


ALFRED MYSTERY MAGAZINE HITCHCOCK®

MARCH 2011

Small Favors

The Case of the
Doorman's Daughter

By STEVE LINDLEY



Plus...
John C. Boland
Blake Crouch
Ann Woodward

\$4.99



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EDITORIAL NOTES

Tuesday, March 1, 2011



EDITOR'S NOTES

The Black Orchid Novella Award goes to . . . Once again we received many fine submissions for the Black Orchid Novella Award, now in its fourth year. This is a competition for novella-length stories...

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FICTION

EDITOR'S NOTES



The Black Orchid Novella Award goes to . . .

Once again we received many fine submissions for the Black Orchid Novella Award, now in its fourth year. This is a competition for novella-length stories in the classic detective mode exemplified by Nero Wolfe. Our partner in this contest is The Wolfe Pack, the organization for enthusiasts of Rex Stout and Nero Wolfe. If you've read and enjoyed Rex Stout, you should consider joining. You may find information about the group and the contest at www.NeroWolfe.org.

This year's winner is Brad Crowther; his novella "Politics Makes Dead Bedfellows" will appear in our July/August issue. Congratulations, Brad! His story is an interesting homage to Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin that we think will please our readers. This will be the author's first appearance

in AHMM, and we're delighted to welcome him to our pages. Mr. Crowther will receive his award at the annual Black Orchid banquet held the first Saturday of December in New York City.

Meanwhile, the fifth round of the Black Orchid contest is now open. Please see the announcement ad elsewhere in this issue for details.

LINDA LANDRIGAN, EDITOR

FICTION

FICTION



MARLEY'S HAVANA

JOHN C. BOLAND

Art by Edward Kinsella III The Englishman stood close to Charles Marley, suit coat cuffs dingy, cola-colored rum drink held away from his chest, hands and face slippery with sweat, half absorbed in...

SMALL FAVORS

STEVE LINDLEY

"You remember my daughter Amber." Kubiak didn't, would have bet even money the two never had discussed her. "My oldest." Torasella shifted his weight, reached into his back pocket, extracted his wallet, opened it, and offered it to Kubiak, who had to lean forward and raise himself a foot off the...



LITTLE BROTHER

ANN WOODWARD

Art by Linda Weatherly It was a time when summer lingered beyond its season, distilled into pleasant warm days of sun and nightly rains. The gardens surrounding the house of the princess were still...

THE PAIN OF OTHERS

BLAKE CROUCH

The bite of conscience, like the bite of a dog into a stone, is a stupidity . . . Can you give yourself your own evil and your own good and hang your own will over yourself as a law? —Friedrich Nietzsche Letty Dobesh, five weeks

out of Fluvanna Correctional Center on a nine-month bit for felony...



ET TU, VALENTINUS

R. T. LAWTON

Art by Kelly Denato Yarnell felt guilty about having the thin guy from the mortuary sleeping in his front closet. As he'd explained to his wife Patricia after she went to get her overcoat the next...

CATCHPHRASE

NEIL SCHOFIELD

Frank put his arms around Donna's throat in a pretend choke hold and said, "Get out of that." Over her head, he grinned at her in the mirror. Donna said, "Do you mind? Very much not? Doing that?" She was trying to apply lipstick and her mouth was distorted so that the words came out all twisted....

Top of FICTION

EDITORIAL NOTES

MYSTERY CLASSIC

MARLEY'S HAVANA

JOHN C. BOLAND



Art by Edward Kinsella III

The Englishman stood close to Charles Marley, suit coat cuffs dingy, cola-colored rum drink held away from his chest, hands and face slippery with sweat, half absorbed in the open-air nightclub's floor show. Nodding to the catwalks that snaked upward behind the palm trees, the man named

Gilbert said, "Did you know they were doing this same routine twenty years ago? With the same costumes, I think. I've been in and out since fifty-eight."

"For the same company?" Marley said.

Gilbert, who was at least fifteen years older than Marley's forty-three, kept his eyes on the show. "Hah, yes, of course. Good old Panama Transport. Niggardly pensions, but I've got to see a bit of the world, haven't I? It isn't as much fun as it used to be, I can tell you."

"Hard on your family?"

"Oh, Winnie got along. Yes." Private laugh. "Made do until she ran off with a vacuum cleaner salesman." That was Tony Gilbert's legend, according to Marley's colleagues at CIA headquarters, sad old born-again bachelor, traipsing in and out of Latin America selling rebuilt automobile parts. He must have been discreet over the years to have lasted so long. Or possibly the Cubans were willing to put up with a little espionage to get gear boxes and ignition coils. Not everything that happened was political, Marley believed.

