Jules should not profit either from this night's business.

Careful to make no noise, I circled the ruins until I found a place where light showed between the long underside of the thatched roof and the bare top of one stone wall. By crawling up over the rubble, I was concealed from outside observation, yet could see a good part of the room's interior and could hear most of what was said. Jules was the one speaking when I snuggled into my hidden perch.

"Like the boy asked, did you bring silver coins?"

The merchant nodded.

Jules held out his hand.

The merchant removed a leather purse from beneath his coat and undid the drawstrings. His right hand delved into the pouch and pulled out a handful of silver livre.

Jules waited, but the merchant seemed reluctant to part with his money.

"Tell me exactly how this works."

"I understand your hesitation," replied Jules. "That is why I'm willing to conduct a small demonstration of good faith before we move on to the more profitable business at hand. Merely lend me ten of your silver livre and I shall return one gold Louis

coin to you this same night. As a businessman, I'm sure you can see the profit to yourself."

The merchant stopped short of counting on his fingers as he muttered in a barely audible voice.

"One gold Louis is worth twenty-four silver livre, and you say the alchemist only needs ten livre to make one gold coin?"

"Correct."

"That's a profit of fourteen silver coins for each transaction."
"

Jules now acquired the smile of a man selling horses in the market. "Remember," he said, "you and I split the profit in equal shares."

"Equal?"

"Yes. As partners, you provide the silver and I provide the alchemist. It was our agreement."

"What share does the alchemist get?"

Jules shrugged for the second time that night. "He is dying, what does a dead man need with money? Don't worry, I'll take care of him."

The merchant tilted his head slightly to one side and peered up at Jules. "So it seems that in every business transaction there are those who gain and those who lose. The way of the world, I suppose, ever since time began."

"A wise philosophy," replied Jules. "We shall remember those very words for the future."

I could see that on the morrow, I'd have to warn Lebel about the plan to cheat him on the profits. Yet, I'd had no previous knowledge of Lebel's interest in alchemy, and wondered why he hadn't used this talent before now, rather than becoming a common thief. Perhaps it was a developing talent he had only lately recognized. I needed to keep an eye on this.

Still, the merchant held back.

"If the alchemist can truly convert silver to gold, then why do you need me? Why don't you do this yourself?"

Jules dropped his outstretched hand. "I'm a poor man. If I had the necessary silver then I would do it myself and have no need for partners. I can see that I've misjudged you. No matter, there is a certain merchant on the Rue du—"

"You'd go to my rival? No, no." He held out his hand with the ten silver coins. "Now show me how it works, and no tricks, else you will deal with my bodyguards."

Jules glanced at both retainers, who placed their hands upon their sword hilts as if signaling their readiness for trouble. Then our underworld king bowed from his waist toward the merchant, a sweeping bow with his right arm stretched out to its fullest, white-plumed hat in hand.

I had to admire Jules's aplomb. There he was, dressed in his best patched clothes, yet he acted the part of a gentleman while outnumbered and under pressure to produce for his wary client. It was a side of him I'd not seen before tonight.

He motioned for Blondel to rouse the alchemist. After being shaken by his shoulder several times, Lebel came round, and with Blondel's aid managed to gain his feet. Shakily, with much dry coughing, Lebel wobbled to the fire pit where a canvas bag rested nearby. Out of the bag, Lebel pulled a thin metal bowl the size and shape of a topless apple, and set it on a flat rock. Other small pouches came out of the bag and were arranged at Lebel's feet. Now, looking from the metal pot to his empty hand and back, Lebel seemed at a loss as to what to do next.

"What's wrong?" asked the merchant.

Adopting an aloof position, matched by his tone of voice, Jules drily commented. "He needs the ten silver coins in order to proceed."

The merchant thrust his hand with the coins closer to Jules.

Jules stepped back, with both hands held palm outward in rejection. "No, monsieur, I sense you have no trust in me. Give your coins to the alchemist direct. I will touch nothing during this scientific experiment."

Wavering from one man to the other, the merchant finally gave the coins to Lebel. Now Lebel seemed to know exactly what to do. With all ten coins in plain sight upon his open palm, he gently dropped them one at a time into the metal pot, counting as each coin rang out on the silver one beneath it. Then he placed the pot onto a metal grill over the fire. From small leather pouches at his feet, he slowly added pinches and handfuls of various chemicals and crumpled herbs until the

coins were completely covered. Throughout the ceremony, he chanted in what I took for Latin used by the priests at church, although it could have been some other foreign language for all I knew. Blondel stayed close at hand, opening and closing as needed the pouches at the alchemist's feet.

"Get ready," said Jules, "the transformation is almost complete. You will soon have your gold. Only one more chemical to add."

Wide eyed, the merchant moved closer, as did his two swordsmen.

Lebel reached into his last pouch and brought out a handful of powder. Reciting more phrases from his arcane language, Lebel raised his hand over his head and flung the powder into the fire.

A bright explosion temporarily blinded me, then thick blue smoke rose up through the metal grill. Blondel jerked quickly away from the fire pit and stumbled backward onto the bed of rags where he fell. Confusion followed. I myself didn't know what to think. As the smoke cleared, Jules loudly proclaimed, "It is done." He pointed at the metal pot setting on the grill.

The merchant stared in astonishment. No one else moved. At last, evidently unable to control himself further, the merchant rushed forward and grabbed the metal pot. Immediately, he turned loose in pain and dropped it. One shiny gold Louis rolled out of its chemical and crumpled herb covering. The merchant licked his burnt fingers, yet somehow managed to wrap the hem

of his long coat around the single gold coin before anyone else could touch it.

"It's a miracle," he exclaimed.

"Test it," encouraged Jules, "make sure it's real gold."

Gingerly, the merchant tried the edge of his teeth against the coin. He seemed pleased.

"Now," said Jules, "according to our agreement, you owe me seven livre. My equal share of our business tonight."

"Of course, of course." The merchant extracted seven more silver coins from his leather purse and handed them over to Jules. The gold Louis stayed tightly clutched in his other hand.

"Are you satisfied with the results?" inquired Jules.

"Yes, yes," replied the merchant. "How often can we do this?"

At the merchant's statement, Lebel had a sudden fit of coughing, and then collapsed. Blondel caught Lebel's arm and helped him back to his rag bed in the corner. Now, Lebel lay limp with his eyes closed again.

Jules turned his back to that corner and lowered his voice. "I fear the alchemist's end of time is not far off. We may only be able to do this once more. What do you propose under these circumstances?"

The look of grave concern on Jules's features was now reflected in the merchant's face.

"A physician," suggested the merchant, "we must find a

good doctor to extend the man's life."

Jules shook his head as if in sadness. "No, he's seen several physicians, but none can cure him. That option is hopeless. What else can you think of? We may only get one more transformation to turn silver into gold."

"Then we must take advantage of that one more transformation."

Jules pursed his lips as if in deep thought.

"Yes, well reasoned, but how?"

"Well ..." started the merchant.

I saw a slyness creep across his face.

"... does the alchemist have a larger metal bowl?"

Now the corners of Jules's mouth seemed to twitch, but he controlled it and turned toward Blondel.

"Is there a larger bowl we can use?"

"I'll look."

Blondel quit rubbing his gloved hands together and dropped to one knee beside Lebel's belongings. From a large wooden chest, he eventually retrieved two metal pots, one the size of a man's head and the other as large as a gentleman's washbowl. He set both pots in plain sight by the fire. "Which one do you need?"

The merchant hesitated.

"We need," interrupted Jules, "to know what size so we can

acquire the proper amount of chemicals, otherwise the transformation fails. And, you should know, with your permission of course, that I will add the seven silver coins you paid me tonight along with three other coins of my own to whatever amount you place in the pot tomorrow night. I, too, would like to be able to hold gold in the hand.”

“Perhaps,” replied the merchant, “we should use the larger bowl.”

Jules’s eyes fairly gleamed in the firelight.

“Then we shall see you tomorrow night. Come at midnight when the full moon shows you the pathway. Do you require the boy as a guide again?”

At that, I started quietly down the rubble and away from the building. Wouldn’t do for Jules to know I’d been eavesdropping on his business of making money. I hurried to the fallen wall of another outbuilding several meters away and sat down facing their entrance as if patiently waiting in case I was needed.

The merchant and his two bodyguards lifted the blanket covering, and came out of the room, into the pale moonlight. I stood up to offer my services, but they ignored me and made their own way down the slope of the Buttes Chaumont. Evidently, my part in this business was done.

My plan was to sneak back up to my hiding place in the rubble under the eaves in hopes of hearing more about Jules’s game, but our underworld king had other plans in mind for now. He stared at me from the blanket doorway, until I understood he

wanted me gone.

I wandered away, my mind full of questions and no answers to go with them. My feet, acting without benefit of my preoccupied brain, soon took me to the three-walled room which I shared with two others: Josette, a young woman who had taken me in off the streets of Paris and placed me in Mother Margot's school so that I could learn a trade to feed myself, and the Chevalier, a human peacock who called himself Remy. This Remy was a son of fallen nobility, come to us after the Sun King's lavish spending on building projects had taxed and bankrupted the Chevalier's family fortune. He was not alone, as the fortunes of several other noble families had also gone to ruin by the king. I had no love for this Remy. Since he'd arrived, Josette tended to lavish all her attentions on him with smiles and soft laughter, while I was left unnoticed. True, I was several years younger than her, but no matter that to me. I loved her deeply, she need only open her eyes beyond the Chevalier to see that. In time, I would find a way to rid myself of this rival for Josette's affections, much as I would get even with Jules for his lowly dismissal of my services.

As I entered our open-front dwelling, laughter dropped into silence. Remy removed his arm from around the waist of Josette and sat down on a large rock by the fire.

For my part, I tried to ignore him and found my own sitting place.

"Why the downcast face?" he inquired. "What troubles you?"

”
“Nothing,” I retorted.

The Chevalier shrugged, then proceeded to relate a tale to Josette of an intricate burglary he was planning near the university. Always trying to impress was our Remy. Well now, I too had exciting events to relate. Words blurted from my lips before I could stop myself.

“Tonight, I saw silver turned into gold by an alchemist.”

Josette turned to stare at me.

Remy fell silent in mid sentence, then acquired a thoughtful look on his face. Eventually, he spoke.

“In medieval times, alchemists attempted to turn lead, not silver, into gold. The conversion was never successful.”

“Well, I saw Lebel put ten livre into a metal pot on the fire and when he was finished, one gold Louis came out.”

“You saw Lebel do this?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know the gold was real?”

“I saw the merchant test it with his teeth. He said it was good.”

Both Josette and Remy now seemed to have a great interest in my tale.

“What merchant?” inquired Remy.

“The rich one that Jules paid me to bring to him tonight in

the old ruins to the east of us.” I ducked my head to avert their eyes. “Well, Jules hasn’t actually paid me yet, but said he would tomorrow.”

“Do you think he will pay you tomorrow?”

I thought about that for a while.

“No, not really. He cheats everyone.”

With that much having already been spoken, Remy wormed the rest of the story out of me, every last detail down to the smallest one.

“Is that all?” he asked.

I rolled my eyes toward the top of my head to see if there was anything there I’d forgotten. “Oh yes, upon arriving, the merchant addressed someone named Père Duval, but I saw only Jules, Blondel, and Lebel.”

Remy laughed aloud and ruffled my hair with one hand. “Jules is using a phony name to go with his phony scheme, boy. Don’t you see?”

I pulled away from his offending hand. And, no, I didn’t see. “But in front of my very own eyes, Lebel made gold,” I insisted.

The smile slowly dropped from Remy’s countenance. He acquired a serious mien. “I have a proposition for you, boy, one which will reward you more than if Jules actually paid you what he owes. Are you interested?”

While I was not in favor of any enterprise which increased the fortunes of the Chevalier, I also knew that getting any pay

from Jules would be like getting blood out of a turnip. And even then that blood would probably be mine. Best for me to take care of one enemy at a time, but even better if Remy's intentions pitted him and Jules against each other.

"What is your plan?" I asked.

"My plan is my own," he replied, "but here is what I need you to do." Remy then explained I should stay in the villa on the morrow to see if Jules intended to use the same building again for his next meeting with the merchant. When I knew for sure, I was to meet with Remy in a certain grove of trees on the downslope side of the refuse pits.

"What will you be doing?" I inquired.

"I have business in Paris with some old friends." Then he broke a chunk of bread off a long loaf and tossed it to me. "Here, eat your supper and sleep well. I have need of your services tomorrow."

At least someone felt my services were necessary. I'd have appreciated that sentiment better had he used the word "talent" instead of "services," but if I were to be paid well, then perhaps I could overlook his choice of wording for now.

When I awoke, the Chevalier had already gone. With no one present, I quickly searched through our meager food stores. Seizing the leftover cooked leg and thigh of a fowl which had been wrapped in white cloth, I hurried out of our three-walled abode and set off to conduct my duties as ordered.

Jules and Blondel were nowhere to be found, but Lebel

was a different matter. For a dying man, he seemed pretty healthy to me as he caroused from the thieves in our community to the beggars, the counterfeiters, and then ending with the few trollops who had not gone into Paris to ply their wares. Two bottles of wine I counted, all for himself, though he did share a few swallows with one of the trollops he appeared to be wooing. He moved along, talking to all in a boastful manner about his future, although he never once came out with the reason for his boasting. In the end, Lebel trudged over to the building in the east ruins at dusk, the same building as the night before. And there a few minutes later, I saw Blondel and Jules approach the blanket-covered front door. Then they split. Blondel entered through the front, while Jules walked around to the rear of the ruins and disappeared. When he didn't return, I remembered the back door into the room and speculated he went in that way.

As a blood red moon rose up over the plains of the Saracen Well, I started down the chalky gravel path. By the time I'd reached the refuse pits, the moon had softened to a pale orange and grown smaller in the sky. Before I reached the tree grove, Remy stepped out of the shadows and came to meet me.

"It's to be the same place," I whispered.

"Good," he replied. "Let me get my cloak and we will wait for your merchant to pass by on his way up."

I waited patiently as Remy disappeared into the grove of trees. As long as it took him to return to my side, he must have

lost his direction and wandered a bit. Plus, at times I swore there were hushed voices back where he went. Suddenly, he appeared again.

“I thought I heard voices.”

“Merely wind in the upper leaves,” he replied.

Halfway back to the path, the Chevalier pulled me behind a small clump of bushes.

“We will wait here in cover. Tell me when your merchant passes. After he gets out of sight, then we will follow.”

I still had no idea what Remy had for a plan, but he obviously wasn't going to tell me at this point. The first hour of waiting wasn't bad. Trees, bushes, tall grass; everything was touched with a dull goldness beaming down from the full yellow moon climbing overhead. By the second hour, I must have dozed off, maybe a little. Remy shook me awake.

“Wha—”

He quickly placed his hand over my mouth.

“A group is coming up the path,” he whispered in my ear.

I peeled his fingers from my mouth, leaned forward, and gently parted the bush in front. Sure enough, three lanterns showed a party of four men making their way toward the Buttes Chaumont. The shorter man was my merchant, and it appeared that his untrusting nature had added another swordsman to his retainers.

At a bend in the upward path, we lost sight of the glow of

their trailing lanterns. Remy hauled me to my feet and pushed me toward the chalky path.

“Now we go.”

With the moon's brightness upon the ground, it was no problem to find my way. We were soon around the bend in the path and moving upward. Always we stayed far enough back to avoid discovery by those we followed. Twice I wanted to stop and check our back trail, but each time, Remy was close behind and firmly nudged me forward. Something nibbled at the edge of my brain, but my mind couldn't quite grasp what it was.

On top of the Buttes Chaumont, we closed the distance between us and the merchant's party, so that when they stopped in front of the blanket-covered doorway at the east ruins, we found cover behind a low wall within earshot of the merchant demanding entrance. As the blanket opened, all four men filed into the room. In that brief light from inside, I noticed two of the retainers carried heavy leather bags. Then the blanket fell shut and the light was gone.

“What now?” I asked.

“Now show me your hiding place.”

Quietly, I guided the Chevalier to the side of the ruins and pointed at a gap of light between the roof and the top of the wall.

“You,” he said, “will climb up there as before to listen and watch what happens. I have some short business to attend to and will join you in a moment.”

He waited until I was secured high up in my hiding place before he left. I had no idea where he went, but he soon returned and settled in beside me. He hadn't missed much. Jules and the merchant hadn't progressed beyond an argument which started shortly after Jules had inquired how much silver the merchant had brought. Avoiding an answer to that question, the merchant was trying to negotiate better terms for himself.

Jules acted shocked, as if his feelings had been hurt.

"We already have terms of agreement."

"Yes," replied the merchant, but I supply all the silver, the greater risk is mine."

"And," retorted Jules, "I supply the alchemist. As you well know, alchemy is against Church law, to say nothing of the king's law."

"That risk we both take," said the merchant. "I want six shares for myself, four shares go to you. Else I leave this very minute and take my silver with me."

"Now," whispered Remy in my ear, "watch Jules make a show of reluctant acceptance."

Jules winced. He looked at Blondel, he stared at the ceiling, he glowered at the fire, he punched his right fist into his left palm, then he straightened up.

"Very well," he said, "but I'll accept no less than that."

The merchant let out a breath he seemed to be holding and grinned in triumph. "Done." He motioned for his retainers to

place his two large bags of silver coins on the opposite side of the fire pit where Lebel's large metal washing bowl rested on broken stone flooring.

Jules's and Blondel's eyes followed the transfer of the two large bags.

"Proceed," the merchant said in a voice rising with excitement.

"Rouse the alchemist," ordered Jules.

Blondel went to the rag bed where Lebel lay. This time it took longer to get Lebel to his feet. He coughed more and his complexion was ghastly. I began to think maybe he really was dying.

"Soot, with dark yellow and green dyes on his face, neck, and hands," whispered Remy. "Someone applied it well. He almost looks like a walking cadaver."

With Lebel in a seemingly weakened state and unable to lift heavy loads, Blondel opened each of the two bags and poured their contents into the gentleman's washing bowl. Silver coins rang and flashed in the firelight. The pile quickly grew. At the sight of so much money, the room became deadly silent. All stared at the large metal bowl.

Finally.

"Put the bowl over the fire." Jules's voice sounded hoarse.

Blondel slid the container onto the metal grate.

Even from my distance, I could tell it made a heavy weight

to move.

“See the gloves Blondel is wearing?” whispered Remy. “That is how he managed to exchange the small metal bowl of silver coins last night for the bowl with the one gold Louis without burning his own fingers like the merchant did.”

“But when did he make the exchange? I saw his every move.”

“When Lebel threw the copper-based chemical onto the flames, you and the others were blinded by the flash long enough for Blondel to make his move. Plus, I’ll wager the blue smoke you spoke about covered his efforts to conceal the first bowl underneath Lebel’s bed of rags after Blondel stumbled backward from the fire.”

Ah, now the events of last night made more sense. Jules was up to his trickery again, but I could see some problems for him to overcome this night.

Lebel had already begun his ritual of muttering incantations in a foreign language and tossing great handfuls of raw chemicals and crumpled herbs into the large metal bowl. At times, he upended the leather pouch he was holding and dumped its entire contents over the silver coins. The merchant and his three retainers seemed riveted to the process.

I nudged the Chevalier.

“When Lebel throws copper powders into the flames for the explosion, how will Blondel easily conceal the switching of bowls this time? Tonight’s bowl is too large and the weight too

great.”

“Fool,” Remy whispered back, “if Jules kept swapping ten silver livre for one Louis, then he would lose money he doesn’t have. No, lad, tonight Jules intends to end up with everything for himself.”

I contemplated that scenario, while Lebel worked his way up to the final step of the alchemy process. He was reaching into his last leather pouch, and I still hadn’t figured out what Jules had in mind to help him take all. Only Remy seemed to know Jules’s end game.

“What happens next?” I quickly asked.

“Watch closely,” replied Remy in my ear. “I have no doubt that in the confusion immediately after the explosion, some of Jules’s confederates will rush in the back door and rob them all.”

I could scarce hold my astonishment.

“Jules would rob himself?”

“Precisely that. To all outside appearances, he is a victim of unknown robbers. That way, Jules can claim to be in the same boat as the merchant, and thus remove all suspicion from himself. Later, he pays off his confederates from the pot of stolen silver and keeps the majority of the coins for his own purse.”

“What of the merchant?”

“He has no one to accuse but the band of robbers. And

even then, who can he go to for help in pursuing the criminals? Alchemy is against the law, the same as witchcraft.”

I was still mulling over this new turn in coming events when Lebel flung his last chemical into the flames. I covered my eyes from the pending flash and used only my ears to record the explosion.

As I opened my eyes again, a band of rough men rushed through the back door, swords and cudgels in hand. Their faces were concealed by wide scarves, yet I swore I recognized one or more of Jules’s assassins by the street clothes they wore and the sound of their voices.

Jules’s and Blondel’s arms shot up into the air in surrender as they begged for mercy from the bandits. Lebel slumped to the floor and went into his dying act. The merchant’s hired swordsmen were quickly disarmed. It was all as Remy had predicted.

Then came the unexpected. Another band of men burst through the front doorway with swords and pikes. These men in uniform bore the livery of our Roi Soleil and shouted loudly, “In the name of the King!”

Having no wish to be captured by our Sun King’s bailiffs, I lurched upright and knocked my head against the low-hanging roof in an attempt to escape. The Chevalier quickly pulled me back down and held me still. Thus, I witnessed the final events in the firelit room.

Lebel suddenly came alive with a speed to be envied by

Lazarus himself and scurried on all fours toward the rear door. He displayed great spirit in his movement, but unfortunately for him, he was still physically within the exit when the mass stampede began and he was trampled by the running feet of robbers all trying to leave through the same portal. Jules and Blondel thrust their own bodies through the tangled mass and disappeared into the darkness. All three hired retainers went intermingled with the band of robbers. Lebel managed to make a second recovery and he too vanished like his blue smoke had earlier. Only the merchant was left behind to be caught.

One man, whom I presumed to be a Captain of the Guard, bellowed for all to hear. "In the name of the King, I hereby seize all in this room." He turned to the merchant. "And I arrest you for the crime of alchemy." The captain motioned toward the front doorway. "Take him." One of the bailiffs led him away, while others grabbed hold of the gentleman's washing bowl sitting on the grate, plus all the bags and leather pouches from the broken stone flooring.

When all were gone and the room was silent again, Remy and I made our way down from our hiding place. As we walked back to our three-walled domicile, he seemed to be in a lighthearted mood, whistling a jaunty tune I'd not heard before. Inside our meager quarters, he even kissed Josette on the cheek and gave her a hearty slap on her behind. I didn't know what he was so happy about, perhaps it was that Jules got his just deserts.

I, too, will admit to feeling a certain amount of satisfaction

at Jules having not profited from his money scheme, but mostly I was overwhelmed by this night's events. Remy must have seen the confusion on my face.

"Speak, boy, what are you thinking?"

"You predicted tonight's happenings as if you had seen all of this before, all except the intervention of the King's men."

Remy gave me a strange look before turning away.