A spotlight followed a dozen women in flowered headdresses and spangled tank suits who marched up the ramp, hips swaying to a rumba in which the brass section

notes sprayed like static from the ancient loud speakers. The spotlight washed out the stars above the trees.

Between the two men and the dancers were a score of long tables covered in white paper, supporting rum bottles, ice buckets, glasses, and mixers. At the tables, elbows planted or chairs tilted back, wilted from the long tropical day, were twenty-six American businessmen and women, several representing large industrial corporations. About half of them had brought secretaries or spouses along. Already the wife of a tractor company vice president had been photographed patting Fidel's beard. Her smiling face had made newspapers all over the world. Wasn't he a nice man to let her play with his beard? Officially, the business reps were there to meet the heads of Cuban *empresas* to line up relationships in case bilateral trade was ever restored. As the chartered plane taxied across Jose Marti Airport, Marley had snapped a picture of an Air Angola transport on the runway. He needn't have. It was no secret that Cuba was sending troops to Angola to help out Neto's rebels. As long as that went on, nobody at the State Department was going to relent on trade. Maybe ten years from now, but not in this politically chilly March of 1978, when the U.S. president was smarting over domestic problems.

Marley's documents identified him as a senior vice president of a Midwestern tool and die maker. The name on the

passport was Dennis Purdom. It had taken him two days to rendezvous with Gilbert, who had the contact that mattered.

"Your mob used to run this place," Gilbert said. "Same with the hotel you're camped at."

For an instant Marley wondered if by "mob" the Englishman meant CIA. No, he meant mob.

"Your hotel was called the Havana Riviera," said Gilbert, speaking softly. Now it was the Habana Libre. "Meyer Lansky had it built for his chums in Las Vegas."

"Really," said Marley.

"I stopped by off and on in fifty-eight. A first-class place."

"The toilets must have had seats then."

The Englishman laughed without making a sound. "You can't ask a revolution to think of everything." His watery eyes shifted. "I admire these people. I really do. They got bored with the old rotters. Brought in new ones."

"What about our friend?" Marley spoke as if it were a natural transition. Rotters. Russians. Kiril Yanov. If a KGB colonel didn't qualify on Gilbert's terms as a rotter, who would?

Gilbert glanced at him. The music was too loud for eavesdroppers. "Lefty Clark ran this club. Do you like the nude statues in the garden?"

"Yanov."

"He's eager. That's the way you want them, isn't it?"

Marley let his glance drift. Speaking of eager, there was Tom Walker, certainly a candidate, if you believed the female staff at Langley. Walker sat two tables closer to the front of the club, big and soft looking. Thick red hair covered his arms and neck in contrast to thin patches on the skull; dense brows, dark eyes, round face with reddish blond stubble, a jovial slackness on the features as his right hand moved a half full glass in circles on the table to the rumba beat. A light seeking the dancers slid across tables, shone on Tom Walker's bald patch. Marley didn't care for Walker, who was essentially a thug, recruited from the military rather than from the Ivy League. But there was no way this job could be performed by a single agent. Just getting information out of Gilbert, who meant to be helpful, could have taken a crew of six. Marley wondered if at some point in the future his own mind would wander into the past, dragging his conversation with it.

"I want to meet Yanov," Marley said.

"He's a weasel, you know. Snake. You'll see when you meet him."

Joining an intelligence service right out of Princeton hadn't been Marley's plan, but that was what had happened. He thought of it that way, in the passive, allowing himself to remain a little surprised even after all these years. A few of the classmates who had known him better than he realized wouldn't have been surprised. They knew Charles liked having small secrets. The secrets gave him the sense of superiority that other students derived from having money. For a man like Marley, trading up to the larger secrets that came with intelligence work was like inheriting a bank.

The Russians had gotten to know him early on, but there was a sort of mutual comfort in that. He ran his people in Paris, and the Russians watched him and tried to guess whether the assets they occasionally uncovered were those he wanted to be discovered. Sometimes a payment seemed to have been too easily intercepted. Or was Marley simply careless? Was he penetrating their networks, turning agents, or creating a disruptive appearance?

His last visible posting had been in Greece. His career track was predictable: he was a Soviet specialist, using embassy covers nobody in the know believed; by definition, a backfield

player. It was the case officers the Russians couldn't spot who worried them, might encourage them to get rough if they twigged to someone, or have a local group do the job. Nobody worried about Marley, until someone in Washington, a disciple of game theory, raised a question of whether Marley's obviousness might not be concealing something less obvious. When it occurred to Langley that their own man wasn't fully visible to them, they brought him home. If the Russians had known that, they might have enjoyed the irony.

It took the mole hunters less than six months to be satisfied that Charles Marley was monumentally neurotic but loyal. He had no perversions that were out of fashion. He had no secrets that could be turned against him. Once the deputy director of operations had decided where to post him, he would be returned to the field. In the meantime, there was this problem with the Cubans, suspicions the *Dirección General de Inteligencia* had made inroads here and there, recruiting sympathizers in Washington, people who were a few steps left of liberal, liked idealistic socialist revolutions, even those that were taking a while to liberate the *campesinos*, and could Marley please liaise with the FBI's counterintelligence people, not that they knew anything, but only for a few months, a year at most, until we find a place for you.

Eight months into the assignment, when Marley had collected mounds of paper, up popped Kiril Yanov, third- or fourth-

ranking KGB officer in Havana, offering names.

“What does he want in return?” Marley had asked.

George Donlevy, the coordinator for Cuba, gave a flustered scowl. “We may not even have the right message. It all comes through a clandestine Brit. Grow a mustache and comb your hair forward. You’ll be good for a week.”

The KGB had a long memory, but Marley had never been on the Cubans’ radar, so he might be good for a week. Donlevy said, “This will be the fourth group of American businessmen going to Cuba. State has cleared them. There’s a fellow in Washington running the tours. We know about him. Yanov wouldn’t waste our time on something silly, would he?”

“Why not?” Marley said.

“He’d know we wouldn’t pay up unless he’s got something good. And he *is* risking his life.”

“If it’s not a setup.”

Donlevy leaned back, steepled his fingers, a gesture Marley always found pretentious. “Do you have an idea worth developing?”

“Moscow and Havana could be at cross purposes,” Marley

said, wondering if he had to spell it all out. "Say Cuba wants trade, George, and the Sovs see it as undermining their influence. Nabbing an American spy could disrupt things."

Donlevy kept his fingers together while he shrugged. "Subsidizing Cuba costs the Rooskies a million dollars a day. A little prosperity on the island might lighten the burden."

"If they think that way." Marley doubted that the Kremlin cared if a few hundred million dollars going to Cuba meant less cabbage and beets at home next winter. The island gave Moscow an air base at Cienfuegos, which in a few years could accommodate long-range bombers. It was a contagion dish for spreading revolution through Latin America, vexing the imperial power. It exported surplus labor as troops doing Moscow's bidding. Surely all that was worth a million dollars a day, Marley thought. So what if someone's stomach growled.

"But it's worth a shot, don't you think?" Donlevy said. He had never been a field man, so he retained his optimism.

"It's worth a shot," Marley replied.

Tom Walker was to some extent Marley's cover. "The DGI would be disappointed if we didn't have someone along on these trips," Walker said. They were having coffee at a

cafeteria at headquarters, sizing each other up: Walker second-generation military, neither stupid nor trustworthy; somebody's idea of a good field man. He told Marley, "Once they identify me, there's no reason for them to look any further."

"I'll send you a postcard from Isla de Pinos," Marley said. If he made it to Isla de Pinos, he wouldn't be sending postcards.

"They had Bishop there five years ago," Walker said, "but he escaped. Think you could escape?"

Marley doubted anyone had escaped the prison who the Cubans hadn't wanted to escape.

Walker sensed his doubt. "I was on the Zodiac that pulled Bishop out of the water. Saw what they'd done to him."

"All right."

"Sanchez, I knew her too. Got special treatment when she got caught down in Sancti Spiritus. First the DGI, then *Dirección de Inteligencia Militar* interrogators. They poured Sanchez off a boat in sight of a Navy frigate. Looked like chum. I know it's not supposed to be personal. But why'd they have to do that?"

“Who was running the DGI then?”

“Mendez Cominches. Humane bastard.”

“A believer,” Marley said. “Maybe that’s why.”

Walker shook his head. “I believe and I would never do that.”

Marley wasn’t convinced what Walker wouldn’t do, but he said, “Some people would say you don’t believe enough.”