"You are right, boy, I did not predict the sudden appearance of the King's men to you, and I am certain their entrance also came as a great surprise to Jules and his men."

After a few moments of silence, Remy inquired over his shoulder, "What have you learned from tonight?"

I mulled that over in my mind before answering.

"Gold in the hand is worth more than all the gold promised to you. If you are not already holding it, then you may never get it, much like the merchant lost everything."

"Very good," replied Remy. "You have learned something."

"Which reminds me," I said. "You promised to pay me for my services tonight, more than Jules promised me."

"And so you shall be rewarded."

On the very next evening when Remy returned from another business trip into Paris, he handed me two silver livre, a small fortune in my estimation. And for several nights afterward, our food larder seemed to be filled with anything we desired to eat. Wine flowed freely at our supper. Remy now sported a new

lavish cape to drape over his shoulders, and somehow Josette had acquired a colorful dress to replace her old one.

On my trips into Paris on the next few days to ply my light-fingered trade, I found it slightly odd to hear no gossip in the markets concerning the recent arrest of a rich merchant. But maybe he escaped into the dark on the pathway down from the buttes, because I did hear rumors about a short, richly dressed apparition seen haunting the refuse pits of late. An apparition that vanished into the myriad of tunnels whenever anyone tried to approach.

The only other thing which gnaws at the back of my mind before I fall asleep at night is related to what bothered me that night as the Chevalier and I climbed the chalk gravel path behind the merchant's party. It seemed to me that we were being followed at a distance, even as we followed the others. And as to the Sun King's bailiffs in the ruins, I recognized their livery when they burst into the room, but when I reflect back on that scene, their footwear didn't appear quite right. Instead of the sturdy leather boots I'd usually seen on bailiffs, these men wore more fancy boots like the Chevalier did. And those were worn down at the heel and elsewhere, as if the owners hadn't funds to replace them.

I also wondered who Remy had business with in Paris on the day before and the day after Jules's moneymaking scheme went awry. Had Remy consorted with other fallen sons of nobility much like himself, men who were also struggling to survive in a cold, heartless world?

No matter. If I thought long enough, I was sure to figure out all in the end. It's just that my mind was getting sleepy.

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DANCER IN A STORM

L. A. WILSON, JR.



Art by Jorge Mascarenhas

Something woke Memphis up. He couldn't identify it at first. A stench penetrated his sleep and irritated his senses until he opened his eyes. It was putrid and revolting, stealing into his nostrils like toxic fumes. His eyes snapped open, only to be filled with large brown irises that hovered only a few inches from his face. The foul breath threatened to gag him, but something more terrifying gripped him.

A sharp object that looked like a sword dug into his neck. It wasn't really a sword, but the butcher's knife was magnified tenfold from his vantage point.

"Geraldine," he whispered softly. "What are you doing here?"

"You seen my baby, Memphis?" Her voice was intense and deadly serious.

Memphis went silent. He couldn't think of an immediate response.

"Where's my baby, Memphis?" She asked again with her voice rising more forcefully.

Memphis couldn't tear his eyes away from the knife.

"I don't know, Geraldine. I think she's at Marcia's," he finally said. It was a desperate lie, and he prayed that the trembling apprehension in his voice wouldn't betray him.

Her expression changed, becoming more thoughtful as she rose up slightly.

"You sure, Memphis?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sure," he answered, grateful to escape the blade at his throat.

She stood back with her eyes still fixed on him and allowed him to sit up in bed.

At last he began to relax. He had no desire to hurt Geraldine, and he damned sure didn't want her to hurt him. There was nothing worse, however, than having a conflict with a

crazy person. They were oblivious to rebuffs. They were oblivious to pain. They could walk through bullets and still kill when a normal person would have turned tail and run.

He had known Geraldine Brooks since first moving to Harlem. It was said that she had once been one of the brightest kids in the community. One day, at the age of fourteen, she suddenly snapped, and from then on she was in and out of mental hospitals.

Everybody said that a local cab driver was responsible for her condition. The general consensus was that the man had probably molested the girl, and when the fear of discovery led him to break it off, Geraldine's mind crumpled like faded flowers. In the mind of a fourteen year old, she wasn't being molested. She was involved in a relationship.

Anyway, nobody ever pursued it, and Geraldine got crazier and crazier day by day and year after year.

Her baby was a doll that she had lost as a child. Her mind had made it into a real baby, and for the past twenty years she had been searching for it.

"You want some coffee?" Memphis asked, in an effort to redirect her thoughts to more benign pursuits.

"Ye-ah," she answered in the reacquired voice of a child.

"You want to put my knife back in the kitchen?" he asked, getting bolder as she seemed to retreat into a more passive personality.

“Yes, sir,” she replied and dutifully returned to the small kitchen to put the knife back in its place.

He watched her with sadness. Most of the time she wasn’t dangerous—a thirty-five year old trapped in an adolescence that had been stolen from her, neither willing nor able to escape from a place of both happiness and sadness.

“Will you help me find my baby, Memphis?”

“Maybe later, Geraldine. I’ve got something else I need to do.”

He fed her coffee and donuts, made her bathe and brush her teeth, and let her sleep on his couch while he left to handle some business. When he returned to his apartment, the door was open, and she was gone.

Nine hours later, Travis Redman was three sheets in the wind. He was in Bessie Myers’s after-hours club with all of the friends he had in the world and drinking liquor like there was no tomorrow. His face was numb and he was laughing, but he didn’t know why.

He had known Bobby Bazemore, Cleveland Pittman, Collis Powell, and Melvin Gaynor most of his life. They were Carolina boys who had come to New York City because it was the Promised Land. They were a part of the migration northward to escape the segregated South and the back-breaking drudgery of picking cotton and priming tobacco.

They had ended up in Harlem and quickly learned it was the same world in a different location—all of them except Travis.

Unlike the rest, Travis Redman went where he wanted to go.

"Memphis! Memphis!" Bazemore gurgled between gulps of whiskey. "How about doin' me a favor?"

"What?" Travis answered, still laughing at some fleeting humor.

"I want you to find a gal for me."

"You got to be kidding. Find your own damned gal."

"Naw, naw, I'm serious, man. I got this gal. I want you to find where she live."

"Why you want Memphis to find her?" Cleveland asked with barely understandable slurred speech.

"He a professional, ain't he?" Bazemore said.

"Yeah," Memphis interjected. "That means I get paid for what I do, and you ain't got no money, Negro."

"He ain't bought no cigarettes in a year," Collis added. "All he do is bum off everybody else."

"You ain't even paid for a round of drinks tonight," Melvin chimed in. "Show me some money, Negro."

"Kiss my big black ass," Bazemore retorted. He snatched Cleveland's glass and gulped down half of its contents before his friend could retrieve it.

"I'm gon' kick your big black ass if you mess with my drink again," Cleveland threatened in jest.

"I'm serious, Memphis. I want you to find somebody. Don't

listen to these Negroes. I got money.”

“Who you want me to find, man?” Memphis asked only to get the business out in the open and get it over with.

“Margo Flowers,” Bazemore replied.

The table erupted with laughter. It was infectious. Memphis wanted to laugh, too, but he wasn’t sure what was funny.

“Who’s Margo Flowers?” He asked.

The others couldn’t stop laughing.

“See, you don’t spend enough time in this part of Harlem, Memphis,” Cleveland explained. “Margo Flowers is a dancer at The Cotton Club. They got one of them half-naked posters of her over in Antoine’s. That boy’s been droolin’ ever since he seen it.”

“Well if you know where she is, why don’t you go find her?” Memphis asked Bazemore.

“They ain’t gon’ let his black ass in The Cotton Club,” Collis laughed. “You got to be cooking or sweeping to get in there.”

“Well, I guess you better get a job sweeping, brother; ’cause I ain’t gonna track down no women unless they’re for me.”

“C’mon, Memphis,” Bazemore pleaded.

“He’ll probably settle for you goin’ to the club with him since you passin’, Memphis,” Melvin added. “If he go in with a white man, he figure ain’t nobody gon’ say nothin’ to him.”

"I ain't passing to get women, man. I'm passing to get money."

"You ought to see her, Memphis," Bazemore said with his face looking almost prayerful. "Skin like creamy coffee. I bet she could wrap them bow legs around you and boy-oh-boy."

"What?" Memphis looked at his friend with incredulity. "Negro, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Don't act like you don't know, man."

"I got to go," Memphis continued laughing. "This conversation just hit rock bottom."

"You ain't gon' help me, man?" Bazemore asked in a pleading voice.

"Not today," Memphis replied.

"But I'm in love, man."

"With your right hand," Memphis yelled as he staggered away. "I'll see you boys next week."

Memphis still got curious stares when he walked down the streets of Harlem even though he had lived upstairs over Fats Morgan's grocery store for the past few years. Tonight he was a drunken white man in a place where he shouldn't be. As a police car slowed to scrutinize him more closely, he pulled his coat tightly around himself and tried to give the appearance that he was moving with a purpose.

"Memphis. Memphis. Wake up. There's somebody here to see you."

Memphis opened his eyes and squinted at his surroundings trying to recognize something familiar. His head was throbbing, and a hint of nausea churned in his belly.

“Memphis!”

He looked up into Winnie Morgan’s soft brown eyes. She was a pretty woman with a sweet smile. Her voice was like warm honey that could take away his headache if he listened to it long enough.

He pulled the cover up over his chest as he gradually got his bearings. He realized that he was naked except for the sheet. His clothes were neatly folded on a nearby chair.

“Winnie, what’s going on here?” He asked apprehensively.

“You were too drunk to open the side door and making all kinda noise. I almost called the police. I was able to get you up here though.”

Her smile, which should have been comforting, only seemed to heighten his anxiety.

“Where’s Fats?”

“He’s in the store. He didn’t hear nothin’,” she added hastily. “He’s like a dead man when he goes to sleep.”

There was a question in Memphis’s head that he didn’t dare to ask. The whiskey had purged his brain cells, and he couldn’t remember anything after leaving Bessie’s. He did remember that Fats Morgan once shot a man for leaning against his 1940 Cadillac. He loved Winnie twice as much as

he loved that car and would likely kill a man twice as fast.

Winnie was a quiet storm. Her smiles were always a little too warm. Her conversations were a little too personal. He had suspected that the slightest response on his part could get him in her pants faster than a heartbeat. He just wondered if that heartbeat had already occurred.

“Cleveland’s downstairs. I told him you didn’t feel good, but he said he had to talk to you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Tell him to come on up.”

He watched the sway of her hips as she walked toward the door, and it terrified him. As she backed out of the door, her full red lips left him struggling in vain for his missing memory.

Cleveland Pittman was obviously distraught when he barreled through Memphis’s door.

“Memphis, Bazemore’s dead!”

Memphis sat up abruptly, intensifying his headache.

“What happened?”

“Somebody shot him. They found him in an alley near Broadway and 48th Street.”

“That’s up by The Cotton Club.”

Surely Bazemore wasn’t that stupid, Memphis thought as the memory of some of the events of the previous night began to return. Surely he didn’t take his drunken self up to The Cotton Club looking for that dancer they were b.s.ing about.

"He might not have been that stupid, but he damned sure was that drunk," Cleveland replied as Memphis gave voice to his thoughts.

People died in the city every day, but this was different. Memphis knew Bobby Bazemore's family. He couldn't react as if it was just another death.

No one noticed when he walked through the back of The Cotton Club. He simply blended in with the workers going about the business of making sure the club would be ready for the coming night.

He wasn't surprised to see Nick Genovese sitting at a table and nursing a drink like he owned the place. Although it wasn't open, people with the right connections could always get access when it suited their purposes.

"Memphis Red," Genovese greeted him as he came closer. "Ahoskie Red, Texas Red, Chicago Red," he added facetiously. "You got more names than the cops got files on you, so I hear."

"Don't believe everything you hear."

"You must be moving up in the world. Most of the people in here this time of day either got long money or long reach."

Genovese was right. He saw small groups of people too well dressed to be employees and recognized a couple of local politicians, a cop, and a few city officials. Strange bedfellows, he thought.

"A friend of mine got himself shot near here last night," Memphis explained. "I came by to see if any of the boys working here might have heard anything."

"Seems like I did hear some talk about a shooting," Genovese informed him. "Couldn't have been anybody important if I didn't do it." He roared with laughter until the whiskey in his mouth caused him to cough. "Who was the guy anyway?"

"Colored fella I've been knowing for a while," Memphis answered.

"Yeah? Maybe you need to choose your friends a little better. Those people kill their own like animals."

"Yeah? Not like anybody we know, huh?"

"What you tryin' to say, smart guy?"

"Nothing special," Memphis replied while flashing an insincere smile. "Some other time, Nick."

Memphis moved on to a door that would lead him backstage. Nick Genovese was as phony as the rest of them were. He was living a lie just like Memphis; only it was a different lie. He hung around The Cotton Club most nights flashing enough money to persuade the management to ignore the chorus girls adorning his table, and some even left with him. He pretended to hate the thing he loved because he didn't have the courage to deal with it.

Memphis understood because he also led the double life.

He lived both lives making fluid transitions and taking maximum advantage of both worlds.

The backstage seemed to buzz with much more activity than expected at that time of day and with clusters of eye-catching women at every turn.

Susie Momon was barking orders a mile a minute. Susie made people jump, and nobody balked at her orders. She was a seamstress who repaired and maintained the elaborate costumes of the performers, a position that made her indispensable.

"Sort of early for the dancers, isn't it?" he observed, as his eyes got stuck on various interesting body parts.

"Health department crap," she replied. "It happens every year or so. It's the price for having all of these young girls in here, but what can you do? Nobody wants to see us old broads bare our behinds. I was wondering when one of y'all was gonna show up."

"So you know about Bazemore," he said.

"Yeah. I wish I could say I was surprised, but I'm not. He came in here last night. Told them white boys on the back door he was with the band. You know them musicians, always stepping out to shoot up some dope or something between sets. I saw him when he came backstage, as drunk as a skunk. He had the nerve to be tryin' to hit on that Flowers girl. She's a headliner, you know. I said, 'Bazemore, is you crazy?' He looked at me like I was a Hebrew slave and kept on talkin'. I

don't know what he said to her, but she let him hang around her dressing room until the last show and left with him."

"She left with Bazemore?" Memphis asked, completely incredulous. "Why would a woman like that leave with Bobby Bazemore? When is she supposed to be back?"

"Tonight—a couple of hours before the first show. And, Memphis, I'm sorry about Bazemore," she added with genuine sincerity. "I liked that old big-headed Negro, but a drunk walking around at that time of night is easy pickings."

"Yeah," Memphis replied. "You're probably right." He didn't mean a word of it. Easy pickings for what? Everybody in Harlem knew Bazemore didn't carry any money. He hustled everybody else for what he needed. Any of the usual suspects intent on robbing someone would have recognized Bazemore and ignored him.

After a few unrevealing conversations, he left the club and started down the street wondering how he was going to solve his other dilemma. He was still trying to figure out if he had accidentally screwed the fat man's wife, chuckling audibly. How the hell do you do that? He still couldn't remember what happened, but he knew he didn't undress himself and place his clothes neatly on that chair. Hell, he didn't do that when he was sober.

"Travis Redman!"

Normally he was acutely aware of his surroundings, but he had accumulated too damned many distractions. Two suits in a

cheap nondescript car had double-parked a few feet from him. One of the men got out flashing a badge and brushed his coat back revealing his pistol.

“Take a ride with us, Mr. Redman. We have some things we’d like to discuss with you.”

The man’s tone assured Memphis he didn’t have a choice. When he approached the car, he was shoved facedown on the backseat and searched for weapons.

“We can ride around a bit, or we can take you to the station. Your choice,” the policeman said in a very matter-of-fact fashion.

Memphis didn’t answer.

“Let’s ride for a bit, Joe,” the man said to the driver as he joined Memphis in the backseat.

“What’s this about?” Memphis asked.

“Colored boy named Robert Bazemore was killed last night just a coupla blocks from here. Somebody said he was a friend of yours. Now I’ve been wondering what somebody like you had in common with a small-time colored hustler. Joe here thinks you’re a stone-cold killer, but I can see how different people can sometimes forge friendships. I got a few colored friends.”

“Why do you care what happens to a small-time hustler?”

“Oh. Hey, Joe. This guy’s a thinker. He asks questions.”

Suddenly the cop dug his fist into Memphis’s belly,

doubling him up with the unexpected blow. He felt as if his abdomen had been ripped apart.

“Okay, let’s try this again. You know Robert Bazemore, and you and some of your colored friends went drinking with him last night. For all I know, you got a little pissed over something and killed him.”

“What the hell are you trying to do? I didn’t kill anybody, and you know it.”

“You killed somebody if we say you killed somebody,” the cop replied.

“What do you want?”

They had to want something. These guys needed something, and they only knew how to get things through intimidation. They had intimidated somebody into calling his name, giving him up to get them off his back. All Memphis wanted was to get out of the car. If he got out of this, they would be hard pressed to catch him unaware again.

“Look, Redman,” the cop began in a sober and more patient tone. “This is more serious than you know. There’s a girl missing—Bazemore’s girlfriend.”

“Bazemore’s girlfriend,” Memphis repeated in an effort to assure himself his ears weren’t fooling him.

“Yeah, he left The Cotton Club with her just before he was killed. We figure whoever killed him took the girl.”

“So you don’t think I killed him?”

"You did if we don't find somebody else," the cop said.

"So you want me to ..."

"Help us find out where the girl is," the cop finished his words. "They say you know your way around these people. You can get closer than we can."

"You want me to find her and bring her to you?"

"Just find her. Don't be a hero. Leave that to us professionals," he grinned.

"I can do that," Memphis agreed. He got out of the car giving them a reassuring smile. He would have agreed to anything to get out of that car. He walked down past 48th Street and entered an alley leading into the back of Sam Harris's pawnshop. Sam loaned him a .38 Police Special. He was a long way from home, and he didn't plan on taking any more crap before getting there.

Memphis found his door unlocked and shoved it open with his gun drawn. He was not prepared for what he saw. She stood at the sound of his entry, and no description of her from others could do justice to her presence up close. What he wanted to say and what he needed to say collided, leaving him dumbstruck. She wore a clingy red dress that offered as much promise as her scarlet lips. She was a chocolate fantasy that made the rest of the world look pastel.

"How'd you get in here?" he finally asked.

"Mr. Morgan let me in. I told him I came to see you."

Her explanation made him smile. A beautiful woman could get anything she wanted. Fats would have thrown anyone else out on his ear, but a vulnerable smile and a seductive demeanor made all the difference.

“How did you know where I lived?”

“Are you going to shoot me?” Her lips teased him.

“Uh ... no, no.” He slipped the gun into his coat pocket. “You’re Margo Flowers?”

She nodded her affirmation, and her eyes entrapped him and made it difficult for him to think of anything but her.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I didn’t have anywhere else to go.” She finally lowered her eyes.

“Do you know who killed Bobby Bazemore?”

She shook her head without looking up.

“What was he doing with you? With all due respect, I don’t think he’s your type.”

“I just met him last night. He brought me a message to meet a friend after the show.”

“A friend? Who?”

She seemed to hesitate, as if reluctant to respond.

“Benjamin Wallace,” she said. She turned away but looked back coquettishly to see his response. “We’ve been seeing each other,” she added.

"Ben Wallace ... the commercial real estate Ben Wallace? Wallace Construction?"

"Yeah."

"And you can't tell me what happened to Bobby Bazemore?"

"No, but I don't think they intended to hurt Mr. Bazemore," she replied, folding her arms tightly as if warding off a sudden chill. "I think they meant to kill me."

"Why would anybody want to kill you?"

"It's complicated," she said. "Ben is an important man. We've been trying to keep our relationship secret because—"

"Because he might make a run for mayor next term," Memphis added.

"How did you know that?"

"I read the papers," Memphis replied. "So Bobby came backstage to tell you to meet Ben Wallace down the street and away from the club so nobody would see his colored girlfriend."

She didn't answer, so he continued.

"Then Bobby started to hit on you for himself."

"He offered to walk me part of the way because it's a rough neighborhood."

"Sounds like him. Then what happened?"

"We had gone about a block and a half, and somebody started shooting. I couldn't tell where it was coming from. We

ran into an alley, and he started staggering. That's when I realized he had been hit. He was scared. He didn't know why anybody would shoot at him, but I knew it was me and not him. I told him so. There are people who can't stomach the idea of the next mayor having a colored wife. He told me to come here, and you would help me."

"Wife? What the hell are you talking about, girl? First of all, he's already married."

"They're separated," she retorted. "It's 1940. Things are changing. He wants to marry me."

Memphis was speechless for the second time that night. Beauty damn sure didn't have anything to do with brains. She was crazy as hell if she believed the next mayor of New York was going to marry a colored woman. Love had its own reality however, and it didn't have anything to do with the rest of the world.

"Miss Flowers," he began in a slow deliberate voice whose very tone questioned her sanity. "Did it ever occur to you that Wallace might not want a colored wife, that he might be the one who wanted to be rid of you?"

"That's not true!" She blurted the words out angrily. "If that's what he wanted, all he had to do was say so. That's the kind of relationship we had. I wasn't trying to trap him. He knew I was there for him as long as it made him happy and not a second longer. We both understood that."

"Did you see him last night?"

"No. I ducked out of the back of the alley and ran over to The Boogie Room. They let me stay in the back until this morning."

The Boogie Room was one of a dozen or more unauthorized private clubs that flourished in basements throughout the neighborhood. They featured jukeboxes and cheap whiskey and were patronized by those who couldn't afford the good times offered by the big clubs.

Memphis persuaded Margo to hide out at his place for a while, not that it took all that much. She was too frightened to go anywhere else. Fats Morgan was grinning broadly as Memphis exited the side door. That was enough to give him a sense of relief. He sure wouldn't have been grinning if he suspected anything between him and Winnie.

"Damn," Fats laughed. "If I had your hand, I'd throw mine in. Every man in the city would give his right arm to get that gal, and she ends up with you. How you do it, man?"

"Just lucky, I guess," Memphis replied. "How about keeping an eye on things for me, Fats? I'm gonna leave her up there while I take care of some business."

"All right," Fats said looking suddenly concerned. "You hurry up and get back, though. Winnie might think I'm up to something. You know how jealous she can be."

"No. I didn't know that, Fats."

Memphis hurried away in order to avoid extending a conversation from which nothing good could result. The less

said about Winnie the better.

It was late in the afternoon by the time Memphis made his way to the other side of Manhattan. He had decided that since Benjamin Wallace seemed to be the source of everything, he would find out for himself if he had been the cause of his friend's death. Memphis didn't have a plan. He was just going to walk up to the son of a bitch and ask him to his face. He accepted the fact that he was probably going to pay a price for it, but he believed he could look at a man's face and tell whether he was guilty.

It wasn't difficult to find Ben Wallace's home. He was a well-known politician, and with rumors about him posturing for the mayor's race, he was becoming the most talked about man on the island.