Kiril Yanov didn’t strike Charles Marley as a snake the first time they met. The man was shorter than average, thin but strong looking, with a high, thick forehead and intense blue eyes. For Marley, who had been roused from bed at three in the morning by several Cuban men in plainclothes, and delivered to a building in the old diplomatic neighborhood, the setting was a disappointment. He didn’t know whose embassy it had been. The building had parking spaces underground, bare-looking rooms and hallways. But it was clean, and there was no blood on the chair where he had been seated. Yanov glanced up occasionally from the report on his desk, otherwise ignoring Marley. There were two Cubans in the room with him. The only Russian was Yanov.

“So you’re a businessman, are you?” Yanov said.

“And a guest of the Cuban Republic,” Marley said. Tone cold,

nothing to fear, nothing to hide, letting these people know it.

“So arresting you was all a mistake. Yes?”

“Yes.”

“I notice you haven’t demanded to speak to someone at the American embassy. Most people do. You haven’t. Why is that?”

“It’s because I know we don’t have an embassy in Cuba,” Marley replied.

“No, you have a couple of consular officers in an ‘interest section’ at the Swiss embassy. Would you like to speak to one of them?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t look like a spy.”

“I’m not one.”

“Then we have made a mistake. But you were observed at the Tropicana talking to an Englishman who we know for a fact works for their intelligence service. Do you know whom I mean?”

“No.”

“His name is Tony Gilbert.”

Marley let himself look surprised. “I didn’t know.”

“You meet a man, share a drink, there’s nothing suspicious in that, you say. Yet I find it suspicious.” Yanov nodded to himself.

Like that for more than an hour. Then Yanov said, “Put him in a cell.” The Cuban men, who wore plaid shirts, took Marley downstairs and beat him up a little before dropping him into the cell.

“There was no other way,” Yanov said.

It diminished Marley’s respect for the man that he thought he needed to explain. But the lack of respect was mutual, if Yanov thought Charles Marley needed an explanation. Of course there had been no other way. A KGB colonel couldn’t drive off in the middle of the night for a clandestine meeting with an American. And none of the Americans could wander out of the hotel without picking up a tag. Taxis didn’t cruise the streets. To get one, you had to visit two desks beside the steps at the hotel entrance, one to declare a destination, the other to turn in the slip of paper the first desk had issued. Then a driver would step out of a waiting line and open the

door of a twenty-year-old Ford. And chat in the friendliest way, all the way to wherever you were going, about the benefits of the Revolution, and you would be careful what you said because it was going to be reported.

So yes, it had had to be something like this. Rather than arrest Tom Walker, Yanov had waited to see who would meet Gilbert.

"The room is bugged, of course," Yanov said, smiling at his command of idiom. "But there's no one in the listening room."

"You have names?" Marley asked.

"Four people the DGI are running in the United States. One is a congressional aide. I want to leave Cuba."

"It's impossible," Marley said.

"No, it's routine. I travel to Mexico City often. In three weeks I will be there. I will leave the embassy at noon, and you will have a car and a plane ready."

"Will we be getting your wife and children out as well?"

"My wife will be happy to remain here. We have no children." Yanov's smile suddenly revealed pleasure. "I have a good friend in Mexico City. She will come with me."

When we get you to the States, Marley thought, how much will you remember? It was a stupid doubt, and he pushed it aside. Yanov would be in the agency's hands for as long as it took to wring him dry. Four Cuban agents would be a down payment. There would be a lot to talk to Yanov about. Once they were done with the Latin beat, his earlier career would be gone over, every station along the way, the paint color on every wall in every room where he had conducted interrogations. If he was lucky, they would have everything they wanted in two years.

Why in the world does anyone defect? Marley wondered. Ideology couldn't explain it. The woman in Mexico, perhaps. Perhaps Yanov was imagining the fresh California air and a woman who wasn't his wife.

"I'll need something now," Marley said. "One name. The congressional aide's."

The Russian waved him off. "There is a financial writer who was here a few weeks ago. She's not what we call a useful idiot. She is a full-time, committed intelligence officer who collects industrial information, which the Cubans pass to us." He gave Marley a name that had already shown up in the CIA's own research. Yanov stood up, collected the file he had carried into the room, said reflectively, "I don't think we'll need

to have the Cubans beat you again.”

The Cubans, in fact, apologized deeply for the misunderstanding, assured him that certain overzealous junior officers would be disciplined, it was very embarrassing—but these Russians, you know? An East German car delivered Marley to his hotel less than thirty hours after he had been arrested. Apart from a split lower lip and several small bruises, he wasn't physically worse for the experience. Part of him, though, knew with a cold certainty that he had brushed up against something that would break him if it were ever applied for real.