He walked up to the well-appointed brownstone that had been described to him and rang the doorbell. A reasonably attractive woman in her early forties answered and gave him one of those condescending looks that rich people reserve for their inferiors. She would have been pretty, but she had the lines and crevices that too much alcohol and too many cigarettes can carve into a face.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but I was hoping to have a word with Mr. Benjamin Wallace," he said in the most polite tone he could muster.

"Good luck," she replied with an accompanying look that could kill a brick. "He doesn't live here!"

"Mrs. Wallace?" he inquired.

"Who are you?" she asked.

He presented his business card quickly and introduced himself. He recognized her hostility at the mention of her husband's name, and the story he needed to tell began to materialize in his mind almost instantly.

"I'm a private investigator. I'm sorry to have to discuss this with you, but my client is concerned about Mr. Wallace's interest in his daughter. Mr. Wallace's prominence demands complete discretion, but my client is very uncomfortable with this situation."

"That bastard!" Mrs. Wallace spat the words out with vehemence. "Every week brings out more and more. Please tell your client not to let her ruin her life with Ben Wallace. He had no respect for me, no respect for his marriage. He didn't think I knew what he was doing, but I did. He was going down to Harlem to wallow with those colored women. He was a piece of crap. I hate him."

"Do you think your husband is capable of violence?"

She hesitated and looked away as if gathering her thoughts before speaking.

"There isn't anything my husband isn't capable of, Mr. Redman, and I have lived through all of it. I'm still living through it."

"What do you mean?"

"There's nothing for me to derive from discussing this, Mr. Redman. Go ask my husband what it means. He lives in relative luxury over at Riverside East. I'm sure he won't like it, so tell him Violet sent you. Maybe it'll interest him that we are on a first name basis."

Benjamin Wallace lived like white people were supposed to live, or at least like most of Memphis's neighbors expected they lived. Memphis knew better, since he wasn't restricted to any particular world, and he walked into this one with complete aplomb.

Riverside East was built and owned by Wallace's construction company. The lobby looked more like that of a hotel rather than of an apartment building. Memphis approached the security desk before one of the guards could ask him his business. He was about to deliver one of his standard lines when a familiar voice accosted him.

"You lookin' for me, Redman?"

It was one of those oh hell moments. He recognized the owner of the voice as one of the cops who had waylaid him earlier.

"What are you doin' here, Redman? This seems a little off your beaten path. Besides, that girl you're supposed to be lookin' for wouldn't be on this side of town."

"Is that right? Well, I heard she has a thing for rich white men."

"I told you once before that you ask too many questions."

The man stepped closer to Memphis, invading his space. "You got a simple job to do, so do it before you get into more than you can handle."

He was close enough to smell the man's cheap cologne, close enough to shove his pistol into the man's belly with the force of a professional boxer's punch and watch his knees buckle.

"Stay on your feet, you son of a bitch. I'll drop you soon enough when I'm ready."

"You gonna shoot a cop?" the man gasped.

Memphis kept his back to the security desk so they couldn't see what was happening. He grasped the man's shoulder, urged him toward the door, and lifted his weapon after exiting the building. With his own gun hidden in his pocket and planted in the man's spine, Memphis hailed a cab. He flashed the weapon again as he slid into the back seat. The man remained frozen on the curb as the cab pulled away. It made Memphis smile. There was a certain level of satisfaction derived from giving the cop some of his own medicine, although it was likely coming back to haunt him. He would have to find another way to get to Wallace since it appeared that he now had New York's finest in his pocket.

Memphis was walking up from the subway at 125th when he spotted Geraldine Brooks. She was barefoot, with her clothes disheveled as if she had been in an altercation. The upper part of her dress was unbuttoned so that it hung off her

right shoulder, exposing her breast. Even the night people gave her a wide berth as she meandered down the street talking to herself.

Memphis ran to her and blocked her way. Her eyes were wild and unfocused, and for a moment he didn't think she recognized him. He covered her with his coat, and she didn't resist.

"I couldn't find my baby, Memphis," she said in the most forlorn voice he had ever heard. "I went over to Marcia's, and I couldn't find her."

He took a deep breath and sighed. He felt horribly guilty. He couldn't remember when he had last seen Marcia. The apartments where they had all lived had been boarded up for over ten years. He had no idea she would have walked the twenty or thirty blocks to the old neighborhood looking for a nonexistent baby.

Her eyes were glazed, moving in an unfixed dance, and her expression remained detached.

"Where are you staying, Geraldine?" He asked.

"I don' know," she replied.

He draped an arm over her shoulder and led her past curious onlookers. He didn't know what to do with her. There was only one place that had become the convenient refuge of people who had run out of options, and she had plenty of reasons to be there.

He had no intention of spending the next five hours in the Harlem Hospital emergency room, but a lingering guilt that he might have been responsible for her current deterioration kept him there. He was about to drift off into his third nap when one of the doctors approached him.

"You a friend of Miss Brooks?" he asked looking at Memphis curiously as if drawing some conclusions about their connection.

"Yeah, I brought her in. How is she, Dr. Scott?" Memphis asked, reading his name tag.

"Not good. We need to keep her overnight. What's your connection to her?"

"She's in the neighborhood. We all try to help out. Will she get any better, you know, mentally?"

"She would if she would take her medicine."

"She takes medicine?"

"Yeah, I know. You wouldn't think so. Geraldine's a schizophrenic. There are drugs that will help. She's been prescribed them, but she won't take them."

"Why?"

"Money, probably," Dr. Scott replied. "She can buy drugs cheaper from a street doctor."

"I don't understand," Memphis said. "She's not a dope addict."

"No. I didn't mean that," Dr. Scott explained. "She's been

taking a drug called meprobamate. It's a tranquilizer, but it won't touch schizophrenia. She gets it from a Doctor Avery Margolis. He's not an M.D. He's a psychologist who lost his license several years ago. He treats people for whatever—pneumonia, kidney infections, mental illness. You name it and he does it. He sells black market drugs—penicillin, sulfa, tranquilizers.”

“And the cops can't arrest him?” Memphis asked, surprised at what he was hearing.

“They can't find him. He moves every week or so. He preys off the poor, illegal immigrants, and the mentally ill. Those types aren't a high priority for law enforcement.”

Memphis's life kept getting more complicated. He had a looker in his apartment whom somebody was trying to kill. There was a woman downstairs married to a fat man who would kill him if he ever learned what Memphis feared he had done. His friend Bazemore had been murdered, and now this deranged woman he had known long enough to have developed a sense of responsibility for was being preyed on by a charlatan who could inadvertently end her life.

Human failings are difficult to tolerate. Memphis found them particularly intolerable when they involved a friend. The people who could have given his name to the cops were limited to his four friends.

Collis Powell's face was painted with moral impoverishment after he opened his door and faced Memphis's unexpected presence. Collis Powell had shared an apartment

with Bobby Bazemore and thus was an obvious link for the police. Powell was weak and rolled over with the slightest threat. Memphis was angry, but he maintained enough restraint to make use of his friend: He needed information more than he needed revenge.

Powell waited tables at one of Nick Genovese's restaurants where secrets floated in the air like wisps of cigarette smoke. He returned with the information that Memphis required before nightfall.

Memphis found Dr. Avery Margolis exactly where Collis said he would be but not in the condition he had expected. He was found sitting in a chair in an abandoned building with his throat slit, while a line of his patients waited to enter a door that would never open.

In the alley adjacent to the abandoned building was a van that had no reason to be there. Memphis smashed the window and looked at the papers in the glove compartment. It belonged to Margolis, as he had suspected. He quickly confiscated a box in the back and left before the discovery of Margolis's body made all hell break loose.

For those who knew the neighborhood, a lane between the Montrose Apartments and the Coronet Building intersected with a series of narrow passages that eventually crossed the alley adjacent to Fats Morgan's store. Memphis traversed those passageways in the predawn hours and climbed the stairs to his apartment.

She was not there. He dropped the box on the coffee table and stretched out on the couch. It was four A.M., and he was too tired to worry about Margo Flowers. He had meant to look at the contents of the box he had retrieved, but he was asleep before the thought could traverse his mind.

“Memphis. Memphis.”

He recognized Fats Morgan’s deep raspy voice, and it scared the hell out of him. His eyelids snapped open with a sudden surge of adrenaline as Fats Morgan’s fist rattled his door.

“Wake up, Memphis!” he said insistently.

He opened his door with his gun in hand because he believed Fats was there to kill him.

“Two white men came by yesterday lookin’ for that gal you had in here.”

Memphis took a deep breath and blinked the sleep out of his eyes.

“Cops?”

“They didn’t say they were cops.”

“What did they say?”

“They said they wanted the key to your room, and they acted like they wouldn’t take no for an answer. I didn’t have no choice, Memphis. I had to bring ’em up here.”

“Damn!” Memphis said. The girl was the key to what happened to Bazemore. If the men Fats encountered were the

same ones who had killed Bazemore, Margo might never be seen again.

“They didn’t get her,” Fats added.

“What?”

“While they were talkin’ to me, Winnie went upstairs and moved her to our place,” he explained with a punctuation of belly-shaking laughter.

“She’s at your place?”

“Yeah,” Fats replied. “I had to open the store this morning, so I left Winnie with her.”

“Thanks, man. I owe you big time.” He leaped to his feet, grabbed Fats’s hand, and hugged him.

Fats’s store was on a corner. His apartment was on the same level as Memphis’s, but the entrance was from the opposite side of the building, facing a less-traveled street.

Memphis ran up the stairs calling Winnie’s name and pounded on the door. It flew open with the second blow, and he crouched immediately as joy turned to dread.

Everything he feared crashed down on him with his next few steps. Winnie Morgan lay facedown on the floor in front of her couch. Broken lamps and overturned chairs explained the nature of her encounter. She was a bubbly, sensuous expanse of light in the midst of a storm that shouldn’t have affected her. She had been a warm friend with whom he had probably taken inappropriate liberties. Fats was his friend, too, and he felt the

terrible burden of being responsible for her death. He touched her cool skin and withdrew his hand instantly.

Margo Flowers was not there. He hoped that meant she wasn't dead yet, but death was following Memphis, or so it seemed. Bazemore, Margolis, and now Winnie—his Winnie, Fats's Winnie. It was Winnie's death that cut him the deepest, even deeper than Bazemore.

"Why, Memphis? Why they do that to my Winnie? She ain't never hurt nobody. All she do is try to help people."

Memphis sat silently and watched the big man cry. Questions posed by his grief were the most difficult imaginable, especially when they were the same questions that plagued his own heart.

Memphis left Fats with his grief because he could offer nothing to assuage it. He returned to his apartment and tried to think, but answers were not forthcoming. He thumbed through the contents of the box for want of something better to do. Margolis was no fool. Written names were dangerous and people were identified only with initials.

G.B. How many delusional women on meprobamate could there be wandering the streets of Harlem? He was sure this was Geraldine. By absconding with these files, he had at least prevented this unfortunate woman from showing up on the cops' radar. But who were J.M., C.T., V.W., and thirty or forty other files belonging to people who had been treated by this street doctor?

Frustration made him push the files aside. Even though he knew Ben Wallace had set this entire thing in motion, he couldn't connect all of the dots. Wallace was insulated, protected, and untouchable. Some things had never made sense, so he returned to the place where it all began, The Cotton Club, where Margo Flowers and Bobby Bazemore's lives had become entangled.

"You're getting to be a regular, aren't you?" Nick Genovese asked when he spotted Memphis.

"Not really," Memphis replied. "Is this early or late for you?" he asked, observing that Genovese was still wearing a tuxedo at eleven A.M.

"Didn't have much choice. Had to get Marlene back for rehearsal."

"You know a lot of these girls, don't you?"

"I've met a few," Genovese replied with a smug nonchalance. "These colored girls are different. I find them ... interesting, stimulating," he added with a smile. "You have no idea what they can do to a man. Don't get me wrong: I wouldn't marry one of 'em, but they have their charm." His face became increasingly animated with excitement as he spoke.

"You know Margo Flowers?" Memphis asked.

"Margo Flowers," Genovese laughed. "Hell, I wouldn't fool around with her."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"The girl's hot as an atom bomb."

"I thought you liked 'em hot."

"Not that kind of hot. I mean hot like she'll vaporize your johnson if you put it in the right place."

"How do you know that?"

Genovese shrugged without replying.

"I heard she's got a rich boyfriend," Memphis said.

"How do you know that?" Genovese smirked. "Those colored friends of yours? I hear they treat you like you're one of them."

"Don't believe everything you hear," Memphis replied.

"I guess you've got a point because I also heard somebody wanted you dead."

"What?"

There was a sudden change in the seriousness in Genovese's face. Memphis almost could have forgotten who he was during the casual banter about women. This mask was a reminder of what had made him so threatening—a soldier in a dark army that had more influence in the city than most were willing to admit.

"Who?"

"I didn't ask," Genovese answered casually.

"Why would somebody want to kill me?"

"You just said it. Margo Flowers."

"I was just looking for her for the cops," Memphis explained.

"What cops?" Genovese laughed. "Besides, I heard you had her."

"Look, Nick ..."

"Hey, I like you, Memphis. We're friends, aren't we? You don't have to lie to me. I got no interest in this except for its comedy value. I do hate seeing my friends get in over their heads. I could help you out if you want."

"You know where she is now?"

"I hear the cops have her now," he replied, making quotation marks with his fingers when he said cops.

"What do you know about this?" Memphis asked pointedly.

"Nothing that you don't know, but tell me something. Why is this so important to you?"

"I've got a dead friend, and everywhere I look for an answer leads someplace that gets darker and darker. Everybody has to make a stand somewhere, sometime. Somebody has to pay. If they don't, what are they gonna be brave enough to try next time?"

Genovese took a deep breath and sighed. "I can understand that," he said. "Good men make bad choices sometimes. I've made a few myself. I've got to go, but let me give you a little advice that might help you stay alive. Those so-called cops—if you don't find them, they'll find you. The world

hasn't changed in ten thousand years. It's the same story. It's about wanting things, fighting to get them, and killing to protect them. It's the way of the world. Even God killed his enemies, and who am I to question the wisdom of God?"

Memphis sat there for some time after Genovese had gone, trying to digest the convoluted thought ostensibly being disguised as philosophy. Nick Genovese had told him something important. He was sure of it. Now he had to figure out what it was.

"What are you doing here?" Susie Momon asked, watching Memphis make his way past the dozens of backstage workers who were beginning the organized chaos that gave The Cotton Club its polished image.

"Looking for you," he replied.

She watched intently as he came closer.

"It's been a long time since a young man came looking for me," she said, offering a coquettish smirk. "Especially one that looks like you." Her eyes slid down his body and back up again.

"Did you see who gave Bazemore the message to give Margo Flowers?"

"I—" she began.

"Before you answer that," Memphis interrupted. "Why would somebody pick a dumb drunk like Bazemore to deliver a message for them?"

"How the hell would I know? He had been telling people he

was in the band. I guess somebody believed him.”

“When did The Cotton Club start letting drunk Negroes stagger around the floor rubbing shoulders with the good white folks?”

Susie didn't reply. She simply stood there staring at him stoically.

“You know what I think, Susie? I think Bazemore talked his way back here just like you said. I think he went through his drunken whining about being in love with Margo Flowers and somebody who was supposed to give her a message decided to let him deliver it. You see, Margo thought the bullets that killed Bazemore were meant for her. I think whoever was supposed to deliver that message knew there was a hit out for Margo. If that person had been seen delivering a letter to Margo just before she was killed, it could look a bit suspicious. Or maybe it was a matter of conscience; it takes moxie to look a friend in the eye and deliver what you know is a death sentence.”

“What are you trying to say, Memphis?” She asked folding her arms across her chest.

“If somebody wanted to get a message to one of The Cotton Club's dancers, who would they most likely ask to pass that message, Bazemore or somebody like you?”

“Get the hell off me, Memphis!”

She turned and walked away.

Memphis raised his voice. “They snatched Margo out of

Fats's place and killed his wife."

The flurry of backstage activity abruptly stopped as Memphis's outburst got their attention. Susie kept walking.

"Who's next? What do you know?"

Susie froze momentarily and then turned to face him, her eyes darting among the nearby workers who were watching them.

"Not here," she said, leading him to a small off-stage storage room that apparently served as a makeshift office.

"I tried to tell that girl that there are things in this world that aren't for us. These young people, they think the world has changed. A girl like her can't do what she did and not pay for it."

"And you were supposed to help make her pay?" he asked.

"I did what I was told."

"And that includes being an accessory to murder?"

"She didn't get killed."

"But Bazemore did, or did you decide that he didn't matter?"

"Don't try to judge me, Memphis. Not you. I'm trying to survive. These people can take your life away with the snap of a finger. I got rent to pay, children to feed. Where else am I going to get a job like this? How many places do you see hiring colored women to do what I'm doing and paying the kind of money I'm making? I don't want to hear nothin' from you. You go

where you want to go, Memphis. You walk through any door you want 'cause everybody thinks you're white. If you ain't gonna get one of your white friends to give me a job, don't judge me for what I've done."

"What's this about, Susie? Who wants to kill Margo Flowers?"

"Leave it alone, Memphis. Leave it alone. Please!"

"You know I won't."

She fidgeted, hiding behind a reluctant attitude. "Margo Flowers had bad blood."

She looked away with a distasteful frown as she spoke the words, and once she had uttered them, the rest tumbled out unrestrained.

"Dr. Margolis came here to treat her, but she wouldn't let him. She thought she was too good for that. She wanted a real doctor so she went to one, and he reported her to the Health Department. You know how they are. They talk to everybody—everybody you screwed and everybody who screwed anybody you screwed."

"Jesus Christ," he whispered. Margolis was in this too. Memphis knew where it was leading now.

Susie studied his face as if looking for direction.

"You couldn't tell that girl nothin'," she continued. "You can't mess with these kinds of people."

Memphis turned toward the door, shaking his head in an

unconscious acknowledgement of the sad motivation for the death of his friend.

“Where is she?” he asked.

“I don’t know. You got the skin to find out. Why don’t you ask Ben Wallace?”

Now he knew who the V.W. was in Margolis’s file. Violet Wallace. Ben Wallace had probably paid Margolis to treat his wife for the bad blood he had contracted from Margo Flowers and passed to his wife. His wife had kicked him out of the house, but it was still contained. The knowledge remained confined to a small group, each of whom had their own reasons to keep the information secret. But Margo had made a stupid move, and once she had been reported to the public health department, their relentless investigation of syphilis contacts threatened to spread Ben Wallace’s indiscretion to a sufficient number of ears such that the truth might escape to the outside world. It could cause devastating political damage to the next mayor of New York City. Bazemore had been an inadvertent victim in the systematic elimination of anyone who could confirm the truth of what Ben Wallace had done. His wife knew the truth, but an estranged husband was more valuable to her as mayor than a husband who had simply been disgraced.

A wide body blocked his way as he approached the stage door. Memphis reached for his gun, but pressure in the small of his back made him stop.

“You don’t know when to leave well enough alone,” the man

at his rear growled as he relieved him of his weapon.

He recognized the men as the “cops” he had encountered previously. Memphis turned in time to see Susie watching in the distance just as the men forced him out of the rear door.

It probably wasn’t dark, but it could have been. The back of Memphis’s head throbbed. The last thing he remembered was being blindfolded and shoved into the backseat of a car behind The Cotton Club. He had been groggy and unsteady when he was being dragged up some steps. When the blindfold was removed, he found himself in a strange shaded room. He decided he was still in Harlem. It sounded like Harlem. It smelled like Harlem.

He rubbed his head and sat up. Margo Flowers lay on a decrepit couch with her ankles, wrists, and mouth bound with tape. One of the “cops” sat in a chair next to her, and the other one sat at a table near the door.

“Well, isn’t this nice?” Memphis observed sarcastically. “What are you boys waiting for? I figured you would have done the girl by now.”

“Don’t be so anxious, sport,” the man near the door replied. “All things at their appointed time.”

“So I guess that means you’re gonna have to do me, too, so the big man’s secret won’t get out.” Memphis’s eyes desperately sought for some way out as he needled his captors.

“Put some tape on that idiot’s mouth so I don’t have to

listen to him," his captor retorted.

"You're waiting for Ben Wallace, aren't you," Memphis persisted. "You boys aren't smart enough to do all of this on your own, are you? You accidentally killed Bazemore trying to get this girl. Then you killed Fats's wife the next time you tried to snatch her, and now you've got me. I'll bet you Wallace ain't got the heart for all of this killing. He probably thought he could knock off the girl without much trouble, but the grocer's wife ... and I forgot about the doctor."

"What doctor?" the other man asked as he began to tape Memphis's wrists.

A knock at the door interrupted them.

The man nearest the door opened it cautiously with his pistol ready.

A high-pitched, ear-splitting female scream tore through the room. The man with the tape turned startled eyes toward the door. His partner stepped slowly backwards.

"What the hell is that, Mike?" he asked, confused, as his partner took another wobbly step.

"What the hell ..."

Mike's right hand drifted slowly to his side until a rhythmic jerk allowed his gun to fall to the floor. He turned slightly, giving Memphis a partial view of what was in front of him before collapsing onto his back.

Memphis crashed into his remaining captor, knocking him

to the floor. His pistol went sliding under the couch. Memphis then looped the tape that loosely restrained his wrists around the man's neck and twisted it. The man gurgled and jerked spasmodically. It seemed to go on forever, but Memphis never released the pressure until he was completely limp. When it was over he collapsed against the wall, exhausted more emotionally than physically.

His eyes turned back toward the door, and the woman was still standing there holding a bloody knife. Geraldine had plunged the butcher's knife into the man's belly.

"You want to give me the knife, baby?" Memphis asked softly, still unable to decipher any reasoning behind the wild look in her eyes.

"You all right, Memphis?" She asked in a surprisingly calm and rational voice.

"Yeah, I'm all right, baby," he replied as if speaking to a child.

"I saw them bring you up here, Memphis. I could tell they were hurting you."

"It's all right, baby. They didn't hurt me too bad. You saved me."

A small smile stole into her face, and he knew she was with him.

"We've got to get you out of here," he said, and she allowed him to slip the knife from her hand. "Geraldine ..." He

began to ask a question, then noticed there was dried blood on the knife's handle. He looked into her vacuous eyes and sighed. "What the hell," he muttered. What did it matter anyway?

He freed Margo and guided the women through the alley and down a crowded street where they melted unnoticed into the bustling sea of humanity.

The soft and sweet strains of the Ellington orchestra persuaded elegant bodies to press together and sway to familiar music. Travis Redman walked across the dance floor casting a flirtatious eye at young women, many of whom seemed eager and receptive. He found Nicholas Genovese at his usual table with three beautiful women doting over him.

"Memphis Red," he roared over the music and gestured for him to sit. "This is my friend Memphis Red, ladies," he said to the women. "Don't get your hopes up. He doesn't like white women. The blacker the berry the sweeter the juice, eh, Memphis?"

"More or less." Memphis smiled. "Terrible thing about Ben Wallace, wasn't it?" He asked assuming Nick would know about Wallace's fatal, self-inflicted gunshot wound over the past weekend.

"Why don't you girls go find something to do?" Nick said with a wave of his hand.

"Accidents happen," he added after they had left.