He learned that the visiting business group had been bused up to a beach for the afternoon. Passing through the hotel lobby, he saw nobody he knew. In his room, he showered and thought about getting a message to Tony Gilbert. But if the Englishman had survived this long, he must have known that the moment he had passed Yanov to Marley, his life was at risk from the Russian. Yanov wouldn't leave people around who knew too much.

“What happened to you?” one of the women asked at dinner. She was with a Midwest agricultural conglomerate, cold eyed, indifferent to *Mojitos*, unimpressed with the Cubans' ability to pay for anything they bought.

"I was bumped by a car," Marley said. He fumbled a dinner roll, clattered a butter knife, tried to muffle his laugh. "I had too much rum."

"No one seemed to know," she said, not really concerned or curious.

Marley registered at a hotel in Mexico City's Zona Rosa that was suitable for a businessman with a modest expense account. He arrived three days before the rendezvous with Yanov was scheduled, stayed well away from the Russian embassy, but sat in a van with a technician from Mexico City station who had observation photos of the woman they were supposed to bring out. The woman appeared to be in her late thirties, more plain than attractive, an economist at a commercial ministry.

"Are you going to make contact with her?" the tech asked.

"No." She would either be at the rendezvous or she wouldn't. By the time they found out, Yanov would have no choice, he would be on the run.

He met Tom Walker twice for briefings. "We'll have three cars," Walker said. "We pick Yanov up outside the university. If the embassy has a regular tail on him, hopefully they won't know which car he's aboard. We're going to take him about

thirty miles south, use a small airport there.”

“And then?”

“Once he’s on the plane, you don’t need to worry,” Walker said.

“All right.”

“Wonder what they’ll do to his family?” Walker said. He wasn’t, Marley realized, a thug at all. The possibilities disturbed him.

“He’s left a wife, but I don’t think he cares,” Marley said.

He took a taxicab to the university. He didn’t admire mosaics, but he pretended to because a middle-aged tourist wearing a straw hat would admire them, or at least find them interesting. He arrived at eleven in the morning. By one thirty, he knew that Yanov wasn’t going to show. He stayed anyway. Walker broke cover at three. “What the hell?”

They stood watching the street. Nervous now, not about Yanov but for themselves. If Yanov had been broken, Marley was pretty damned obvious to anyone who was looking. So was Walker, now.

“See if he’s gotten a message to the woman,” Marley said.

Yanov hadn't.

They didn't bother going back the next day.

Charles Marley was in Washington for more than a month before an agency asset in the Cuban diplomatic service reported what he already suspected. Kiril Yanov had been arrested by the KGB sometime in March in Havana. The asset knew no more. He didn't, in fact, *know* any of this. It was the story making the rounds.

Marley flew down to Panama and met Tony Gilbert.

"I've had to retire," Gilbert complained, tilting a gin and tonic so the ice bumped his nose. They were on the terrace of a small, noisy hotel, where the two men seemed to be the only English speakers. Gilbert's shirt was damp and sweat stained. His linen trousers were wrinkled. He wore no socks. "I'm officially a *pensionado*, but they keep coming around trying to steal from me with regulations and fees. I wish Winnie could see me, though. The young ladies in the building across the street think I'm interesting. I appreciate that, so I give them a few dollars."

"It sounds as if you're comfortable," Marley said.

"I barely got out of Cuba, you know. Yanov had people around at my hotel first thing in the morning. I flew out with a group of tourists going home to Canada."

Marley asked, "Did you burn Yanov?"

"Heavens, no, Charles. I wouldn't do that to your people. Besides, I was at the game too long to hold a grudge. It was nothing personal with Yanov. The sod was just protecting himself. They shot him, you know. The day after they arrested him. Didn't take him long to break. Not much intestinal fortitude, when it came to having the jewels crushed. Don't suppose I'd do any better. What about you?" Gilbert lifted his glass as he asked.

"Probably no better," Marley said.

"We're all very brave until the moment, then cry for our mamas."

Marley was feeling impatient. Yanov hadn't told the interrogators everything, or there'd have been someone to meet him at the university, just to square accounts. Perhaps the interrogators hadn't asked, and once the pain stopped Yanov hadn't had a reason to tell them.

"They must have already been suspicious of him," Marley

said. “Did he have political views?”

“Not that I know of,” Gilbert said. “I’m pretty sure it wasn’t political. I hear Yanov’s wife found out about a girlfriend in Mexico and denounced him. That *was* personal, wasn’t it?” Gilbert lifted his glass and finished his drink.

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Next Article

SMALL FAVORS

STEVE LINDLEY

“You remember my daughter Amber.”

Kubiak didn't, would have bet even money the two never had discussed her.

“My oldest.” Torasella shifted his weight, reached into his back pocket, extracted his wallet, opened it, and offered it to Kubiak, who had to lean forward and raise himself a foot off the couch to reach it. Its plastic sleeves were flipped to a photograph of a young woman who shared her father's dark complexion. She was standing, bent, in the side yard or tiny backyard of a house or building, holding a working lawn sprinkler at arm's length, aiming the spray of water away from her body. The wall behind her was brick. She was wearing a casual nothing of a summer outfit that carelessly showed off her figure, and her face might have passed for lovely had it not been for the look on it. She had been caught laughing, a goofy, unselfconscious, wide-mouthed, squinty-eyed guffaw that was full of little girl nonsense, and was probably the reason this particular photograph had been tucked into her father's wallet. Kubiak passed the wallet to Denise, who was

on the couch beside him. He noticed that his wife managed a quick flip to the surrounding photographs before handing it back.

“Amber’s in her sophomore year down at U of C,” Torasella said, taking the wallet and giving his daughter’s image one last glance before tucking it back into his pocket. “Doing it all on her own, on grants and scholarships. About all I have to spring for is the pizza.”

Even with the wallet tucked away, he continued to sit on an uncomfortable angle. The chair he was in was the favorite of most of the Kubiaks’ guests, as it had the deepest seat and the highest back. Joe Torasella, however, had gone only so far as to perch himself on its edge since being let into the apartment. Stocky, with a crew cut of thick, black hair under his cap just beginning to show gray at the temples, he was maybe a year or two younger than Kubiak, and a good half foot shorter. He had once been an amateur boxer, claimed that if not for his short reach he could have gone pro. He still frequented a gymnasium somewhere on the south side, lived in Cicero, had a family, worked the four-to-midnight security shift seven floors below at Park Tower’s front desk. That, and the fact he had been asking Denise about Kubiak over the last few days, was about as much as Kubiak knew about the man.

Kubiak seldom passed the building's front desk. He found the garage entrance on the west side of the building more convenient, and the freight elevator dropped him closer to his apartment door. Denise had insisted that Kubiak call down tonight and invite Torasella up after his shift, as his inquiries to her about her husband were growing a little less casual each time she entered the lobby. Torasella evidently wanted something from him, probably something having to do with police business as it was well known throughout Park Tower that Kubiak, though retired, still had ties to the Chicago P.D. Kubiak had guessed that something might have had to do with the apartment building's security. He hadn't expected wallet photos.

"Amber's workload is a little heavy this semester," the security guard said. "She's putting in a lot of time downtown. Staying down there late, too late for my liking."

"The Hyde Park campus is about as heavily patrolled an area as you're going to find on the South Side."

"Yeah, so I've been telling myself, especially since the election and all. But the reason I'm concerned . . . Last summer, she met this kid. This punk."

Torasella's face darkened. Though he spoke softly, he couldn't muffle the natural characteristic of his voice, every

word punctuated, every syllable a short jab to the ear.

“Amber’s a lot like her mother. As good as she is in school, she’s got more caring in her than common sense. Strangers smile at her on the street, she smiles back. They talk to her, she stops and listens. This kid glommed onto her at some porch party. They went out a few times, only because she had nothing else to do, and he wouldn’t take no for an answer. She says she let him know from the start that she wasn’t interested, and I believe her. But, at the same time, I can understand him thinking otherwise. You spend any time with Amber, you’ll know what I mean. People meet her in the laundromat or the grocery checkout line, they fall in love with her. And I’m not saying that just because I’m her father.”

No, of course not. Kubiak didn’t say it aloud. Still, Torasella paused, tried to read Kubiak’s face, considered, continued.

“Last August, he went back downstate to school, U of I, Champaign. I thought she’d seen the last of him, only I found out lately that all semester he’s been coming back up here every other weekend, showing up wherever she happens to be. And now he’s up here for a solid couple of weeks on his spring break. I knew something wasn’t right because she’s been acting different lately, all withdrawn into herself. She comes straight home after school, stays in on weekends. I’ve tried getting through to her, but she won’t talk to me about it.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve hated this kid since the minute he shook my hand and grinned at me, and I was dumb enough to let Amber know it. You’ve got a daughter, you know how that goes.”