"You sure it was an accident?" Memphis asked.

"More or less," Nick replied with a smile. "He was a crappy guy, not the sort a man can count on. If a man can't manage his own business, how can he manage a city?"

"I didn't think you were into politics."

"I have interests, Memphis. La Guardia's a better mayor for my interests."

"I don't suppose you'd have any reason to tell me if you'd made any moves to protect your interests."

"Why would I do that?" Nick grinned. "You gonna do Susie?"

"Why would I do that?" Memphis retorted. "You think I should?"

"Naw. She's a good girl. She just got caught in the middle of something too scary for her. Besides, she keeps me hooked up with the dancers back there. If you do her, I might have to do you."

Nick laughed and pushed an untouched drink toward Memphis.

Memphis sucked down the whiskey and shook Nick's hand as he left.

"You're an interesting man, Memphis Red. I don't know why I like you, but I do. Give me a call sometimes. Maybe we can do some business together."

Memphis drifted to other tables and other acquaintances. Nick Genovese knew more about all of this than he revealed.

Nick was like that, playing his hand close to the vest and revealing things only when it was to his advantage.

I could help you out if you want. Even God killed his enemies.

Even the darker side of society couldn't always control everything, but it likes order and predictability. Sometimes that was as good as control. Ben Wallace's private life was chaotic, but with his death, order had been restored and the uncertainty of the political process was no longer in question.

A line of chorus girls led by Margo Flowers emerged on stage, high kicking in rhythmic sequence. Memphis drifted backstage and opened a bottle with Susie Momon. They talked about Bobby Bazemore and North Carolina and all of the good times they once had in the city. They talked for a long time, and before they knew it, the storm that had raged through their lives over the last few days had passed.

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THE GUN ALSO RISES

AN AARON TUCKER MYSTERY

JEFFREY COHEN

“So he pulled the gun out of his pocket.” I stared into her eyes for a sign of uncertainty; there was none.

“Yes,” she said.

“He aimed it straight at Jeremy.”

“That’s right.”

“And he pulled the trigger.”

Again, not so much as a blink. “Yes.”

“And what happened to Jeremy?”

“He got wet and started to cry.” Anne Mignano, assistant principal of the Sydney Primary School in Midland Heights, New Jersey, stood up from her desk and exhaled audibly. Nobody could remember who Sydney was anymore, and only a select few of us ever thought to ask. “Jeremy doesn’t like being wet.”

I’d only met Ms. Mignano once before, at back-to-school night the first week of classes. This was only two weeks later, and already I’d been called back to her office for a report on my son Ethan, a six-year-old first grader back then. It wasn’t a good sign.

We knew Ethan wasn't like other kids; we just didn't have a name to put on the difference that year. The following May, he'd be diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism. This September, he was just a kid who'd broken the rules.

"It was just a water pistol, Ms. Mignano," I said. "Ethan wasn't trying to be mean. He was just playing."

"This is 1999, Mr. Tucker. We have a zero tolerance policy for bringing toy guns to school," she reminded me. "I'm going to have to suspend Ethan for two days."

I gave her my best give-me-a-break look, mostly because I really wanted her to give me a break. "Two days!" I protested. "Isn't that a little severe?"

"I don't have any leeway here. It's a district-wide rule. Parents in Midland Heights ..."

Inwardly, I rolled my eyes. It isn't pretty, but you get to see the inside of your skull that way. "Don't get me started on parents in Midland Heights, New Jersey," I said. "They think that if a child brings a water gun to school when he's six, he's not only destined to become Charles Manson in later life, he's probably going to watch the Three Stooges, vote Republican, and other unspeakable things, right?"

Ms. Mignano smiled. "Something like that. I'm sorry, Mr. Tucker."

"Aaron," I said. "I have a feeling we're going to get to know each other. Call me Aaron."

She nodded. "But it will have to be two days. Even if I call you by your first name."

I sighed. It would be bad enough that I'd have to work in the house with an overactive six year old for the next two days. On top of that, I'd have to inform my wife the attorney that I was unable to deflect this violation of our child's civil rights. "Can I at least get the water gun back?" I asked. "Maybe he can take target practice on the plants until Friday."

"Of course," she said. "But the point is, he must never bring it to school again."

"Yes, ma'am," I intoned. I wanted to hate Mignano just for being a school system functionary who couldn't see my son was troubled and didn't need more discipline, but more understanding. But she exuded enough humanity to make that impossible. Dammit.

She opened a drawer on her desk and reached in for the offending piece of wet plastic. And when she handed it to me, I stood up, shook my head, and put my palms on the edge of her desk.

"This isn't Ethan's," I said.

After convincing Ms. Mignano that my son would never under any circumstances own a yellow water pistol (he hated yellow and owned only blue and red plastic toys, except dinosaurs, because of the alleged accuracy issue), I won a reprieve of three days for Ethan. If the real guilty party was not exposed by then, Ethan would have to do his two-day

suspension starting the following Monday. A humiliation from which my son might never recover.

So walking back to the house, where I had two assignments for Tech Week waiting and a proposal for a ghostwriting assignment (the memoir of a businessman who had never done one interesting thing in his entire life) gathering dust on my hard drive, I considered ways to expose the little rat who was turning my kid into a hardened criminal. It was important, I'd decided, to maintain objectivity in the matter.

I'm a freelance reporter. I was once a newspaper reporter, but it turned out I was much better at writing the news than I was at gathering it, and they frown on that in the newspaper business. I also write screenplays that have what baseball players call "warning track power," meaning that they manage to generate some interest, but don't get sold so much. Mostly, I work on feature articles about electronics and technology, and I sell my talents (such as they are) to the highest, or to be honest, any, bidder. It's a living. Sort of.

I'd barely dodged the encroaching debris that is my office when I noticed a red flashing light reflecting off a couple old copies of Daily Variety. I pushed the button on my phone to hear the messages, and was rewarded with a voice I did not recognize.

"I'm looking for Aaron Tucker," the man's voice said. "Is this his machine?" I'd never changed the outgoing message from one in which Ethan sang the first lines of the Groucho Marx

classic “Whatever It Is, I’m Against It,” while his baby sister Leah laughed in the background. I just loved hearing that girl laugh. “If it is,” the voice continued, “please call Jim Furda at Infield Magazine about a possible assignment.” He left a phone number.

Infield, I knew, was a baseball magazine for fans—I’d subscribed to it when I was a kid—that never said anything bad about players and never got too heavily into statistics. It was all about how cool it all was to be a Major League player. After you’re finished being eleven, it’s the kind of thing you pretend to be too old to enjoy.

“We’re trying to change that image,” Furda explained when I called back. “We’ve been growing up a little, writing about betting on games and players taking amphetamines, things like that. Anyway, I got your name from Mitch Davis at USA Today.” (Mitch was a college buddy who stuck with newspapers because he’s actually, you know, good at it.) “He says you’re good. And I’ve got a story I need covered in your area.”

In my area? The Major League teams near here were the Yankees, the Mets, and the Phillies. I was hoping, in my partisan heart, for a Yankees story. “I’m listening,” I managed to croak out.

“It’s in Edison, right near where you live,” Furda said, reading off a paper. Edison? Edison, New Jersey? Had the Montreal Expos finally moved? “Minor league team called the Kilowatts. Kid pitcher called Ramon Escobar.”

"I thought you guys only covered the Majors," I said, a little off balance. "What happened?"

"Our readers grew up. They want information on the farm systems too."

"So what about this Escobar kid? He really good?" A profile of a minor league pitcher? I was a baseball fan, but not a sportswriter. Anybody bigger than me—and that's roughly ninety percent of the adult population—was going to look impressive to me. I had decided that very morning to lose some of the weight I'd gained since I'd married Abby and started eating actual food. In fact, I'd made the same decision every morning for the past eight years.

"He was," Furda said.

"Injury problem?"

"Sort of. He's dead."

It was a short drive Kilowatt Park, where the Kilowatts (get it? Edison? Electricity?) played. The Infield press pass Furda had faxed me got me through the gates and into the office of Mel Paterson, security chief (and traveling secretary) for the team. Paterson could be described in no other way than "grizzled." I've never seen someone with a better grizzling job than Paterson. Bottom line: The man could grizzle.

"There's nothing to tell you," Paterson began, always an encouraging sign for a reporter. "The kid was our closer, so he was on the mound when we won the championship Tuesday night. They all piled up on top of him, like they see the big guys

do on TV. And then everybody got up to go spray cheap Champagne on each other, except Ramon didn't get up."

I looked out onto the empty field, already looking lonely until next spring, and tried to picture it. "They were all on the pitcher's mound?" I asked.

Paterson nodded. "I was the first one to realize something was wrong, and I got to him first, tried to give him CPR, but ..." His voice trailed off, and he looked like he might tear up.

"You can't blame yourself," I told him. "The kid suffocated under a pile of other players." Silence. "Didn't he?"

"They're doing an autopsy today," Paterson said, looking away. "We'll see when the results come back. But I'll tell you something, Mr. Tucker. I've seen players pile up on each other like that before. I've seen it on TV every year for forever. And I've never seen one get slightly injured, let alone killed. They know how to protect each other."

"So what do you think happened?" I asked. Hell, the guy knew what didn't happen; I figured he'd have a really interesting idea.

"I have absolutely no idea," Paterson said.

That didn't help much, but it was starting to smell like a good story. I thanked Paterson, made an appointment to talk to Dave Crenshaw, the president of the Kilowatts, early the next morning, and drove the three and a half miles back to Midland Heights. There are days I seriously contemplate riding a bicycle around instead of taking the car.

It was almost time for the Ethan to get home from school, so I picked Leah up at Kimmy the babysitter's and, as usual, was given a look from my daughter that indicated she would have preferred to stay with the paid caregiver. Toddlers are at best a fickle lot, though, so by the time I'd strapped her into the car seat, Leah was giggling and singing a song to me. She didn't actually know the words—she didn't actually know all that many words at all—but she could mimic the sounds, and for her, that was enough. The song, which I'd taught her, was "Everybody's Got Something to Hide (Except Me and My Monkey)."

Leah continued to sing for the three entire minutes it took to get home (now I remembered why I didn't ride a bicycle—I'd have nowhere to put my daughter), and we sat down in front of the house and waited for Ethan to get off the bus.

He did, about three minutes later, in a full Asperger's rage, which I recognized at the time as "a snit." "It's NOT FAIR!" he shouted before he even made it all the way off the bus. A few other kids gave him looks that indicated he would not be the first one invited to their birthday parties.

I waited until the bus pulled away. "Okay, what's not fair?"

"Nothing!"

This was going to take a while, so I took Leah's hand and we all walked into the house. Ethan slammed his backpack, with one book in it, down on the dining room table, sat down on the floor, and did his best to look miserable.

I decided to concentrate on Leah and let him stew, but Ethan was intent on getting a reaction. He'd scripted something in his head, and I wasn't playing my role. I finally set my daughter up with a Sony device that draws pictures on the TV (she never really got the hang of doing it herself, but loved watching the demonstration video), and sat down at my desk to make phone calls about the Escobar story.

Beginning with the Edison police, who told me nothing except that they had a public information officer who was off until tomorrow, I ran into brick walls with the office of the Atlantic League, the independent organization to which the Kilowatts belonged, the staff at the emergency room at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, where Escobar had been taken, and the Middlesex County prosecutor's office.

I started to understand Ethan's frustration—I couldn't get a rise out of anybody either.

He sat down next to my desk, still in his jacket, zipped up to his Adam's apple. And his face read complete and total revulsion with the idea of life on planet Earth.

After hanging up on the last call of the day (or at least, the last one I could think to make right now), I looked down at my son, the bundle of anxiety he was, and I decided I'd give him what he wanted.

"It's none of my business, Ethan," I told him. "But isn't it kind of warm to be wearing that jacket in the house?"

That was it: Ethan put his script into production. He stood

up, tore the zipper all the way down, ripped his jacket off his shoulders, and threw it to the floor. "You make me do everything around here!" he screamed, and stomped up the stairs to his room.

I was happy to have helped.

The question, really, was who had handed the water gun to Ethan. Now, most parents faced with such a conundrum would probably just ask their sons, but they don't know Asperger's kids as well as I was about to. Asking Ethan would have been a worthless exercise; he would have denied even having seen the yellow water pistol, and would never give up someone he thought was a friend, even someone who in all likelihood was purposely framing him. One thing I already did know was that my son was a really easy target.

I took out the list of his classmates the Parent Teacher Organization had sent home. I hadn't known many of the kids for long—it was still September, after all—but I did recognize a few names from Ethan's kindergarten class. I didn't know enough to narrow the pack.

So I decided to check with my inside source on all things Sydney Primary School: the president of the PTO, Carole Drabek. I knew Carole first as Danny Drabek's mom, back when Danny and Ethan had played together on occasion.

"Carole, it's Aaron Tucker," I began, since only one of us knew who was calling. "How's Danny doing?" You never ask about the parents; we're all irrelevant. You ask about the kids.

"Oh, he's adjusting so beautifully to first grade!" Carole gushed. Danny was one of those kids you knew would turn down Yale for Brown in eleven years. I made a mental note to transfer some money into Ethan's tuition fund, which currently stood at a hundred and seventy-eight dollars, earning two-percent interest. "He just loves Ms. Turner! I heard there was some trouble with a water gun at school today." Carole misses nothing.

"Yeah, that's what I was calling about," I told her. "Ethan got caught with a water gun that wasn't his; he's facing a two-day suspension unless I find out who owns it, and of course ..."

"Ethan won't tell you." Carole was quick on the uptake.

"Right. So I'm wondering if you have any ideas."

There was silence. Was she appalled at my suggestion that she rat out a first-grader for my own selfish purposes? Nah. She was thinking. Carole knew everyone in Midland Heights, and she appreciated nothing better than being thought of as "in the know."

"It's hard, because you know we don't allow violent toys in the house, and Danny's friends who have them know to leave them home when they come here." Carole and her husband Richard were so crunchy-granola that they wouldn't allow Danny and his younger brother Jake to watch any television that wasn't on PBS. I thought of that as my two-year-old daughter watched *Pinky and the Brain* in the next room.

"But you have suspicions." I led the witness.

"Okay, yeah. I think it's possible Leopold Brinker might have brought in the water gun."

"Leopold?" This was a kid whose name I had not heard before. And it was a corker.

"Yeah, Alistair and Connie's son. He transferred in just before the school year started. I know they'll let their kids use those big water guns, and I always have to let them know that Danny can't have any sugary snacks when he's at their house." The kid's been living in town for a month, and she already knows them well enough for "always." "You want their number?"

Given proper contact information, I was about to call the Brinkers when the daily Mardi Gras near my front door (Leah screaming, Ethan calling down from his room) indicated that my wife had once again returned home from work.

Abigail Stein, Esquire, surveyed the living room: two year old reaching out for a hug while animated mice planned to take over the world on the TV in front of her; six-year-old boy, with tear-stained face, stopped halfway down the stairs, as if surveying all that will one day be his, and a short, under-earning husband, unable to contain his glee at seeing her walk through his door again.

"So," she said. "Tuesday."

I filled Abby in on Ethan's misadventure with a nautical weapon and my latest assignment while she and I were cleaning up from the circus act we call dinner. My wife, besides being beautiful and brilliant (and probably other things that start

with “B”), is also one of the best listeners I’ve ever met.

Abby, of course, was more concerned with our son’s impending suspension than my dead baseball player story. She’s a mom.

“So your only lead is this Leopold kid that Carole Drabek suggested?” she asked, wiping the kitchen table of the debris only a six year old with an autism-spectrum disorder and his two-year-old sister eating like a two year old can create.

“Lead?” I asked. “Yes, Mrs. Columbo, that’s the only lead I could drum up in close to an hour of work. What do you suggest?”

“Well, if the principal can’t help you ...”

“I haven’t spoken to Mr. Breen. He’s at a conference in Denver until Monday, which you’ll recall will be too late.”

“Okay, then.” Abby sat down at the table to think while I filled the dishwasher. If I let her do it, the knives all point up and the person who empties it (me, again) is in constant danger of impalement. “We can eliminate at least half the parents in town, since they don’t allow toy guns of any kind.”

“You know,” I interjected, “I had a whole set of toy guns from the Magnum, P.I. play set when I was a kid, and so far I haven’t shot so much as one person.”

“There was that time they interrupted the Yankee game with election results,” she reminded me.

“I just said I wanted to shoot someone. Besides, it was the

ninth inning of a tie game, and there were two men ...”

“Anyway, those parents can be eliminated.” Abby is nothing if not focused. “So let’s see the class roster.”

I closed the dishwasher, hit START, and then handed her the roster, which I’d left on the kitchen counter, now freshly cleaned. I sat down across from Abby so I could ogle her more efficiently.

She scanned the roster. “I don’t know a lot of these names,” she said. “How about you?”

“I’m probably about ten percent behind you,” I admitted.

Abby pursed her lips. That made it hard for me to concentrate on the task at hand, but I managed.

“I’ll start with the name Carole gave me,” I said. “If that’s a dead end, I’ll think of something else. But you know Carole knows something, or she wouldn’t have passed that along.”

Abby nodded. “I can’t think of anything else either,” she said, and stood up. It was still warm enough for her to be wearing shorts, which was entirely unfair on her part. Her legs made me think thoughts that could not be printed in a family newspaper. “What do you want to do later?” she asked me.

“Depends. Before or after the kids are asleep?”

She saw the look on my face. “You’re impossible,” she said.

“No. Just highly improbable.”

The next morning, after dropping the children off at their

various storage facilities for the day, I drove back to Kilowatt Park to talk to Dave Crenshaw, the team president. He started out with the same stunned confusion that Paterson had expressed, but when I asked if there were any question that his star closer Escobar had suffocated under the weight of his teammates, Crenshaw bristled.

“Don’t blame his teammates,” he scolded me. Crenshaw was a thin man, dressed in a suit with no tie, and already a small “47” band around his left arm, Escobar’s team number. “He didn’t die because of them.”

“I wasn’t suggesting ...”

But Crenshaw was on a roll. “We do more than just train these boys to be ballplayers, you know,” he said. “Most of them aren’t ever going to get a sniff of the Major Leagues. So we try to give them a feeling for how to get through life. We connect with the community. We watch out for their welfare. I don’t want you writing some crazy article that blames them for a freak accident that took the life of one of their own.”

That seemed like an awful lot of defense in response to very little offense, and it threw me off. “I’m not blaming anybody,” I said. “I’m just trying to understand what happened.”

“What happened is that Ramon died,” Crenshaw said. “I had a team that had won a championship, league officials waiting in the clubhouse to hand me a trophy, the first one we’ve taken here in the twelve years I’ve owned the team, and Ramon just ... died. You tell me what to make of that, Tucker.”

The interview didn't really go anywhere, but it was interesting that both Paterson and Crenshaw had offered reasons the teammates piling on to Escobar wouldn't be a factor in his death.

On the way back to my car, though, I noticed two young men getting out of an SUV in the parking lot. You could tell they were athletes; they had the requisite swagger and an air of invincibility.

I approached them, and spoke to the smaller of the two, mostly because I could actually see his face without standing on the hood of the car. He was a very young man, probably not yet twenty, with a dark complexion and the kind of build that suggested to me he was an infielder.

"What happened to Escobar is very sad," he said, making a sad face to illustrate. "Very sad."

He identified himself as Melvin Montenegro, the Kilowatts' second baseman (so I mentally patted myself on the back for guessing). And he said he and his companion, the outfielder Armando Cortez (who spoke no English) were in the pile-up the night Escobar had died.

"What happened?" I asked.

"He just didn't get up," Montenegro said with a shrug. "Everybody else got up, but not Ramon." He repeated the sad face, in case I'd missed it the first time.

The other ballplayer, who resembled a giant redwood, began to speak very quickly in Spanish, and his companion

turned to listen to him. I don't speak Spanish (I took Latin for four years in high school, so I'm covered if I ever run into a ballplayer from ancient Rome), but occasionally, Cortez sprinkled English words into his soliloquy, and my ears would prick up. After at least half a minute, Montenegro turned back toward me to translate what Cortez had said.

"He says he's very sad about Ramon, but he didn't see anything special, either," Montenegro told me.

I waited a few seconds. "That's it? He talks for half a minute, and I get one line?"

"I'm boiling it down," Montenegro answered. "He's real upset."

"I heard some words of English. He said 'cream,' and he said 'clear.' Now, how do those words enter into how he's sad and didn't see anything?"

Montenegro's face clouded over. "We don't wanna talk no more," he said. He gestured to Cortez, and they started toward the entrance.

"Hey, come on!" I tried. "Just tell me what it means." But they were gone. "You're never going to make it to the Show if you don't know how to do an interview," I said, but I'm not sure whether I was talking to the two men who had just walked away, or to myself.

I called the public information officer at the Edison police as soon as I got back to my phone. I'd never spoken with Dorothy Levin before, but she was cut from the same cloth as

every other police spokesperson I'd ever known. The minimum of information was offered, requiring the maximum of effort on my part. It's not an unusual game, just a tiring one.

"Ramon Escobar's post-mortem report is not yet available," she said immediately on hearing the reason for my call. "There's no evidence of foul play at this time."

"That's an ironic baseball metaphor, don't you think?" I asked. Sometimes humor will help loosen up a source.

"I apologize if my turn of phrase was inappropriate." I didn't say it worked every time.

Against all logic, I decided to push on. "The information officer at the hospital said Escobar had probably suffocated. Is that the police department's assumption as well?"

"The M.E.'s report is not available," Levin repeated. "We can't make a determination until that report has been released."

Well, that was tremendously helpful.

It had been too late yesterday to call Dr. Randall Medavoy, so I placed the call now. Randy was an invaluable source, since he actually worked at the Middlesex County Medical Examiner's office, and he always answered my calls because I dated his wife in college and he thinks I know something he doesn't. Which I don't. But there's no reason to tell him that.

"What is it this time, Tucker?" Randy began. We have a very warm relationship.

"Ramon Escobar of the Edison Kilowatts," I said. "And it's

nice to talk to you too.”

“The report—”

“Hasn’t been released yet. Tell me something I haven’t heard from the cops.”

“You know I can’t do that, Tucker,” Randy answered. “I can lose my job.”

“I’m not going to quote you,” I assured him. “I’ll refer to sources within the medical examiner’s office.”

“And you think they won’t know who that is? How many people work here who would have access to an autopsy like that?”

“All right, Randy,” I said. “I had to ask. By the way, is your home number still the same? I was thinking of calling Renee, and I wanted to make sure I had the right number.”

Now, my history with Renee Medavoy (then Renee Klimowitz) consisted of going to maybe three movies and a dinner, and got as intimate as teenagers become in a PG-13 film about something other than teenagers getting intimate. But I’ve never told Randy that, and for reasons that escape all explanation (except that she likes to mess with his mind), neither has his wife. Part of that misconception is based on the fact that he’s never seen Abby, and doesn’t realize I wouldn’t jeopardize my own marriage for Heather Graham, Halle Berry, and Salma Hayek all at once. Let alone Renee Klimowitz.