Denise made a sound, something between a grunt and a chuckle. Kubiak ignored her, asked Torasella, “This kid have a name?”

“Harold. Not Harry, never Harry. He let me know that right off. Mr. Harold Walsh. Anyway, when all this became news to me, it got me thinking, and I remembered Amber was coming home from the beach one afternoon late last summer and I noticed a couple of bruises on her back and side. She told me she got banged up playing softball. That was good enough for me at the time. She’s nineteen. She treats her body like a suitcase. But the other day I noticed a little black and blue around her wrist, and my wife, Connie, tells me now that she saw some marks on her arm a month or so ago. So, we both got on the phone and started giving the third degree to Amber’s friends. To a man, they closed ranks and shut up. I don’t know if they think they’re defending this kid or Amber, but right now Connie and I are more in the dark than ever, and it’s driving us crazy.”

“What about Amber’s siblings? She hasn’t confided in them?”

“No. There’s just the youngest, and eight years between them. All her little sister knows is that there’s something wrong.”

“Are you at the point yet where you’re willing to bring the police into it?”

“We already have. We’ve called those hotline numbers out of the phone book too. Everybody gave us pretty much the same story. The cops gave it to us the straightest. Amber’s an adult, they said. Any time she wants to talk to them, they’ll listen. If she won’t, all they can do is wait until she comes home one day looking bad enough they’d have reasonable cause to believe this kid has . . . But you understand that there’s no way I’m going to sit back and let it get that far. I can’t stand to see what he’s done to her already.”

“What you *think* he’s done.”

“Yeah. I’d go over and put the fear of God into Walsh myself, only I know what he’d say back to me, the look he’d give me, the ‘What’s your problem, old man?’ The ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, sir.’ And I know what I’d do to his face. I just don’t know if I’d be able to let up before . . . It probably

wouldn't take much."

Torasella glanced at Denise, lowered his eyes. Kubiak could imagine the pictures playing out in the man's head, wondered if the images of what he might do to the boy helped him to sleep at night or kept him awake.

"Connie knows it too." Torasella continued. "And she's afraid that if we try to talk to Walsh's parents and the conversation turns sour that it might push Amber even farther away from us. No, we both know at this point we don't have any choice but to back off, but something has to be done to keep this punk away from our daughter. It's why Connie asked me to talk to you. Walsh's family lives in Oak Park. I've got the address here." He reached inside his jacket, extracted a slip of paper. Kubiak took it, glanced it over, placed it on the table beside him. Torasella waited.

"Joe," Kubiak said, "I'm not really sure what it is you think I can do for you."

Torasella glanced at Denise again. This time his look was different, as if he were wondering what turn the discussion might take were the boys alone in the room.

"You do realize that the cops aren't just giving you a line," Kubiak told him. "Short of fresh bruises, there's very little

anyone can do without your daughter's cooperation."

"Sure. Sure."

"As for recruiting anybody else to put the fear of God into this Harold Walsh, especially anybody at any time involved with the Chicago P.D., the chances are pretty good it might backfire, and any complaint of intimidation, coming from him or his parents, would be about the worst possible thing that could happen to you in the situation you're in."

Torasella nodded, tried to hide his disappointment, waited for something more. When nothing came, the security guard, chin set, let out a soft sigh.

"Well," he said. "That's it, then."

Kubiak asked, "How late does your daughter's schedule keep her in Hyde Park?"

"Like I said, too late for my liking."

"What I mean is, it wouldn't take much to arrange to have a university patrol car swing around to keep an eye on her during her trek to her car or the subway."

Torasella said nothing. No doubt he had been hoping for a solution that dealt directly with Walsh.

"I'd only have to make a phone call," Kubiak added. "A couple of guys tweak their route a bit. She won't even have to know she's being watched."

"She takes the 55 bus out of Midway, gets home pretty much the same time every night."

"Just get a copy of her schedule to me, along with classroom buildings and room numbers. And, a good, plain photo of her. You own a car?"

"Sure."

"It might be smart if you can find some excuse for her to use it until Walsh goes back downstate."

"I don't know how to manage that. How would I explain it making sense, her dragging the only car we've got through traffic just to leave it parked on campus all day?"

"I don't know. I didn't say you had to do it, just that it could be better for Amber if you did."