“Give me a break, Tucker,” Randy whined. “I don’t know

anything about Escobar except that it looks like he died from a pulmonary problem, like large air bubbles in his lung."

"Is that consistent with a bunch of players piling on top of him?" I asked.

"Not really," he said. "It's more consistent with junkies, actually. They don't know how to do intravenous injections."

"That would do it?"

"Only if you inject yourself with air, and who does that?" Randy sounded impatient. Imagine—someone impatient with their friendly freelance reporter.

"So was Escobar a junkie?" I asked.

"I don't think so," Randy said. "No track marks on his arms or any of the usual spots."

"Any idea what 'clear' or 'cream' might have to do with it?"

"No, but it sounds delicious." Randy thinks he's witty.

"He came to the E.R. in his uniform. Did they find anything in his pockets? Anything he had with him?"

"Nothing," Randy said. "Except a small tin of chewing tobacco, and yes, it was chewing tobacco. Gross, even dangerous in the long term, but it didn't cause air bubbles in his lungs."

"How long before you know for sure?" I asked.

"Couple of days. But by then, I'll have changed my phone number. Good-bye, Tucker."

Some people have no sense of humor.

The Escobar story was going so well (that's sarcasm) that I decided to concentrate my attention on the Water Gun Caper, and I walked the six blocks to the Brinker residence (where I would have to exercise extreme self-control—not one of my strong suits—to not ask if Hans could come out and skate).

A woman a few years younger than me (so about thirty-three), dressed perfectly for cleaning a house (minus the rubber gloves), opened the door and considered me. She looked puzzled. This was natural, as we'd never seen each other before.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"I certainly hope so," I answered. "I'm Aaron Tucker. My son Ethan is in your son—" Here I really had to work hard not to chortle. "—Leopold's class at school."

She smiled. "Hi, Mr. Tucker. I'm Constance Brinker. Come on in, but please excuse the way the place looks." She stood to one side and gestured me into an immaculate living room. Every object in the room had been dusted within an inch of its life, and the carpet had probably been vacuumed twice already today. I felt like I was walking on virgin snow, except without the ice that makes your socks wet.

And they had just moved in a month ago. We'd been living in our house for seven years, and I was pretty sure there were still some unpacked boxes in the basement.

"It's amazing you've done so much with the house in such a

short time,” I said. Open with a compliment; people will follow you anywhere from there.

“Oh, we’ve barely scratched the surface,” Constance said. “The place is in total chaos.”

I looked around at the total chaos, a room with every book in place, every wooden surface gleaming, every window freshly washed. “If this is chaos, what does order look like?”

Her mouth tightened a bit, and I imagined she was sizing me up and finding me wanting. “Come back in a couple of weeks and see,” she said. “Now, what can I do for you, Mr. Tucker?”

People don’t like it when you suggest their children are anything other than perfect. So you have to ease your way into it. “Well, I was just wondering,” I said, “if Leopold ...”

“We just call him Leo,” Constance informed me. “And I’m Connie.”

“Thanks, Connie; I’m Aaron. I was wondering if Leo owned a water pistol that looked like this one.” I reached into my jacket pocket and produced the offending piece of plastic.

But before I could brandish it, Connie’s face flattened into an irritated frown. “Is that what this is about?” she asked. “The water pistol thing? You’re all bent out of shape because some kid brought a little water gun to school?”

“Actually, no,” I said. “I’m all bent out of shape because my son is being suspended for bringing it, and he didn’t bring it.”

Her expression went from annoyed to offended. "And because Leo is the new kid in school, you figured that he had?" she asked.

"Look, I'm not suggesting anything. If it's not his water gun ..."

Connie looked at the yellow plastic in my hand and smiled condescendingly. "Leo wouldn't bother with something that small," she said. "He likes the ones that take about a gallon of water. He can barely lift them when they're full." She pointed toward the back door of the house, through the kitchen, where a truly massive plastic weapon, marked "Soakin' Suds," leaned against the doorframe.

"Ah yes," I said. "Ethan loves those."

"Oh sure," Connie said. "The name didn't register before. You're Ethan Tucker's dad. Leo talks about him."

When you have a kid like Ethan, that's not necessarily what you want to hear. But I tried to be casual. "Oh really? What does he say?" So maybe there was a little edge evident in my tone, but not a lot.

Connie looked a little reluctant and said, "He says Ethan always has a different way to look at things."

"He says Ethan's weird," I offered.

She blushed. No, really. "Leo didn't say weird," Connie said. "He said wacky."

"Wacky?"

Connie looked me straight in the face and smiled. "Leo's a little ... wacky himself," she said, and the atmosphere in the room relaxed significantly. "He used to love this computer game called Wacky Jacks, and he adopted the word. He thinks most things are wacky."

"He's right," I told her.

She leaned on the edge of the absolutely spotless, mirror-shined piano and seemed to be thinking. "So who did bring the water gun to school?" she asked herself.

"A good question. Who lets their kids have such destructive, dangerous toys?" I allowed myself a slight ironic grin.

"I've only been in town a few weeks," Connie said in a confidential tone, "but if I had to guess, I would say the gun belongs to Britty McCawley."

"Britty?" I asked.

"I think it's short for Brittany. I met her parents at Back to School night, and the kids played once. She seemed pretty rough-and-tumble."

"Thanks, Connie. We should get the boys together sometime," I suggested, being careful as always to avoid the term "play date" because it sounds like it involves play dinner and a play movie. "If Leo doesn't think Ethan's too wacky."

"I think Leo would like that," Connie said. "And you can see the house when it's not such a mess."

I spotted an eyelash on the windowsill across the room. "Yeah," I told her. "That'd be a treat."

It was a couple of hours before I'd have to pick up Leah and deal with Ethan's inevitable crisis of the day, so I called Jim Furda at Infield to give him an update on the Escobar story. He listened patiently, and then asked a question I wasn't really expecting.

"Why are you concentrating on the cause of death?"

I took a moment before answering. "Isn't that what the story's about?"

"No. The story's about a promising young player's life cut short and what it does to his teammates, his coaches, and the organization," Furda answered. "We're not a news magazine; we talk about baseball."

"The kid might have been murdered, Jim," I reminded him.

"Good. So you can write us the piece we asked for, and sell that side of the story to True Crime."

"You mean even if it turns out something was up, you don't want to know about it?" That couldn't be right.

"That's exactly right," Furda said.

"It would be all over the newspapers, on TV, even some of the Internet sites might pick it up." If I could convince him his publication was getting scooped on a story it had assigned, Furda might very well relent.

"And we'll come out six weeks later than all those, anyway,"

he answered. "Write the puff piece, Aaron. It's what I hired you to do."

"I know that, but ..."

"But nothing. Go talk to the players, get some weepy reaction, and then file the story. You have until Monday." And he hung up.

This left me with something of a conundrum. I'd been working the news angle on the story, something I'd been trained to do when I was a newspaper reporter, and my editor—my boss—was saying he didn't want that. The easy thing would be to do exactly what Furda said and simply write a standard feature on a young life cut short.

And whoever said I couldn't do the easy thing?

"Your problem," Jeff Mahoney said, "is that you don't speak Spanish." He threw a softball to me, and I, on cue, dropped it. Luckily, we were outside in my backyard (which isn't so much a yard as a patio with a press agent), so I didn't break anything.

"Yup," I answered, tossing the ball back, a little wide of Mahoney, but close enough that he could catch it barehanded without lunging. "That's always been my problem."

Mahoney is my closest friend, and has been since high school. Despite advanced degrees in marine biology and economics, he has chosen to devote his life to repairing cars for a rental company. That, he says, is a challenge.

It's not the only time we see each other, but when one of us

has a perplexing problem, we throw a ball around and hash it out.

"If you spoke Spanish," Mahoney explained, "you could talk to the outfielder, who clearly knows more about what happened to Ramon Escobar than his little infielder friend wants to tell you."

"You should see this 'little infielder.' He's eight inches taller than me."

"Who isn't?" Mahoney asked as he tossed the softball back. Mahoney is well over six feet tall, and doesn't mind reminding me of that.

"Nonetheless, if he doesn't want me to know what his friend is saying, I really can't insist very well. Besides, the editor doesn't want a story about how Escobar died. He wants a story about how sad it is that Escobar died, and what his ERA might have been if he'd made it to the majors."

"That's one editor," Mahoney said, reaching up effortlessly for a high toss that would have ended up going through my storm door if he hadn't. "Don't you always say the best part of being a freelance writer is that you can sell a story to anybody?"

"I don't even know if there is a story yet," I said. "The kid might have died from being under all those other kids."

"That's not what the coroner told you," Mahoney reminded me. I put up my glove, and his throw just fell into it. That's Mahoney. "He said there were air bubbles in Escobar's lungs. What does that mean?"

“How do I know? Who died and left me Trapper John, M.D.?”

Mahoney raised an eyebrow, something he'd learned to do by watching Star Trek reruns religiously when we were kids. And his expression said it all. He didn't even seem bothered by the fact that my throw was four feet wide of the target, and he actually had to lunge to catch it.

“Okay,” I said to his eyebrow. “So I could find out. I know some doctors. But who made it my responsibility to solve Ramon Escobar's murder, if it was a murder?”

The eyebrow stayed raised.

“Fine,” I told it. “Nobody else is reporting on it, and I have a couple of questions. I'll ask them, but as you so accurately pointed out, I don't speak Spanish, and there's a man considerably more in shape than I am who seems to want me to stay out of the conversation.”

Mahoney reached down for my throw and picked it up on one hop. “I might be able to arrange being near the ballpark tomorrow, if you want me to,” he suggested.

“And what good will that do, besides my not having to worry about a middle infielder turning me into guava jelly?”

I'm not sure exactly what Mahoney said after that.

It was in Spanish.

And so it was that the next morning Mahoney's enormous

work van, stocked to the brim with tools, oil, and other things people of my heritage don't understand, was parked in the lot outside Kilowatt Park. He and I staked out the area in my Saturn, which was only three years old at the time, and had only one scratch I knew about. Things have changed since.

"You don't have a call you're supposed to be on?" I asked him. Mahoney is constantly on call from the rental company—if one of their cars breaks down on the highway, the renter simply calls the company and a replacement car is on its way in minutes. Then Mahoney shows up to do a quick repair or, much less frequently, tow the busted vehicle back to the shop for a more serious going-over.

"Everything's quiet for a while," he said. "Summer's over, and the holidays haven't started yet. Not that much renting going on."

"Some people have it dead easy," I said.

"While others toil away with the grueling commute from the bedroom to the dining room," he countered. Touché.

Luckily, the witty banter didn't have a chance to go on. A limousine (black, naturally) followed by another and then a line of cars ranging from Lexuses to battered Pontiacs came streaming into the lot. They stopped near the entrance to the park's offices.

"People always show up like this when you're interviewing?"

"Yeah. I usually wear a tuxedo, but it's casual Thursday." I

watched as Dave Crenshaw got out of the limo, wearing the exact black suit you'd expect from a team owner. "They must have just gotten back from Escobar's funeral."

"More likely a memorial service," Mahoney said. "I'll bet he was buried back at home, either the Dominican or Puerto Rico."

He's annoyingly right almost all the time.

We got out of the car and walked toward Crenshaw as the other cars emptied, with Paterson, a few older men in suits who clearly were executives or coaches, and a group of players gathered in clusters around the lot. I nodded on the way toward Montenegro and Cortez, so Mahoney would know which ones I'd spoken to before. They were standing with two other players, Montenegro wearing that patented "sad" face and Cortez looking dreadfully serious.

From the look of it, Montenegro was doing the bulk of the talking.

I approached Crenshaw, and he shook his head when he saw me coming. "We just got back from a memorial, Tucker," he said. "Couldn't you find a better time?"

"I've got a deadline," I explained, although I didn't mention that I had no idea which publication I'd be sending anything I'd write. Sometimes it's best to leave out details the layman wouldn't necessarily understand. "Besides, I didn't know you were all going to a service this morning."

Mahoney drifted over toward Montenegro and Cortez's

group. In his green rental company jumpsuit, anyone else would have looked laughably out of place. Mahoney's bearing and his absolute inability to be embarrassed made him look completely natural. He listened to the group's conversation for a moment, then said something that obviously got Cortez's attention.

"Let's make it quick, Tucker. What do you need?" Crenshaw wasn't looking in Mahoney's direction, which was helpful.

"Can you tell me why there'd be air bubbles in Escobar's lungs?" I asked.

Crenshaw stared at me a moment, then shook his head. "What am I, a doctor?" he said. "I'd think there'd be no air in his lungs, the way he died. What else?"

"Who paid for the funeral?"

"The Kilowatts sent the body back to the Dominican Republic after Ramon's mother claimed it. She was pretty shook up. They don't have a lot of money, so of course the club paid the interment expenses." Crenshaw puffed up his chest a little to show off what a great guy he was, and by extension what a fine organization the Edison Kilowatts was.

Time to try and catch him off guard, while he's feeling so good about himself. "What do you think the words clear and cream mean, when you put them together?" I asked.

Crenshaw was a professional, so he tried not to look like he'd been blindsided, but his eyes widened just a bit. Unfortunately, that was also the moment that Mel Paterson

appeared at his shoulder, and pointed toward Cortez's coterie.

"Who's that talking to Ricardo?" Paterson asked.

By now, Mahoney was deep in conversation with Cortez, with Montenegro and the other two players, perhaps wanting to distance themselves, about twenty feet away, leaning on the second limousine. Paterson headed toward Mahoney and Cortez.

"Hey! Hey!"

I walked toward them, Crenshaw behind me, trying to tell the reporter that it wasn't necessary to become involved. I ignored him, which made me feel good. By the time I got to Mahoney, he was holding up his palms in a conciliatory gesture.

"What's going on? Who are you?" Paterson insisted. He turned toward me. "Do you know this man?"

Over his shoulder, I could see Mahoney lift that eyebrow again.

"Never saw him before," I said, hoping nobody had noticed us both getting out of the van at the same time.

Paterson turned back to Mahoney. "What are you doing here? Why are you bothering our players?"

Mahoney looked blank.

"Who are you?" Paterson demanded.

Mahoney answered him back in great detail, but neither Paterson, Crenshaw (or for that matter, I) could make out his reply.

It was in fluent, unaccented French.

Mahoney and I got into our respective vehicles, and drove away in opposite directions. Then we both turned and met halfway down the opposite block. I got out of the car and he approached from the van.

“So?” I asked. “What’s up with Cortez?”

Mahoney grinned; he loves being the guy who solves the problem. “A lot,” he said. “He didn’t want to talk at first, but I convinced him you’re trying to do right by his friend Escobar. He says everybody’s covering up what happened to the guy.”

“Okay, so what happened to the guy?”

“Cortez doesn’t know, exactly. But he did tell me that clear and cream referred to drugs, something players either rub into their skin or inject themselves with.”

That was a stumper. “Why?” I asked.

“They say it makes them play better. The guys in the minors, especially, are so desperate to get noticed, to get their numbers up, that they’ll take the risk on something that might do them damage in the long term.”

“What kind of damage?” This was getting weird.

“Cortez says you can get tumors.”

“So Escobar was a user?”

“I didn’t get that far. But you can ask Cortez later.” Mahoney smiled. He knew that would catch me off guard.

“What, later?”

“He’s meeting us for lunch at one.”

I had a couple of hours to kill before the meeting with Cortez, so I went home and made some phone calls on the stories for Tech Week. Then, after having procrastinated as much as I could (and freelancers are the most accomplished procrastinators on Earth), I opened up the PTO directory and called Melanie McCawley, mother of the suspected water gun bandit, Brittany “Britty” McCawley.

At least, I intended to call Melanie.

“Hello?” The voice was deep and gravelly.

“Hi ... Is Melanie there?” One thing freelancers have to do on almost a daily basis is make phone calls to people we don’t know. You’d think we’d be less awkward about it.

There was a pause. “Who’s calling?” The sound of a man wondering why another man is asking for his wife.

I gave him my name and explained, without making any accusations, Ethan’s situation. The man, who had identified himself as Bill McCawley (Britty’s therapist dad), sounded relieved.

“Yeah, I heard about that,” he said. “Honestly, water guns at school, and they make a big deal out of it. Can you figure it?”

“You’re the shrink,” I reminded him. “That’s your job.”

Bill laughed. “So, what can I do for you, Aaron?”

I took a breath. “I hate even saying this, Bill, but does

Brittany—" I didn't know her well enough to call her by her supposedly adorable nickname. "—own a yellow water gun?"

There was an uncomfortable (for me, at least) silence. "Aaron, have you ever had a six-year-old daughter?" Bill asked.

"Not yet, but I have one warming up in the bullpen."

"Then let me tell you about it. They don't own anything that isn't pink, or that doesn't have a picture of one of the Disney princesses on it. Nothing. Britty doesn't even like pink that much, but people keep giving her stuff that's pink. Because she's a girl. The cultural stereotypes are absolutely ..."

"I'm sorry I had to ask, Bill. Do you have any idea who might have planted that water gun in Ethan's hand?"

Bill took a moment to think. "The problem is, there are any number of parents who think this is a stupid rule, so there are only three or four families that don't allow plastic guns. I mean, I had an A-Team set when I was a kid, and how many people have I shot?"

"Mine was from Magnum, P.I.," I volunteered.

"How many have you shot?" Bill asked.

"Not a one, but there was this one Yankee game ..."

"When they interrupted with election results?" Bill sounded agast. "Could you believe that?"

"Ramon called it 'the clear' and 'the cream,'" Armando Cortez said in Spanish, translated by Jeff Mahoney. "There are other kinds. Some of the guys use them. I don't."

We sat in a banquette at the Plaza Diner in Edison, on the opposite side of town from Kilowatts Park. Cortez had insisted on the location and the time, to assure himself he would not be seen by teammates or team officials. Mahoney, deep into a Greek salad, would be careful to eat when Cortez was talking so he could translate afterward. But I could tell he was hungry, because the occasional word was stifled by feta cheese.

"Why don't you use it?" I asked Cortez. He waited for Mahoney to translate. So did I.

"Because you can get cancer, tumors in your liver. Your hair can fall out. You can get breasts. Your testicles can shrink. I love this game, but I don't love it that much. I can go home and be poor; I've been poor before."

"Are you sure Escobar was using steroids?" I'd done a little research by calling Randy Medavoy, who had not changed his phone number, before coming to lunch. I found out we were discussing anabolic steroid usage, which Randy said would definitely not cause air bubbles in the lungs.

"I see things," Cortez said. "They inject each other. They worry people will find out. They hide it from the league, from the owner, maybe even from the manager. But we share a locker room. I see. I've seen Montenegro inject Ramon. But I don't do that stuff."

"I don't understand how that would kill him, though," Mahoney offered on his own.

Cortez shrugged. "I have no idea," he said. "All I know is, I

take care of my body.” He bit into his patty melt with extra cheese.

“Did you see him using the night he died?” I asked Cortez.

He shook his head. “No. But I did see him sneaking his needle out of his locker. He was worried the league guys who came for the championship game would see it.”

And suddenly, I had a theory.

We parted ways in the diner parking lot. Cortez said he was heading home now that the season and the memorial service were over. He didn’t know if he’d be back in the spring, but he guessed he would.

I thanked Mahoney for his help—the six hundred and seven thousandth time, by my count—and drove the Saturn to Kilowatt Park, where I was lucky enough to find Mel Paterson packing up his office for the off-season.

I had no time for niceties: “What did you do with the syringe, Mel?”

His head snapped up toward me. He was sitting down, or his head would have snapped down toward me. “What are you talking about?”

“The syringe. The one Ramon Escobar was carrying, I’m guessing, in his back pocket during the game. The one he used to inject himself with steroids. The one he took out of his locker so the league brass wouldn’t catch him. You got to the body first; you didn’t want anyone to see he’d been using drugs.

Maybe you didn't even know what he was using, and thought he was into heroin. But you took the syringe out of his pocket before the EMTs got there. What'd you do with it?"

Paterson's face closed; he didn't have it in him to deny it. "I threw it out. On my way home that night. In a garbage can I chose at random in Piscataway. Go find it."

"You knew Escobar was using steroids. Why didn't you do anything about it?"

Paterson shrugged. "There's no rule against it," he said. "The players think it makes them better. What do you want me to do?"

"Crenshaw goes on and on about how you're preparing these kids to be good citizens," I reminded him. "How is this doing that?"

"Oh, cry me a river," Paterson said. "Some of the players use. I don't see how that killed Escobar. He didn't use any that night."

"No," I said, "but he stuck the syringe into his back pocket because he was afraid he'd be found out. And when they won the championship, and everybody piled onto him, I'm guessing the needle was pushed into him and the syringe pushed down. Air got pumped into a vein. And that led to air bubbles in his lungs, and he died."

Paterson sat silently. "Oh my god," he said. "I did have to pull it out of him. But there wasn't anything in the syringe, not even a trace, so I thought ..."

"I'm going to write about it," I told him. "You'd better tell the cops what you know because I'm going to write about it. You tell them ahead of time, and maybe you'll get a better deal."

His eyes widened. "Jail?" he said. "Because I pulled a needle out of a kid who was already dead?"

"You withheld evidence. Tell them now, Mel. Tell them before they come looking for you."

Paterson looked at the phone. "It's no crime, Tucker," he said.

"The whole thing is a crime," I told him, playing my self-righteous card for the year. "Call the cops."

And he did.

"So you solved the mystery." Abby, as radiant as a woman who had just come home and cooked dinner for a Philistine and two children could be, sat across the table from me and smiled. "You figured it out."

"Yeah, that one," I said. "Because someone told me what I needed to know."

"Isn't that your job? Getting people to tell you stuff?"

"Not according to Furda at Infield. He's not buying the story. Too downbeat, he says."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I sold it to the Press-Tribune," I said. "It's not as much money, but it's an in there. The editor, Mark Harrington, said it

could lead to more work.”

“Not a total loss,” Abby grinned at me. Grin at me, and the world is mine, Abigail.

Ethan walked in from the living room, an indication that there was a commercial in tonight’s broadcast of Rugrats. Ignoring our conversation entirely, or the idea that we might be having one, he used his time efficiently. “Dad, why don’t other kids like me?” he asked.

Abby did her best not to look startled, but realizing he’d asked me, she got up from the table and went to talk to Leah in the living room. The coward.

I could have denied that the other kids didn’t like Ethan, but he is very smart, and would have seen through me. “People are put off by what they don’t understand, Ethan,” I told him.

“They don’t understand me?” He was baffled enough to sit down at the table, but I think better on my feet, so I stood up.

“Do you think you act like everybody else?” I asked.

“No, but I think they’re the ones acting strange,” Ethan answered after a second.

I smiled. “You’re probably right,” I said. “But the fact is, they act like most people, and they’re going to think it’s odd when you don’t.”

“Is there something wrong with me?” He didn’t sound concerned, just interested.

“No. You’re fine. But we’ll talk to some doctors, maybe, and

see what we can find out. It doesn't mean you're sick. It means your brain works differently. Maybe you have to learn things differently. But you're really smart, and you can do it."

"Can I learn to get the other kids to like me?" he asked.

Kids. Love them, and they'll tear your heart out. "I'll bet you can," I managed.

Ethan stood up. "Okay." And he went back inside to see what Tommy and Chuckie were up to now.

Abby walked back in, and assessed my face. "Wow," she said. "You okay?"

"I think so. But I feel bad. I never found out about the water gun." And I told her about today's conversation with Bill McCawley, and with two other parents I'd called late in the afternoon, who shared his feelings pretty closely.

Abby sat down and her lovely face was dedicated to thought. "What's funny," she said finally, "is that everybody seems to think it's okay for kids to have water guns."

"Why is that funny? What's a little water gun going to do ..."

"You're missing the point. You've been trying to find out who broke the rule."

"Right. To save Ethan a suspension."

Abby nodded. "Maybe our problem is with the rule, not the rule-breaker."

It took a second to set in. "You mean because just a few parents care about the water gun rule ..."

"Exactly. The majority thinks it's stupid."

I walked over and kissed her seriously, and not for the usual reasons. "You're exactly right," I said. "It's time for a little civil disobedience." And I spent the next ninety minutes on the phone, distributing water guns to children through their parents.

The protest worked exceptionally well, although Ms. Mignano was a little nonplused when she summoned me to her office the next day. "Every child in the first grade except two showed up in school with a water gun today, Mr. Tucker," she said. "Why do I think this might have something to do with you?"

I did my best to appear wide eyed. "I thought you were calling me because Ethan was one of the children with the water guns," I said. In fact, the other parents had suggested leaving Ethan out of our protest effort, but he had insisted on violating the rule, appalled at the idea that he'd appear "different." "I figured he'd be suspended. And I thought we had agreed you'd call me Aaron."

"We can't suspend the entire first grade," Ms. Mignano countered. "Which you and the other parents counted on, didn't you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said. "But it is a silly rule."

"It's going to be re-examined when Mr. Breen comes back next week," she said. "Now, take your son's blue water gun and go home, Aaron. Ethan's off the hook; he can come to school as usual next week."

Since Carole Drabek had been the only parent I'd called who had been against the Water Gun Gambit, I decided to drop by her house after school that day, and I brought Ethan and Leah with me, mostly because there wasn't anyone else to watch them this time of day. Carole opened the door with a wary smile.

"I just wanted to apologize," I said after she let us in, and Ethan ran off to see what Danny was up to. Leah stood next to me, and attached herself to my right leg. "I know you weren't crazy about the idea of the water guns, but—"

"You had to do what you thought was right," she said, smiling. "I know how it feels to want to help your child."

She ushered me into the kitchen, where she was cooking dinner. It was hard walking with a two-year-old girl on my leg, but I managed.

Carole stuffed something into the oven, then gestured toward glass doors opening onto the rear deck. "Let's go outside," she said. "Jake's out there, and maybe Leah would like to play with him."

We walked out, to where Jake, Carole's three year old, was walking around the backyard, eschewing millions' worth of toys, swings, and other amusements left around the yard in favor of a two-foot branch that had fallen off the oak tree. He was using it as a walking stick.

Leah, of course, refused to budge off my leg.

"I hope Ethan didn't bring a toy gun here today," Carole said. "We still insist on no violent toys, you know."

"Oh, no," I told her. "We respect your right to have things the way you want them in your house."

"Just not in my school?" Carole said. The smile didn't dim.

"It's a democracy," I tried. "Majority rules, up to a point."

Carole nodded. "I understand that. And I'm okay with it. But not for Danny and Jake ..."

There was a shout from upstairs. "Mom!" a voice yelled. "Ethan scraped his knee on the rug!"

I was about to head for the stairs. Leah, thrilled with the thought of some action after all this grownup talk, forgot to be bashful and ran toward Danny's voice. Carole looked at me.

"It's just a scrape," she said. "I'll take care of it; I know where the washcloth and the Band-aids are. Do me a favor, keep an eye on Jake, would you?" And without waiting to see if I agreed, she headed inside.

I couldn't hear Ethan crying or shouting, so my guess was he was more embarrassed than hurt. I decided, for once, to let someone besides Abby or me help him. I'd have to get used to that, I supposed.

I sat back on a deck chair and watched Jake for a minute, reveling in my lack of responsibility. All I had to do was watch.

Jake and his walking stick were involved in some great inner drama, as he was talking to himself and wandering

around the yard. Finally, he noticed me on the deck, and walked toward me, an expression on his face that was serious, and dedicated.

I smiled, and stood up. Show him you're friendly, and the child won't be afraid of you.

Jake stopped about fifteen feet from where I stood, and raised the walking stick parallel to the ground. He pointed it at me.

“Bang,” he said.

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WATTS IN THE WIND

DOC FINCH



Art by Edward Kinsella III

“Here we harvest the wind’s free bounty,” said Leo Albertson, the manager of the Lamancha Wind Ranch. “If only it didn’t cost so much for the tools to reap it.”

He waved at the window, beyond which stood a forest of white steel pillars, each supporting a whirling three-bladed fan. Beyond them and downwind stood taller, larger fans spinning slower, catching and stripping breezes that escaped the first

line of energy gatherers.

I quit trying to count spinning fans and just watched them. They all seemed to be turning. They stretched in staggered rows to the horizon, rising up from the flat, bunchgrass-covered plateau. The multiple ravines and arroyos in the surface left by eleven thousand years of short but savage summer rains wound through the rows.

I'm Vlad Hammersmith, owner and sole operative for Enertricity Resolvers, LLC, a company that redefines its goals for almost every job it does. This job had been described as "a lot of problems in my power company." I wondered how many problems he had.

"One hundred and thirty-six," said Albertson. "That's how many one and a half megawatt turbines—the ones up front—we have. The big new ones are a little over eight megawatts each and there are fifty of them. We've been feeding better than four hundred gigawatt-hours a year into the grid for three years now.

"It should be more power," Albertson continued, smoothing back his retreating hairline. "But we've got these things going wrong, and our security people are stumped, and more important, so is our public relations department."

"Equipment or people problems?" I asked.

"People, I guess. It isn't like there's that much equipment failure."

"Staff, customers, or neighbors?"

“Oh, not customers—we seldom even see them. Could be staff, or even neighbors, though we’ve certainly not given them a cause to hate us.”

“Is it just mischief, or annoyed people, or organized sabotage?”

“It doesn’t look organized—mostly it’s just little things. Sand in a generator gearbox, something stuck to a turbine blade that unbalances it, a grounded transmission line, things one or two people could do quickly, but still cost us generating capacity for a day or a week or a month. That adds up.”

“Ever catch anybody?”

“Maybe. The other day we had an oil spill—”

“Oil spill? I thought you bragged about no ecological risk in using wind power.”

“Transformers. We gotta have them to raise the voltage on what the wind generators make so it can feed into the power grid. Grid runs at 345,000 volts; the generators a lot less. Got to have oil to cool and insulate the transformers. Anyway, our maintenance man was headed out there, and arrived about the time the overheat alarm went off. Found a couple hundred gallons of oil soaked into the caliche. A temp worker must have left the sample valve open. He swore he didn’t but he had oil all over his coveralls. I fired him.”

“How about sand in the gearbox—how’d anyone get to that? It’s up on top in the cabin opposite the blades, right?”

“Yeah, in the nacelle. Someone bashed the lock off the door to one of the shorter towers, climbed up two hundred ten feet, dumped sand—no shortage of that—into the gearbox and a week or two later it died of erosion.”

“You said ‘shorter towers.’ No one has tampered with the eight-megawatt towers?”

“Not yet. For one thing, they don’t have a gearbox. The generator is connected directly to the blades. And also, they’d have to climb nearly six hundred feet to get to the nacelle on one of those.”

I grinned. “Not all monkey-wrenchers are lazy.”

“There’re still monkey-wrenchers around?”

“They’re not just guys who drove nails into trees in front of a logging crew; they’re anybody, usually one or two, that are trying to shut down an operation they think is threatening them, or the ecosystem, or a protected animal, or sometimes just because it’s blocking their view. Yeah, they’re still around.”

“Hell, how do you stop that?” Albertson said.

“Tighten security, make some arrests, change their minds about the threat.”

Albertson waved at his big window again. “Security? I got wind turbines on over fifteen thousand acres, full of little ravines and dry canyons. No fences.”

“Fences would help. Some.”

Albertson shook his head. “New Mexico has an open-

range law. Cows can graze damn near any place they want. Some of those places are out here on the wind ranch.”

I looked at the multitude of fans again. “How many security people you have?”

“Twelve—and yes, I know it’s nowhere enough. Had an expert from the government come in first time I complained about the open-range law; he told me to hire about thirty-five or forty security people.”

“You throw him out?”

“No. But I don’t complain to the government anymore.”

The door opened and the secretary I had seen at the desk outside stuck her head in. “Mr. Albertson, Rodney Barr is here for the ten o’clock meeting. Shall I ask him to wait?”

“No, have him come on in, we’re about to break here ... Mr. Hammersmith wanted to take a tour of the site, right?”

“It’s Vlad, and yes.”

Rodney Barr was a slender man with a small potbelly who walked with a slight stoop. He wore rimless glasses perched on a longish, pointed nose. With his head lowered slightly and his halting stride, he reminded me of a sandpiper looking for lunch on a beach.

“Rodney runs the competition. He has the South Wind Natural Gas Power Plant over near Santa Rosa.” Albertson chuckled lightly. “Actually, we work together: I provide the base-load power, and Rodney takes care of the peaking power, when

it's needed. Both feeding the same grid."

"Howdy. You one of those wind engineers?" Mr. Barr bobbed his head forward and back.

"Rodney, this is Vlad Hammersmith. He's here to—"

"Actually, I came out to see if I could offer Mr. Albertson some pointers on increasing plant efficiency." There was no point in telling anyone I was there to look for saboteurs.

"Ah, that's good. We could all use some more efficiency in our operations," said Rodney. He turned to Albertson. "All I needed to do today is to pass on something I got from the grid dispatcher this morning. Two of the regional nuclear plants are shutting down for scheduled maintenance a month early. Do you need my assistance in the changeover? Do you need me to pick up the extra power generation? We want to keep them thinking of eastern New Mexico as Old Reliable, eh?"

"A month earlier? No, I think we have that in hand, no problem, but thanks for remembering to mention it." Albertson made a note on his desk calendar and smiled at Rodney. "I'll buy you lunch next time I'm up in Santa Rosa."

"Thanks. Look forward to it. Nice meetin' you, Mr. Vlad."

Rodney turned and shuffle-stepped toward the door. When he paused to pick up a paper clip from the floor, I had a sudden feeling that he had found lunch, and fought to keep the grin off my face.

I pointed my pickup down the nearest gravel path—it was

too narrow to be a road—and headed for the fan forest. As I drove slowly along I looked carefully at the shorter towers. They were round steel towers, riveted and welded into a single piece. Each had a metal door, set into the tower, which resembled the watertight door on a ship. There was a handle on the door and a keypad on the tower. Other than that and a set of identifying numbers they were featureless. The power cables for each tower were apparently routed underground, which made the whole scene very neat, almost surrealistic—white tapering columns rising from a concrete pad with no wires, no litter, and no landscaping. There was only the thin bunchgrass whipping endlessly in the wind and the three-armed rotors ceaselessly turning to engage the eye.

In the middle of the shorter forest, I stopped the pickup and turned off the engine. I opened the door and stepped out to listen.

There was little to hear. There was a low growl coming from high up—the step-up gearbox to get the proper voltage and frequency? There was a light sound, a vibration in the air, of hundreds of vanes sweeping their endless arcs. I thought of swords swinging without impact. There were irregular squeaks and rattles from the machinery as it adjusted itself slightly to track the wind and to adjust the rotors to compensate as the wind varied in speed and direction. I could hear the nacelle far above move on its track every so often to adjust for larger wind direction changes.

Below that was a very low frequency rumble, almost a

humming, a sound that couldn't be pinpointed. Woven into it all was the constant murmur of the wind across the New Mexico plains. There was also a flickering of the light as hundreds of blades shadowed and bounced the sunlight about; I found it more annoying than the sounds.

Where the transition from short towers to tall towers came, I found the ragpicker. Off to my left, I noticed the motion of her skirt whipping in the wind, so I stopped and took a long look. A woman was walking under one of the large towers. She wore a long skirt and a shawl against the wind and moved forward slowly, bent toward the ground. She was dragging a large black garbage bag, into which she occasionally put something picked from the ground.

I got back in the truck and circled around to come up alongside of where she was walking. As I idled along at a walking pace, she continued her work, ignoring me. Finally I pulled forward a little, stopped the truck, and stepped out and stood in her path. She stopped when she reached me and looked up, then stood erect.

"You going to run me off again?" she said. She seemed much younger this close up. And prettier, I thought. Her hair was red and unconfined, and it swirled around her head in the ground winds making their way through the towers. Her eyes were green, and not friendly. Standing erect, she was taller and stood like an athlete, ready to run, jump, or kick me square in the crotch if I moved wrong.

"No, I didn't come out to run anyone off. Should I?"

"You could run the bastards off that are killing the birds and bats."

Uh-oh.

"I'm Vlad. Is there some other way I can help you?"

"And I'm Erin. Erin Algood, president of the Fort Sumner Birdwatching and Protection Group. I'm also the maiden lady who teaches high school biology and physics in Santa Rosa. Or, in the summer, I'm the woman who goes down to Baja California and classifies birds. You want to help pick up the birds and bats slaughtered by these killing fans?"

I said, "Yes, ma'am," and walked over to the truck to pull a pair of gloves out of the back. I didn't trust bats. Even dead ones.

We worked our way down the last of the tall towers. It was a long walk. I noticed that the harvest was uneven. Some towers had a dozen victims below it; others had nothing.

"Is it always like this?" I said. "Some towers kill more than others."

"Almost always, Sometimes all of the dead are found at just a few towers and nothing at the others. But there's no pattern. The next night it may be almost even. We've been keeping track for two years now and I can't find a pattern in any of the deaths or numbers. Except they go up during migratory times, and down in winter."

"You count these every day?"

"Well, not always me personally. But someone in the group does it. Every day. Then we post it on the tote board."

"Tote board?"

"Didn't you see it? It's right where you turn to go to the wind ranch office. It has daily tolls of bats and birds and a running total of the year's dead. We used to put weekly photos in the local paper, but ..."

"But?"

"It went bankrupt." She paused and smiled. "Not that one had anything to do with the other."

Erin laid out the harvest and began separating it into birds and bats. The bats all looked similar, but there was a wide variety of birds, from warblers to predators.

"Isn't that a golden eagle?" I said.

"Yes, a young one. We forward a report to Fish and Wildlife, along with any threatened species we might find here. The eagle is then sent to one of the reservations. Native Americans are the only people who can legally possess an eagle or its feathers, you know."

I didn't, but nodded anyway. I pulled two bats out of the pile. "What about these? They don't look like the same species to me."

Erin glanced over at them. "They're not. The one on the left is a Brazilian free-tail bat. The other is a Mexican long-nosed

bat, an endangered one. Set it aside over by the eagle, would you?"

"What do you suppose killed them—broken necks?" I waved at the pile of dead fliers.

"Usually. Except for the bats. Most of them just appear to die, and we don't have the money for necropsies, so ..."

"I know someone at the University in Las Cruces who might do a couple for you. Can I take a few?"

"Sure, just wait until I get my count."

I offered to drive Erin and her bundles of casualties back to where her truck was parked and she readily accepted. I walked back to get my truck while she rested.

"Where do you take these bodies?" I asked on the drive back toward the wind ranch entry.

"I used to take out the threatened species and send them to Fish and Wildlife, and dump the rest on Albertson's front yard at night. But he just had his gardener dispose of them. Now one of the ladies of the group takes them and buries them in her flower gardens."

"Must be a big garden."

"Lots of flowers too. She says it's a form of recycling."

"How about your relationship with Albertson? Antagonistic?"

"

Erin thought about it, then shook her head. "Started off that way, but now I produce my PR about how many birds he's

killing, and he produces his PR about how much he's spending to avoid killing the birds and how the buildings in Albuquerque kill a thousand times as many as his turbines do. Sort of a standoff."

"Does he do anything specific to avoid killing the birds—reflectors or something?"

"No. He takes credit for the slower speed of these new turbines. Says the biggest one only rotates at twelve revs per minute and any dumb bird can see it coming."

I thought about it for a moment. "The fan blade on that is about four hundred feet long; that means the tip of those blades would be traveling at about a hundred and eighty miles per hour. Pretty hard to dodge that, I'd say."

"You sure about that speed?" Erin was already writing it down. "We've been trying to get Albertson to put whistles on the blade tips to scare off the birds, but he says it would keep people awake."

"Anybody actually live out here?"

"A few people, ranchers, Albertson, and the maintenance men he hires."

Security is here all night—could interrupt their sleep, I suppose. But not many people, no. Oh, there's one of the ranchers now—that man running over to the right. Wonder what his hurry is today."

I saw a lanky, gray-haired man in oil-stained jeans and

cowboy boots loping off through the columns of the shorter towers. He was obviously fairly old, but making good time.

Erin leaned to see the destination of the runner. "Where is he running to?"

"Or running from—" I began, just as two towers, one on either side of the path I was driving blew dust, dirt, and concrete chunks from their bases and began to fall. Following the thunder of explosions, a huge dust cloud and its burden of gravel and shattered concrete bits enveloped the truck, I spun the wheel, stood on the brake, then gunned the engine again to try and outrun the debris, or at least get out from under the falling towers.

Then I ran into another vertical tower.

As the gravel quit falling and the wind blew the dust cloud away, I asked Erin if she was hurt. She said no, so I got out and checked the damage. The truck had some new wrinkles in the front, but I couldn't see or hear liquids dripping nor could I smell gasoline. I turned to the towers. Two were down, one completely flat across the gravel path, and the other held up at a slant by a rotor blade buried deep in the ground. A third tower leaned far over, as if checking on its fallen comrades. At least a dozen other towers' rotations were slowing. I figured a block of power had been lost.

Erin was out of the truck, shading her eyes with her hands and looking in the direction the old cowboy had been running. "Did you see Tom again? He didn't get hurt, did he?"

"Doubt it. He was much farther than we were from the blast. Could he have set off the charges?"

"Oh no, not Tom. He's an old-timer around here. He even leases out some of his grazing land to Albertson for his towers. It'd be like he was blowing up his own money. Though, come to think of it, I did hear that he wasn't happy with the leasing arrangements."

"How not happy was he?" I waved a hand at the debris.

"No, not that unhappy, but serious enough for him to hire a lawyer, and for an old pinchpenny like him that's—"

The second set of explosions came from the far western end of the field. I could see the dust rising and three towers were doing their slow motion fall.

"That's close to the office building, maybe we should ..."

Erin trailed off as I took her arm and led her to my truck.

In four-wheel drive we bypassed the downed towers and found the path again. As we approached the edge of the wind ranch, we could see the towers on the ground, and again, a number of adjacent towers winding down. One of the towers had fallen across an old, battered pickup on the road leading to the office building. I thought the truck was totaled. The tower had shaped it into a V. I could see an arm slowly moving in the cab of the front half of the V.

I got out. "Got a cell? Good. Call 911 and tell them to be sure and send an ambulance along with whatever else they're sending out here."

Then I ran to the pinned pickup, slid under the tower where it pressed the crew cab portion toward the ground, grabbed a claw hammer from a burst tool bag, and went to work removing the windshield.

The driver was now unconscious and so covered with blood I couldn't tell anything about his age, condition, or race. He was pinned by the steering wheel. I lay flat on the hood, and using my shirt and the totally inadequate first-aid kit from the crew cab, I began patching, wrapping, and staunching what I could. When the first-aid kit was empty, I tossed it into the foot area on the passenger side. It made a dull clunk.

I glanced over. The tin box had hit a very old and faded canvas-and-leather carryall. Sticking out of the bag were some very old and faded sticks of dynamite. No wonder the guy got caught by his own bomb, I thought. Stuff that old could go off with a strong wind gust. I began to sweat. Slowly I slid back off the hood, trying not to impart even a tremble to the vehicle that had just been smashed flat by a two hundred and something foot steel tower. To hell with rationality, I thought, that dynamite is old, old, old.

I slid off the truck hood and tiptoed away from the wreck. At about thirty feet away I met Albertson and a crew coming in.

"The guy in there—he do it?"

"Odds are he was involved," I said. "Got any hazard tape or rope in those tool bags?"

"What? I don't know, Joe, got any hazard tape in there?"

Joe dug into his tool bag and pulled out a hank of black and yellow rope from it. "This 'nough?"

"Not even close. Tell you what, you stand right here and keep every person, animal, and bird away from that truck."

"Hey, hey there. I own this operation," said Albertson. "Who do you think you are to give orders to my people?"

"I'm the one who knows how big the bomb in that truck is."

As the words sunk in, the crowd began to move back, away from the mild-looking guy with the good tan wearing a windbreaker with no shirt, who was talking about bombs.

Albertson cleared his throat, said softly, "I'll just go call them to send along a bomb squad. If they've got one." He hurried away toward the office building, his cell phone forgotten in his right hand.

By late afternoon Albertson's crew and a Public Service Electric Company crew from Tucumcari had isolated the damaged towers and reset the breakers on the tripped towers. Albertson's crew and the grid dispatcher were in the process of putting the generators back onto the grid. Six towers were out of commission, and would remain so for the near future. Albertson laughed and said he had plenty; they'd still easily meet their planned output.

The Fort Sumner Fire Department, the closest thing around to a bomb squad, borrowed one of Albertson's ravines and moved the bag of old dynamite into it with long, long ropes.

Then they spent a quarter hour or more shooting into the bag with a rifle until it finally went up with a satisfying roar. The man who fired the final shot won a case of beer, which he shared.

The driver of the crushed pickup was finally extricated and his wounds professionally treated. They were fairly serious, but he was still breathing. The Santa Rosa police put him into a hospital room, under guard. He had not said anything, not even his name, since I had found him.

"Can you get me an appointment with this fellow Tom's lawyer. I don't think we'll find Tom too easily."

Erin looked at her watch, said, "Wait," and wandered off chatting into her cell. When she came back, she said, "He'll see you at eight tomorrow, but promises nothing. What sort of job are you doing for Albertson anyway? Bombs, lawyers. I've never seen Albertson back off from anybody before."

"I'm sort of an efficiency enhancer. Now, where can I take you to dinner? You help me, I help you."

She smiled. "For efficiency's sake, in which of our nearby cities are you staying?"

"I was thinking of staying in Fort Sumner. It's a few miles closer, for efficiency's sake."

She thought for a moment. "It's okay, I guess. It has a couple of motels, both are the Billy-the-Kid-slept-here style. And there is a truck stop with a sixty-four-ounce steak challenge."

"Where shall I meet you in Santa Rosa?"

“Check in at the Caprock Bed and Breakfast, just up 91 North toward the State Park, and I’ll pick you up at eight, give or take.”

Dinner was the most authentic Mexican food I had eaten since I last got lost in Mexico City. Erin turned out to be a delightful dinner companion, with a broad knowledge of world events, with just enough twist on her view of them to be stinging and funny instead of bitter or mocking. I, in turn, contributed to the ambience by not talking shop. I didn’t even ask her what cowboy Tom’s surname was until the evening was wrapping up.

“Brown,” she said. “Tom Brown. And thank you for not teaching me a new career. You’d be surprised how many men think their jobs are utterly entrancing.”

“Perhaps they have nothing else to talk about.”

“That would be sad.”

“Yes. It is ... would be. But maybe I, too, was about to run out of interesting conversation.”

“Well, start building some more,” she said as I paid the bill. “You didn’t say how long your contract is—or much of anything else, but I’m sure we can find time for me to show you that I can cook as well as discuss world events.”

I smiled as we walked toward her car. “I’ll get right on extending the contract to cover that. Just as soon as I work on some new dinner conversation.”

The lawyer’s name was Damme, which I felt was

appropriate. He welcomed me in, and seated me facing east, into the rising sun framed in the window behind him. I took out sunglasses and put them on. I stared at Damme and saw a middle-aged man with white hair carefully cut at his jaw line and framing a face brown, wrinkled, and holding two wise brown eyes. He wore western-style clothing. The jacket hung open just enough to see folksy red suspenders covering up some of the embroidery on his shirt.

Lawyer Damme looked at me. He could see himself. Twice. Once in each lens of my mirrored sunglasses.

I said. "Mr. Tom Brown was seen leaving an explosion site yesterday. I was an eyewitness. He was moving right along and had what appeared to be a large oil stain on his Levi's. I could describe him as appearing furtive, or perhaps just in a hurry. He could have been leaving the scene of a crime, or maybe he was taking a shortcut through the wind ranch. He could have looked guilty, or maybe he looked startled at the noise and dust the explosion caused. I'll have to think about it some more before I report it. Or not."

Lawyer Damme sighed. "You not nearly as nice as Erin said."

"When I have a job to do, I like to get right to it."

"And your job is what? Messin' up old Tom Brown?"

"My job is finding out what's going on at the Lamancha Wind Ranch and smoothing it out so it works better for everyone. Everyone who deserves it. I think it could help to

know what the problem is with the leases out there.”

“So you come on all hard nosed? And why ask about leases?”

“Up to this point all Tom would need a lawyer for is leases. And I didn’t push until you tried the window trick. It doesn’t work with everyone.”

“I see that.” Lawyer Damme went to the window and closed the blinds. I took off the mirrored glasses and put them away.

Damme sat down and looked at me for a minute or two. “You gonna make a stink about this if you don’t get some answers?”

“Probably.”

Damme steeped his fingers and looked at them instead of at me. “Suppose you signed a contract to lease out your land so someone could generate variable amounts of money off it. How would you set the contract worth?”

“A percentage of the money produced sounds fair,” I said. “And probably a base rate so the leased object doesn’t just sit there, paying nothing while it’s not being used by the money producer.”

“Close enough. Now, what would you base the percentage on?”

I thought a moment. “Basing it on what the buyer of the product pays should get to a fair value.”

“And if the buyer didn’t pay a fair value, or anywhere close

to it?"

"Doesn't make sense: Nobody wins except the product buyer. How do you continuously sell something for less than it's worth?"

Damme was smiling now. "Yes, how would you do that?"

"Okay, the producer sells, at an extremely low price, the product to himself and pays the contract percentage—now a very low price—on that transaction to the owner who leased it out, then resells the product to the final buyer at the going rate. He keeps the difference. The lease owners get shafted."

Damme leaned back, smiling. "You sure you're an honest man? You seem to have a knack for this sort of thing."

"I learn from those I work with, for or against."

"Well, that's what's happening. Lamancha Wind Ranch leases about half of their land from owners for three percent of the total generated from the turbine built on that site, plus a nominal thirty or forty dollars per site as a base rate. Then they sell the power to a division of a wholly owned subsidiary—say Energy Distributors, LLC, for an extremely low price, say five percent of its true value, and that's what the owner of the lease gets—a small fraction of what they negotiated.

"Energy Distributors, LLC, then resells the power at the going grid price and the profit is returned to the mother company, Lamancha Wind Ranch, which spreads the profit around among the losers and winners within their own company and subsidiaries to make it—overall—an average profit-making

company. Just a little spin on the rig Enron was pulling in the gas market some time back.”

“It can’t be that simple. The owners of the leases wouldn’t stand still for it.” I stood and began pacing.

“There are seventeen people who have leased sites—land—to Lamancha. Tom Brown is the only one who has tried to break the contract.”

“Okay. Why?” I examined the law degrees hanging on Damme’s wall. He had been a lawyer for a long time.

“We’ve been in a drought for five years now, and with global warming looking like a problem that’s come to stay, we expect more dryness. These ranchers would rather get a little bit of something out of currently useless land than hand feed and water their cattle just to break even. A lot of them commute to work at various businesses around the counties now. Hell, a couple are even on Albertson’s maintenance teams.

“Tom, on the other hand, is too old and too much a cowman to change. Besides which, he leased out too much of his grazing land to this company and had to market his cattle or let them starve. His only salvation is to get a reasonable price for his leases—then he can keep his life. Until the next schemer comes along, anyway.”

I shook my head. “You’re a lawyer. You know people. You’ve got the whole thing right here. Book, chapter, verse, and perps. Why haven’t you blown the whistle?”

It was Damme’s turn to get up and pace. “I’m fifty-three

years old. All I know how to do is country lawyering. All the money in these three counties comes from the power companies, so if I blow the whistle I'm out of a career with no possibility of finding another place to practice and damn little chance to learn another trade. I tried to talk these guys—every one of them—out of this deal, but they were strapped too. They all took it, even the one that suspected it wouldn't work."

"What happens to you if I blow the whistle?" I said. "The power boys come after you?"

"Probably not. They might not even come after you. They're white-collar crooks, they do their work with paper. But you'll have a hell of a time getting the attorney general down into this county."

"Doesn't have to be an AG. Oh, one last thing. Did anyone, anyone at all, support Albertson in this scheme?"

"Well, not many knew about it. Wasn't something you'd brag about. But ole Rodney Barr, he was right supportive of the idea. You'd think it'd be the other way 'round, he only makes real money when the wind gets still or Albertson falls short. You understand it?"

I shook my head and opened the door. "Not yet. Thank you for your insight, Mr. Damme. And your trust."

"You're welcome, Mr. Hammersmith."

I had three messages waiting when I turned my cell phone back on. The first was from Erin. She had seen Tom Brown and wanted to know if it was safe for him to come in. I had no

answer to that. As far as I knew, the Santa Rosa sheriff still had his people looking for Tom.

The second message was from Sheriff Garza. They had identified the man with the dynamite. His name was Bransky, and he'd been hanging around Santa Rosa for a month or so, picking up part-time work as he could, mostly out at the wind ranch. The sheriff wanted me to come by the hospital and perform a formal ID to tie Bransky to the truck with the crew cab and the dynamite. The third message said forget the second message. Bransky was dead. Somebody had strangled him in his hospital bed.

I drove around the center of town until I found the sheriff's office, parked, and went in.

"Thanks for coming in, Mr. Hammersmith, but I told them to leave a message saying it was no longer necessary."

"Well, Sheriff, since I'm here anyway, want me to do a post-mortem verification?"

"Won't hurt. Drop by and ID him, leave us a statement putting him in the pickup with the dynamite, confirm you don't know him, and we'll file it until we get the person who killed him."

"Sure, glad to. How'd they get him, by the way? Thought he was under guard."

"Well, nature called, so the deputy handcuffed Bransky to the bed and went down the hall for four minutes. Four minutes, you believe it?"

I shrugged. "Some guys are faster than others."

Back outside, I punched in Erin's number. She answered promptly.

"Good, I was afraid you were in a class," I said.

"All my students are on a holiday—no school during Thanksgiving week."

"Thanksgiving? Already?"

"Well I'm glad to see there are some things you don't notice. Can Tom go home now?"

I told her about Bransky, then went back to Tom's situation. "Ask him to spend one more day hiding out. Twenty-four hours. I'm hoping this thing can be done by then, and if not, well, we'll have to send him to Baja California to count birds, I guess. Also might ask him how he got oil on his jeans."

"What about dinner tonight?"

"I suspect it will be pretty late by the time I get through running around the wind ranch."

"Perfectly all right, tomorrow's a holiday. Let me know what time?"

The phone rang before I could get it back in my pocket. It was Professor Lew at the University of New Mexico.

"Hey, Vlad. Got your message. You can send the bat bodies along, and I'll run a test, but something we just found here says it's going to be heart failure."

“Heart failure? Why would they fly through things that scare them to death?”

“More like the heart explodes from the abrupt change in air pressure as they get too close to the fast end of the rotors. Got some fast ones up there?”

“You could say that. Anything that can be done?”

“Working on it. Some tests indicate a frequency—ah, I’ll look it up—no, I’ll send you a few hundred of these little whistles we had built on that freq. Just glue one to a rotor on each turbine and it’ll generate a whistle they don’t like. Works in a lab. We’ll call it a field test. Can you keep records on any changes?”

“Oh boy, can she ever.” I gave him the address for the Lamancha Wind Ranch and he said he’d ship the whistles along. Then I called Albertson and got an appointment for as soon as I could get there.

I went through the contract setup for site leasing step by step for Albertson, holding up a quieting hand when he tried to dispute a point or interrupt. I even drew a flow chart on his conference room whiteboard to show the movement of money among all the participants, jotting down percentages here and there. Albertson finally gave up trying to argue and sat watching, growing paler and more haunted looking with every new aspect of the scheme I added.

I finished and stood watching Albertson.

He looked some more at the chart showing the money

generation and flow that now covered the entire board. “How did you get all this so ... so quick?”

“Looked in the right places. Think how much faster the right agencies could unravel it if they just had a starting point, or a valid complaint.”

Albertson shook his head. “No one is going to complain. They’re all satisfied with what they’re getting. Not much, I know, but even water out of a hoofprint looks good to a man dying of thirst. Anyway, soon’s I had things set right for the company, I was going to renegotiate the contracts. Make it right for them.”

“Tom Brown will complain. All you need is one rock to start a landslide.”

“Tom Brown is running away from blowing down six million-dollar turbine towers.”

“He didn’t do it. Tom is out there just monkey-wrenching around—draining oil out of transformers, messing up locks, tripping breakers—trying to remind you that some people are aware they’re being cheated. But he’s like a kid playing Halloween tricks on the edge of a combat zone. He now knows somebody else is after the towers and he’s just nervous enough to make a complaint, tell what he knows, take the hit for some minor stuff, and get clear.”

“Who’s after the towers then?”

“Whoever killed Bransky, and I’m working on it, but one thing at a time. Let’s finish this problem first.”

"I need the money for a while longer. I need to set up a link to the high-voltage transmission line up north to assure we'll have a market for wind generated power. It has to be done."

"Then get a loan for it. Your credit is good unless all this goes into court. You need to get this straightened out before it comes down around your ears. And believe me, it will, with or without a formal complaint."

"All right, I'll start moving things to get the subsidiaries out of the picture and write new contracts. Give me a month?"

"With all that's going on right now, I doubt you'll get nearly that much time without someone coming to look closer at the operation, but it's your call. There is one thing I need today."

Albertson's head came up and he glared at me. "How much?"

"Not money. I'd like you to call Rodney and tell him that you're shutting down all of the eight-megawatt towers for security upgrades. You're doing it starting now, so he should be ready if he needs to come on line.

"But my towers are working fine, and there's not enough power margin to take them all out of service."

I continued, "Take just the first eight or nine of the big towers off the grid now, and shut them down. You can put them back up later tonight. Okay? I just want you to tell him you taking them all down. He needs to believe that."

"Why?"

"I want to see what he does with the opportunity."

"Suppose he does nothing?"

"Then I'm back to looking at others, including you. Oh, I need something else—would you call the maintenance shop and tell them I'll be by to pick up a couple of tools."

At the maintenance shop, I explained what was needed and the man there pulled it off the shelf and even carried it out to the pickup for me. I said I'd bring it back the next day and headed into town, this time to the sheriff's office.

The sheriff's office was crowded. They had asked everyone at the hospital who was coming on shift or going off at about the time of the murder to show up and talk to a sketch artist. It looked as though everyone had come, doctors, staff, and patients. And each had a different slant on the strangers they had seen.

The sheriff shook his head. "Everyone agrees that there were only four strangers—unknown persons—at the hospital this morning, but we've got sketches of fifteen completely different people."

I nodded. "Eyewitnesses. How many did you interview?"

"Fifteen," he said.

I looked at my watch and headed for the pickup. At the Lamancha Wind Ranch I drove past the so-called entry gate, waved at the security man on duty there, and drove to where the tall towers began. I parked along the path and began to walk to

each of the nine towers whose rotors were not turning. At each I scanned the dust and scrub grass around the tower base, checked the lock pad, and went to the next.

The lock pad on the fifth tower I visited was broken off, smashed free of its bolts. I could see that the internal power wires had been cut, which meant that the solenoid had de-energized and unlocked the tower. Quietly, I opened the door and stepped into the base of the tower. It was roomy, at least ten feet across, and the steel grab bars rising up the inside of its wall were encircled with a strap-metal frame to keep a climber from slipping free. I estimated it was a six-hundred foot rise. I could hear voices bouncing down from the nacelle above in a conversational tone, but couldn't make out the words. From the smashing and pounding mixed with the voices, I assumed they were practicing sabotage. I stepped out of the tower and softly closed the door again.

I drove the pickup back to the tower, found the borrowed tool, and fired it up. When I finished, I wrote the tower number down on an index card and stuck it in my pocket.

I put the pickup behind another tower, almost a quarter mile away, took a tire iron from the bed, and walked back to the tower under deconstruction and began to beat on its side. As soon as I saw movement in the nacelle above me, I stopped hammering on the tower and trotted to the edge of a shallow ravine nearby.

"Ahoy there!" I shouted. The banging sounds from the

nacelle stopped and a long silence followed. I yelled again and waited.

“Yeah, who is it? What you want?”

“Lamancha security force,” I yelled. “Who are you? Nobody’s scheduled to work tonight.”

After a long silence, one answered, “Emergency repair crew.” I could hear one, maybe two men coming down the inside ladder, which was a good choice as there was no outside ladder.

“Bullshit,” I shouted. “No one is logged in and the keypad’s broke on that tower. You do that?” I could see the door handle moving slowly as someone tried to pop the door open. The door didn’t budge. I began to hear someone kicking softly at the door, then harder. It didn’t budge. Finally there was a shot and an alarmed shout. Frustrated, I thought.

“Watch out for those ricochets,” I shouted. “They’re tricky inside round places.” There was silence from the tower.

The sun was almost totally down, and shadows ruled the wind plain as I dropped into the ravine and waited. It wasn’t a long wait, so the two in the bottom must have been very fast in getting back to the open window in the nacelle.

They all opened up together, shooting at the last sound of my voice, at shadows, at the flicker created by blades sweeping through the lights lit throughout the wind ranch to scare off night birds and bats, at anything. I sat with my back against the ravine wall and listened to the slugs hitting dirt and

rock.

Five minutes after the shooting stopped, it occurred to one of them that they were still trapped. “Hey! You!” I waited quietly. After another five minutes or so all three were yelling.

“Bransky up there?” I yelled.

“Why you want Bransky? He ain’t here.”

“I was just on the phone with the local law and he’s wanted for attempted murder. How do I know he isn’t up there?”

They had a short conference. “We’ll give you our names and then you can let us out.”

“Like I’d believe someone who shot at me. Throw down your wallets and I’ll check your ID.”

They had another, longer, conference. “Open the door and we’ll show you our ID.”

“Okay, that’s it. I’m calling the SWAT team, they can deal with you. Now I’m hearing you guys may be murder suspects too. Bransky’s dead.”

I heard three wallet-sized thumps on the ground, and three voices. “We didn’t kill Bransky. He was one of us.”

“But we know who did—”

“Deal! I’ll do a deal ...”

I took the wallets and walked away. Back at the pickup I called Sheriff Garza. “Victor Morales, Juan Perez, and Ivan Semilov. That’s the rest of the sabotage crew involved with

bombing towers and whatever else. They're in fear of being charged right now, so they'll give up the murderer, if you can sort out their stories."

"You have these men? I have to remind you, much as I hate to, that you have no arrest powers in this county. Where are you, we'll send a team right now."

"I don't have them, but I know where they are, and they're not going anywhere, so you can take your time. May I suggest that you check in on Rodney and see if he knows them?"

"Funny thing, that had occurred to me too. Just about to go over there—you gonna drop by later?"

"Probably."

I saw the light in Albertson's office as I went through the gate, so I turned around and went in.

"You can start the eight-megawatt beasts back up and put them to work," I told him. "Except for, uh, eight dash lima whiskey hotel zero zero nine. Got it?"

"Did you get him, then?"

"I have every reason to believe that Sheriff Garza will have him, and his helpers, in custody before midnight."

"I, uh, have been thinking about those contracts we were talking about."

"Yes?"

"Well, I don't see why, uh, we should wait to get that set right. Can you reach Tom Brown?"

"I know someone who can."

"Well, if you can get him, I'd like to review his contract. Even tomorrow would be all right, even if it is Thanksgiving. In fact, you tell him he's invited to eat with me and my family. I know he's got no family left in the area. We'd like for him to come. Can you tell him that?"

"I'll do that. Congratulations on your choice."

"Yeah, well, I did have some encouragement."

Back on the way to Santa Rosa, I called Erin and got no answer, so I left all the information for Tom with her answering service. In a half hour or so I pulled over and parked in a visitor's slot at the sheriff's office.

The sheriff's receptionist insisted that I take a seat and a cup of coffee instead of wandering off looking for the sheriff, so I sat in a vinyl chair, flipped through Southwest Lawman, and tried to spill the coffee into the plastic potted plant slow enough so it wouldn't leak through before I left. In an hour and the last of the lawmen magazines, Sheriff Garza came in, a tight little smile on his face.

"Got him, did you?" I said.

"Yep. Oh, Vlad, why didn't you come on back and watch the lineup?"

I looked at the receptionist, who ignored me, as she had for the past hour.

The sheriff followed my gaze, grunted, and said, "Come on

in,” and we went into his private office.

“We picked him up at that peaker power plant he runs. He was so surprised to see all of us that he almost gave it up right there. Then when we told him about the three men you have, he started telling the arresting officer he didn’t intend to do it. He was just protecting his investment. We flat ran out of tape getting it all down again and again. And you know, the guy does walk like a sandpiper.”

“Good work, Sheriff. Foresee any problems making it stick?”

“Nope, just gotta pick up and interrogate the last three guys he hired to do the dirty work. Where are they, by the way?”

“Damn, I forgot. Look, well, the thing is, uh, hmmm.”

“What? You know where they are?”

“Yeah, meant to tell you earlier. They’re out at the wind ranch, in tower number, uh, here, this one.” I handed over the crumpled index card. “It should be the only fan not turning.”

The sheriff jumped to his feet and grabbed his hat.

“Ah, Sheriff, unless they’ve got six hundred feet of rope in their pocket, they’re not going anywhere. I welded the door shut. And they’ve all got guns, but I think they’re out of ammunition.” Then I dumped their wallets on his desk. “ID,” I said.

The sheriff dropped back into his chair. “Well, if you ain’t the damndest thing ever walked in here. Let me get you a television interview when they get here—”

“Sheriff, I pay people to keep me off those things. No, thanks.”

“Let me do something for you—what you need?”

I stood, “Not a thing, Sheriff, not a thing. Maybe someday, if I get a speeding ticket around here ...”

“Well, you jus’ call. Anytime.” He stuck out his hand and we shook.

The phone rang just as I was getting back in the truck.

“Hi, Erin here. I conveyed your information to Tom and he’s going home to get ready for Thanksgiving. Now, what have you been doing—tilting more windmills?”

“Please. It’s tilting at windmills, and I won. Tell you about it tomorrow?”

“Can you eat a midnight supper? Because I’ve got the use of your bed and breakfast’s kitchen, and that’s where I’m calling from.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Make it fifteen; I have to open the wine.”

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ARCHIE'S ESCAPE

WILLIAM F. SMITH

"I'm sorry, Mr. Valsivio, I just don't have the money right now." Archie Vernon's pale blue eyes were wide with apprehension as he waited for the man on the other side of the counter to react to his statement.

In the old days, Rod Valsivio, hearing such a remark, simply would have reached over, dragged Vernon from behind the counter, and beat the hell out of him. But nowadays the organization was different, more polite, more refined. Why I'm almost a damn executive, he thought. I even have to wear a suit and tie! He looked at the fearful grocer, suppressed a desire to curse, and said nothing until he had finished the second of two chocolate-filled cupcakes he had helped himself to from a nearby rack and washed it down with the dregs of the pint of milk he had appropriated from the store's refrigerated case. He carefully inserted the crumpled wrappings into the waxed carton, which he tossed to the grocer for disposal in the wastebasket behind the counter.

Despite their superficial similarities—forty-something men of average height and ordinary looks, starting to get a little thick around the middle—the differences between them were obvious from their demeanor. Vernon, in his white grocer's

apron, had a deferential attitude that made him appear meek and obsequious. Valsivio, on the other hand, wearing an expensive handmade suit, a matching hat with the front brim turned down, and a huge diamond on his ring finger, moved and spoke with the domineering authority of a man who gave orders and got what he wanted, but also a man who could execute the commands of his superiors without a qualm.

“You know company policy, Archie. The premium is due and payable every Tuesday. There’s no grace period. If I have to remove the Big M logo from your window, you won’t have our organization’s protection. You know what that can mean.”

Vernon shrank back visibly but kept his eyes on Valsivio’s. “I’ll have it today, honest, Mr. Valsivio. I just forgot it was Tuesday, and I don’t have that much money in the register. I’ve had some personal problems, you know, and I’ve got to run the store by myself now. I’ll need a little time to get the cash from the bank. Can’t you come back after you’ve made your other collections? I’ll have it for sure then.”

Valsivio ran his well-manicured fingernails across his clean-shaven jaw. “Out of the question. I wouldn’t be able to get back here until after six, and I’d have to drive miles out of my way. You know I’m always here at nine. You should have had the money ready.”

“I know, I know. But my wife’s been sick, and I’m worried frantic about her. I just forgot. Please,” Vernon begged, his eyes beginning to show moisture. “I don’t want my policy to lapse. I

can't afford it. Just this once, Mr. Valsivio, please. I won't forget again. You know I've made payments regularly for nearly nine months. Please, just this one time." He began to cry.

Valsivio looked at him with disgust, glad there was no one else in the store. He was aware of Vernon's problems. Big M made it a point to keep current information about their clients. Vernon's business had dropped off drastically since his wife had been hospitalized several months ago. And the recent opening of a big chain market a few blocks away had made the little mom-and-pop grocery less appealing to the customers. The supermarket was open twenty-four hours a day, had lower prices and plenty of free parking. Vernon wouldn't be able to compete. He'd probably be bankrupt before the year was out, but the company would go on collecting until he folded. Valsivio figured Vernon would have to borrow the money to make today's payment, but he couldn't care less, as long as he collected and kept his accounts in order.

"All right, all right," Valsivio acceded. "But it'll cost you an extra fifty vigorish. I'll be back at six fifteen sharp. Have the money ready."

"Thank you, thank you," Vernon blubbered, wiping his eyes with a corner of his apron. "I'll have it for you."

Archie Vernon watched Valsivio leave, breathed a huge sigh, then smiled. The biggest hurdle in The Plan had been cleared. The rest should be a piece of cake. He put the CLOSED sign in the window, locked the door, and went into the

small storage room where he had been living since selling his house to pay Laura's astronomical medical expenses.

He lay down on his cot and closed his eyes. In the darkness of his mind, the problems of the past nine months moved in and out of focus in kaleidoscopic confusion. He tried to put them in their proper sequence. First, the sudden rash of robberies and acts of vandalism. Next, the appearance of Mr. Rod Valsivio and friends, who had "become aware" of his difficulties, which they were certain their company, Big M, could alleviate. For four hundred dollars a week, they would guarantee to cut his losses nearly one hundred percent. Vernon's business at that time was fairly profitable, and even though four hundred a week was a huge sum to him, it was nowhere near the amount he had been losing to the local thugs. So he had agreed. After the PROTECTED BY BIG M sign had been placed in the store window, the robberies and vandalism came miraculously to a virtual standstill. Valsivio had explained that anyone who saw the sign knew he had better take it seriously. The organization dealt harshly with those who were imprudent enough to disregard the clear message of the logo.

Laura had not liked the arrangement. She wanted to sell the store and move north. Archie argued that the business could not be sold in the economy of the day and that to get any benefit from it, they would have to continue to run the store themselves. Laura was almost ready to file for divorce when she became so ill she had to be rushed to the hospital for emergency surgery and weeks of intensive care. The costs were beyond belief.

Vernon had no medical insurance, and now the funds from the sale of the house were almost exhausted. He was going to have to come up with a great deal more money to pay his wife's expenses. The doctors informed him Laura would need around-the-clock hospital care for at least six months, then she could be looked after in a convalescent center or at home. But Vernon no longer had a home. His married daughter lived two thousand miles away with a family of her own. The only solution was to acquire enough money somehow, so that Laura's future care would be assured.

For a moment he had thought of killing himself, so the life insurance money would be available. But in spite of his problems, Archie Vernon had no desire to die. There seemed to be no way to come up with the kind of money he needed. He couldn't sell the building which housed his store because he didn't own it. He was already three months behind in the rent, and many of his other creditors were reminding him of how much he owed them. It was at his moment of greatest despair when The Plan suddenly formed in his mind. It was incredibly simple. He had been paying Big M for nine months; now Big M was going to be the means of his salvation.

Three weeks ago, after Valsivio's weekly visit, Vernon had closed the store and followed the collector on his rounds. In addition to protection premiums from nearly a hundred stores, Valsivio also collected his organization's bookmaking income from bars, newsstands, and barbershops, which Vernon was sure were fronts for off-track betting. He figured that when

Valsivio finished his rounds, the satchel he carried probably contained well over a hundred thousand dollars. Maybe even two hundred.

The fact that he would have to kill Rod Valsivio to carry out his plan didn't bother Archie Vernon in the least. To him, Valsivio was not a real person, but an inhuman machine. He knew how the mobster had acquired the nickname Rod. It wasn't because his first name was Rodney, but because he made frequent, efficient use of his gun on many occasions when he deemed it necessary to enforce company policy.

At six fifteen precisely there was a banging on the front door. "Hey, Archie, open up! It's me."

Valsivio was not in an ideal "executive" mood when Vernon admitted him. "What the hell's the idea of closing up? I told you I'd be here right after six."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Valsivio. There weren't any customers and I desperately needed a nap." He quietly locked the door behind him. Valsivio was so steamed, he didn't notice.

"You damn well better have the cash."

Vernon now had more self-assurance than he had displayed in the morning. He held out an envelope to Valsivio, who opened it and extracted the money. "There's eight fifty here," he said, raising his eyebrows.

"I know," Vernon explained. "I want to pay for next week in advance. My wife's having another operation and I'll be closing the store Tuesday. I thought it would save you a trip. It's all right,

isn't it?"

The cash had an immediate, soothing effect on the collector. "It's unusual, but the company can accommodate you." He put the money in the bulging satchel and made a notation in the small notebook he carried. "God, what a day! Never saw worse smog or traffic."

This was just the opening the grocer had been hoping for. "Now, how about some cupcakes and milk? Ease your tension."

"Good idea, Archie," Valsivio agreed, accepting the package offered him. "I can't resist these little devils. Hand me a milk, will you?"

Couldn't be better, Vernon thought. If Valsivio had not accepted the refreshments, Vernon would have had to switch to his alternate plan, which required violence and therefore a degree of uncertainty. He was sure the mobster was accustomed to coping with violence, but that he would never suspect the milk contained enough chloral hydrate to fell an ox.

The drug worked effectively. Valsivio collapsed to the floor before the second cupcake was half eaten. There was no turning back now, so Archie Vernon worked fast. He verified the contents of the bag, using his adding machine to total the sums entered in the little notebook—\$198,640. Close enough to two hundred grand to satisfy Vernon.

He half carried, half dragged Valsivio into the back room and dumped him onto the cot. He removed Valsivio's watch and ring, replacing them with his own. After exchanging clothing with

the mobster, Vernon was pleased to find the dark gray pinstripe a nearly perfect fit. He took a can of lighter fluid from the store and emptied the contents over the body, the bed and the wooden floor. His plan was that Valsivio would be burned beyond recognition and the body would be identified as Archie Vernon, who had been stupid enough to smoke in bed.

He smiled as he thought of several bonuses his plan would reap. The contents of the store were insured for two hundred thousand, his life insurance was fifty thousand, and Valsivio's diamond ring should be worth about twenty grand. It worked out just about even. A little over two hundred thousand for Laura's expenses and about the same for Vernon's new life. By using the name of a friend who had died years ago, he had already secured a birth certificate, which he would use to obtain a driver's license and other necessary documents. He was happy Laura would be cared for. In any event, he could do no more for her. When things were going smoothly in a year or so, he might return to see her, but he really had no hope she would be able to recognize him again.

Placing an unlit, half-smoked cigarette in Valsivio's right hand, Vernon dropped a crumpled pack on the floor. The fire investigators would probably find no traces of them, but it paid to take everything into account.

The expensive clothes he was wearing gave Vernon a new confidence. He put on the hat, which must have cost more than his own best suit, pulled down the brim the way Valsivio wore it, and glanced in the small mirror affixed to the storeroom door.

Very good. Clothes do make the man, he thought. When I leave here, no one will recognize me. He lit a cigarette and inserted the unlit end into a book of matches. In about eight or ten minutes, he figured, the cigarette would burn down sufficiently to ignite the matches, which would set fire to the lighter fluid –soaked cot, turning the storeroom into an inferno, cremating Valsivio. He picked up the empty can, grabbed the bag of money, and left the store, locking the door behind him.

Vernon moved directly to Valsivio's dark blue Cadillac Escalade, parked so that it took up three of the lot's five parking spaces, unlocked the door, and slid behind the wheel. He took a minute or two to acquaint himself with the unfamiliar instrument panel before starting the car and driving off. Eight blocks from the store he stopped, got out, and put the lighter fluid can into a city trash container. He drove to Century Boulevard, heading to Los Angeles International Airport by way of Inglewood.

While still a few blocks from the airport, Vernon glanced up into the darkening sky where he could see the lights of the big jets which were landing every couple of minutes. He patted the satchel beside him and smiled. Complete success. He thought of the small northern California town where he would begin his new life.

A traffic light turned red at an intersection near Hollywood Park Racetrack. Driving cautiously, Vernon came to a smooth stop. An Escalade identical to the one he was driving pulled up on his left. The right front window was rolled most of the way

down, and a young man seated next to the driver was glaring at him.

“Good-bye, Valsivio,” he shouted above the traffic noises.
“No one skips with company funds.”

Archie Vernon’s eyes widened with sudden understanding as a gun barrel appeared over the edge of the glass and he saw a whitish-orange burst of flame before everything became black and silent.

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THE LITTLE ONES HAVE MORE FLAVOR

DAN CRAWFORD

“Apples, apples!”

“Come away. I think she’s selling apples.”

“Apples!” Polijn sang each iteration of the word with a slightly different tone, in hopes that they might ask for a song later on. If she was interesting enough, the cries could also conceal the fact that the old tree just beyond the square was loaded with apples just like these ... since that was where she’d picked them.

“Apples?” The rather fierce and buxom blonde who carried a tray of big, red apples and was overly curious about who had given Polijn permission to sell apples here was pushing past a knot of men discussing the dry spell. Polijn put the apple in her hip pouch, put one hand over that and another over the shoulder strap, and moved along through the crowd herself.

Two tumblers were balancing near and almost toppling onto the kegs on the beer wagon, to mild screeches from the barmaid presiding over the stand. The lack of real outrage in those shrieks suggested the tumblers had been asked to endanger the wares so more people would notice them. A few feet away a bearded man sat on a stump and offered to paint dragon wings on face, arms, or whatever you offered to his brushes.

Guards stood near the door of the old Dragon Slayers Hall, but so did a cider wagon. The hall was a bright but grim old building, in spite of or because of its recent renovation. The heavy doorway was original, but the brassbound wooden door was new. Crude bronze dragons snarled to the left and right of the entrance. These were old, but the toothy gilded dragon head above the door was new. The silver-pink gazebo four yards from the doorway was completely the inspiration of Lord Thoringhold, whose money had paid for the restoration and the grand opening festival as well. A frothy shell, it was high and delicate and expensive, and was said to have been inspired by Lady Thoringhold's hairdo. A small band sat waiting for its cue to play dramatic music when Lord Thoringhold officially opened the Dragon Hall door for the first time.

"Nothing like an apple with that sausage sandwich." Carasta was right there, of course. The one-eyed minstrel Polijn had taken up with when banished from her homeland was busy drumming up business. That kind of drumming was more his trade than singing, and to be precise, he had insisted she join him, seeing a chance to enhance his own performances and profits. A jolly, cheerful chatterbox, he pushed through the crowd, dapper in the bright green cape he'd bought from apple sales in three previous towns.

Polijn would as soon have drawn their attention with a song; the apples were his idea. "Then if they don't want to hear a tune, we'll still make a few pennies." The "we" was a little fantasy of his own as well. He believed in perfect division of

labor: Polijn risked life and limb in rickety old apple trees, Polijn sold the apples, and Carasta dealt with collections and expenditures.

No one rushed to her to buy an apple, and Polijn eased farther from the minstrel, into the crowds of children who surrounded vendors selling dragon puppets, and dragon hats, and little jackets for dressing ducks up as dragons. The children laughed and applauded the puppets, and dared each other to approach "the dragon."

"Keep clear, miss! Keep clear." Polijn nodded, and willingly moved on.

A small dragonlike creature not a tenth the size of the real thing crouched on a stone step in the terraced green. It was the closest thing to a dragon seen in these parts since the glory days of the Dragon Hall, a firesprite. Rare enough in itself, it was the size of a pony, and was suffered to survive because, in spite of its name, it was a flameless vegetarian. If it couldn't breathe fire, Polijn wonder why it should be called a firesprite. Still, after all, Carasta called himself a singer.

People studied it from a distance, obviously admiring the bravery of the two men who guarded the ropes that held it down. It was not taking much interest in them. Yellow translucent wings drooped behind it, and faceted yellow eyes blinked without much expression. It seemed so obviously resigned to sitting there that Polijn felt a certain sympathy. Reaching into her pouch, she waved a small pink apple for a moment until the

eyes turned toward it, then she tossed it into the air. The crowd applauded as the firesprite, stretching its neck just a bit, caught it in the air. Gratified by the fruit or by the applause, its eyes glittered red for a moment.

Carasta, suddenly at the elbow of one of the keepers, called "Dragon apples! Only a penny! Daryk'an himself might have served them!" One of the keepers sniffed, but a few people wandered over to Polijn, pennies in hand.

They had come to enjoy themselves and spend money in honor of the reawakening of ancient grandeur. The old Dragon Hall of Daryk'an had turned up in the new mine workings of Lord Thoringhold, and he had at once seen the value of restoring it (since obviously there wouldn't be anything to mine under the old stronghold.) The age of the dragon slayers was gone, but the memory lingered in old stories. Thoringhold had spared no expense to make the hall worthy of the stories. His personal bodyguard was here, dressed in what was probably Lady Thoringhold's concept of dragon slayer armor: brocade-covered mail, with silver dragons at the shoulders and hips. The men were big enough to pass for dragon slayers, though they had no genuine dragon credentials, and their stern eyes were an echo of the mighty dragon slayers as well as a dare to any of their neighbors to laugh at their outfits.

Polijn hoped mere apple sellers would get a chance to go in and look around where once the dragon slayers gathered. Much of the decoration inside was said to be fifteen hundred years old, and in good condition. Local rumor claimed

Thoringhold had found valuable secret manuscripts and treasure maps within, in addition to a hundred battered beer steins.

“Apples!” It was Carasta’s voice again; he was pointing her out to the firesprite keepers. One of them pointed at the blonde with the tray. “Ah, the little ones have more flavor.”

Polijn drew a long breath, hoping he was still selling apples. Sometimes he sold apples, and sometimes just tokens, to be redeemed later. That fellow who had just given her six pennies for six apples didn’t look like he baked many pies. Her eyes scanned the field for a good hiding place, if worse came to worst. Maybe there was a dark corner in the Dragon Hall? She shook her head. Thoringhold looked like a man who wouldn’t skimp on torches to show off every inch of his new plaything.

Someone shrieked. A mighty shadow passed across Polijn’s spot in the crowd. Two men jumped into the air, but the firesprite had been too quick.

“The rope broke!” shouted Carasta. “Look! The rope broke!”

Polijn wouldn’t have looked, but he said it twice more. Anyone could see that rope wasn’t broken. Carasta was always a master of badly planned misdirection.

Shrieks gave way to laughter and more applause as the firesprite executed a sort of somersault in the air and shot off to the east. It was, after all, not dangerous. The ascent had been

startling, but it was amazing to watch, and quite appropriate to the day. The band struck up a skirling song suggestive of dragon flight. Polijn tipped her head to listen, wondering if it could be duplicated on a flute.

She found a hand wrapped in her hair. "Listen!" said Carasta, meaning himself and not the tune. "Let's go see where it went. There'll be a reward if we can bring it back."

Polijn nodded, letting her eyes slide to the rope burn in his palms before turning to the east. He could be correct, for a novelty, about the reward. Or she could just put a mile or so between herself and the men with apples.

The road from the Dragon Hall led into rocky hills; this was, after all, Thoringhold mining territory. After only a few minutes, Polijn was ready for the next part of the conversation, and twisted to keep her hair out of reach when Carasta's hand came out.

He nodded. "Listen," he said again, "no sense both of us hunting in the same direction. It probably went downhill ... with the prevailing winds. You keep checking this way, just in case, and I'll check downwind. At midday, if nothing else happens, we'll meet up back by the Dragon Hall. At the beer wagon."

"Apples," said Polijn, without a trace of bitterness in her tone. He nodded again, and set off by the straightest route toward the beer wagon.

Well, it was a nice day for a walk, and it would be easier to see the Dragon Hall later in the day, when the crowd thinned

out, or at least joined the minstrel at the beer wagon. Polijn moved off the road and uphill, toward a grove of trees. She came across a brook, and followed that into the shade.

It was not until she had sat down under one of the trees that she bothered to look up among the branches. She was not the least bit surprised, however, to see a long, reptilian form stretched along a branch, foreclaws under its head, a rope dangling from its neck. The firesprite, having sat out in the sun most of the morning, had also hunted up a cool spot.

Polijn wrapped her arms around her legs, and set her chin on her knees, considering the rope. It was well within reach. Then what? Suppose the firesprite decided it had seen enough of the Dragon Hall of Daryk'an. Who'd pick the apples if both she and Carasta wound up with rope-burnt hands?

She hadn't come far, of course. It would be easy enough run back to the festival to fetch Carasta. She shrugged and stretched her legs on the grass. A lot of work just to break up the party even more, taking more attention from Lord Thoringhold. How much would he reward them for that, especially if he, too, had spotted Carasta's rope burn in the first place? And, anyhow, the firesprite hadn't seemed to be enjoying its command performance much. Let it sleep.

Who needed a reward anyhow, especially one Carasta wasn't likely to share, as long as she had provisions? She reached down to the pouch and took out an apple.

At the second bite, she looked into the trees to find the

firesprite gone. Something soft nudged her elbow.

Multi-faceted eyes looked into her own, and then went to the apple. "Ah," said Polijn.

She reached into her pouch for another, and held it out in her free hand. The firesprite took it between long teeth, tossed it into the air, and caught it with a crunch.

The thing must move very quietly, Polijn thought, unless she had for the first time in her life fallen asleep while biting into an apple. To be sure, she had heard no flap of wings when it took off at the festival, but the crowd had been squealing and shrieking. She held out another apple from the pouch.

While it crunched that one away, she rose, and took three steps toward the road. The firesprite, which had crouched to bring its head to her level, came up too. The big, hungry eyes went to the pouch.

"Fool thing," she said, taking out more fruit. "Are you going to follow me to be tied up again, just for apples?" The firesprite took one apple in its teeth, balanced a second on its nose and, with a flip, tossed both into the air and crunched them.

This was all very well, but if Carasta saw things like this, he'd get ideas about a traveling firesprite show. He wouldn't hesitate to steal the animal from Lord Thoringhold again, without the slightest thought for how hard it might be to smuggle a stolen minidragon out of the territory.

She checked her pouch. Anyway, what happened when she ran out of apples? There were plenty right now, but how many

apples per mile did a firesprite consume? She set four of the apples on the ground and, when the firesprite's head was down, grabbed for a branch. She'd show this apple moocher who could be fast and silent. If it found her in the trees, she'd just have to abandon the whole pouch and sprint for the Dragon Hall while it ate. Carasta would expect her to buy a new pouch, of course.

She had one leg over the branch when she discovered why it had been hanging so handy to her grasp. The branch fell to the right and she swung left. "Ai!" she said, landing astride a long, rocky outcropping.

Huge red-tinged eyes came around at her, green eyeridges lifted a bit. These weren't rocks. They were part of a backbone.

"My mistake," she told it. "I'll just—"

Her hair was streaming behind her in the sudden wind. Polijn very carefully eased one hand to feel her neck and make sure her head wasn't in danger of flying back there as well.

The trees swirled beneath her as they rose in spirals toward the clouds. So, she thought, in spite of herself, she'd caught the firesprite. Of course, catching it was one thing; steering it, another. She bounced forward, sliding along the spine, as the end of the rope caught in one of the taller trees. The firesprite shook loose and went on, though not quite shaking its rider loose at the same time. Polijn set her head down at the base of the firesprite's skull until all her internal

organs settled back where they were meant to be.

The head swung round and the big eyes sparkled at her again. The firesprite's mouth hung open, a barbed tongue flapping. It looked for all the world like a dog enjoying a run.

"Good boy," she said. "Down!"

It shot straight up, the head forward again to make the long neck as arrowlike as possible. Now what? Could she hang on until it got tired and came back to the trees? And would it be these trees or some trees a hundred miles from Lord Thoringhold and his archaeological treasures? There must be some way to let the firesprite know that, as much as she was enjoying the ride, she'd like to get off just long enough to throw up.

She tapped on the back of the big head, but got no response. The firesprite rolled to the left, and she dug her fingers into its skin. Life or death to her, but the firesprite didn't seem to feel it. The animal straightened out at the tops of the trees and skimmed along them.

There were some hard apples in the pouch. Polijn reached back, selected a solid one, and threw it right between the creature's ears. It ducked at the same moment, though. The apple shot beyond it.

The firesprite lunged and caught the apple in midair. Polijn, utterly without appetite now, reached back for another apple. She hurled it as far as she could to the left of the big head.

Tossing apples to the left sent the creature soaring left. She

swallowed. That was steering mastered. Now, how did one go about landing?

“Whoa! Whoa! Down here!”

Carasta was running along the road below, waving his hands. He was closer than Polijn had expected, and it was thus no difficulty to send an apple square between his eyes. He toppled over backward.

Polijn slid forward on the bony ridge again, and this time, since both her hands were on the pouch, flipped up over the firesprite's ears and found herself seated in the dust of the road. Carasta, tumbled by the apple, had still had enough presence of mind to get his hands on the rope as it swept past him and the firesprite, concentrating on the apple, had come to a halt at just the right time ... for Carasta, at least.

Polijn rose, rubbing one hip.

“Excellent! Excellent! We’ve done it!” her partner crowed. “Um, how did we do it?”

“Apples,” said Polijn, taking one out and tossing it to the firesprite.

Carasta's eye widened as the creature gulped it down. “Ah! Got it! You threw the apples and it followed, huh? Lemme try?” His free hand yanked the shoulder strap of the apple pouch.

He threw himself astride the long neck and hurled an apple into the air. The firesprite followed. Carasta laughed. This was

nothing new to an experienced horse thief.

“Meet me back at the Dragon Hall!” he shouted. “The reward will be huge after a dramatic entrance!”

They were not far from the festival now. In fact, some of the spectators had come to see what the firesprite was doing. Polijn trotted along under the shadow of the beast, wondering if the reward would be big enough to rent a pillow for her to sit on come dinnertime.

The crowd roared and applauded. Lord and Lady Thoringhold, standing before their orchestra, shouted encouragement as the minstrel passed over them.

“Not all the dragon masters are dead!” Carasta shouted, zooming low above the crowd. “Behold the ... whoa! Whoa there! Hold up!”

Polijn stopped. The firesprite had spotted the old apple tree. Foreclaws went out to take apples and hindclaws went for a grip on the trunk. Polijn, remembering how the tree had creaked under her own weight, closed her eyes.

A creak shut her eyes tighter, but a crack made her open them. One third of the tree did not move. “Oh, fooze!” cried Carasta, sounding less heroic as he rode his steed, and the rest of the apple tree, down onto the dome of Lord Thoringhold’s gazebo.

Shards of quartz and silver sent the crowd scampering for shelter. Polijn ducked behind a barrel, but peered around the side. A green streak full of apples tore into the air and

disappeared among thin clouds.

The crowd, largely unharmed by the expensive but delicately carved shrapnel, regrouped to watch other victims scramble out of the debris: the band members first, then Lady Thoringhold, trying to hold her gown together in all the places it had burst, and then Lord Thoringhold, pulling Carasta behind him.

The wings of the mine owner's helmet flapped in his face. The scales of his expensively tooled dragon armor dripped clattering to the ground. The ancient dragonsword he bought from a dealer in artifacts was now just an ancient handle in a broken ancient scabbard.

But his face was authentically dragon-slayer grim as he shook Carasta's collar. Gusty laughter from the crowd drowned out what the mine owner was saying, but Polijn decided she'd best abandon the barrel and take to the road.

The firesprite was correct. It was time to fly.

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