Torasella considered. He seemed to have become tired. He thanked Kubiak quietly, said he would have to talk it over with his wife. Kubiak walked him to the door, shut it behind him, faced his own wife.

“Well?” Denise asked.

“Well, what?”

“You can’t tell me that all you can do for that poor man is to assign a couple of beat cops to see Amber to her car. You must have some other plan.”

“Yes, I do. I plan to keep using the garage entrance for at least the next six months so I don’t have to see that look on his face again.”

“Kubiak, the daughter of a man we know is being stalked.”

“I’m not so sure that’s necessarily the case. In fact, the chances are she’s closer to this Harold Walsh than Torasella thinks.”

“And, what do you base that conclusion on? Male instinct?”

“No, only that it would explain why she’d feel the need to protect Walsh by staying silent, and why her friends would do the same.”

“You might consider that because she has a modicum of pride, and is obviously intelligent, she simply might want to keep her parents out of the situation and handle it herself.”

"Well, she hasn't managed to do either at this point, has she?"

"No, but that's why we're counting on you."

"We?"

"I don't use the garage entrance. I have to pass that look on Joe's face every time I go out to get the paper."

"So, get your news from the television for the next two weeks. In the meantime, I'll do my part to keep Amber from landing on the police blotter on her way home from her classes. As for the rest of it, that's up to her and her family."

"Is it? I would have thought it was entirely up to Harold Walsh."

They were wakened just before eight the next morning by a knock on their door from Purcell, the security guard who worked the day shift. He handed Kubiak an eight-by-ten manila envelope, explained that Torasella had asked him to swing by his house on the way to work and deliver the information Kubiak had requested concerning Amber. Evidently that conversation Joe had said he'd have to have with his wife had been a short one.

Kubiak dumped the envelope's contents onto the kitchen

table. There was a copy of Amber's schedule, some friends' names and addresses, a photo of Amber (probably from her high school yearbook; it was so posed and key lit that it expressed her true likeness less than the goofy one in her father's wallet), a note from Torasella stating he had convinced her to commute to and from Hyde Park in the family car over the next week and a half, and another note folded and tucked inside a pastel envelope. That note had been written by Connie Torasella. In it, in neatly penned blue ink, she thanked Kubiak, praised Kubiak, and expressed a jumble of thoughts on daughters and aspirations, universities and inner cities, families and random cruelties. Kubiak refolded it, tucked it back into the envelope, reached for the phone.

"I hope you're not thinking of calling your old friend Crawford," Denise said. "You remember, the last time you dialed his number it nearly got you locked up over Christmas weekend on the Stacey Bennett homicide."

"I remember, and it's why I'm phoning someone who's just down the hall from him but a little more . . . malleable. Your old friend, Danny Guie."

Denise made a face. She shared Kubiak's low opinion of Guie, but found even less use for the man who specialized in trading favors for favors. This early in the day, Kubiak had

expected to leave a message, but Guie was already in his office at police headquarters at 3510 South Michigan. His tone, after Kubiak announced himself, was as cordial as that of a lazy salesman. Kubiak pictured him with his heels on his desk, asked him if he knew anyone working out of the University of Chicago campus.

“Who do you want me to know?”

“No one in particular. I just need an umbrella service.”

“Oh? Who’s out gunning for you this time?”

“It’s not for me. It’s for a student.”

“So give the university P.D. a call yourself. You need the number?”

“It’s not a one-shot deal. I need it over a short period of time. I have her schedule.”

“Okay.”

“And, I’d rather the student not be aware of the officers’ presence.”

A pause. “You want surveillance.”

"I just want them parked somewhere nearby while she walks to her car. I'm trying to prevent a family fracas. Her father thinks an old boyfriend is stalking her. She's not cooperating, and I'm not even sure she and the boyfriend aren't still an item."

"Kids these days. I thought your daughter was all grown up and happily married."

"She is."

"So who is this girl, and what is she to you?"

"Nobody. I've never met her." Kubiak held up the glamour photo of Amber, tossed it aside, wishing for another look at the wallet photo, instead. "I'm helping out her father, is all."

There was a dismissive chuckle on the other end of the line, then a sigh. Kubiak pictured Guie dropping his feet from the corner of his desk and stretching to reach a pen. "How long a period are we talking about?"

"Nine or ten days, until the boyfriend goes back to school downstate."

"You're sure that's all there is to it? I don't want to get these guys involved in anything that's going to come back at them."

“That’s all there is.” Kubiak spelled Amber Torasella’s name.

“What’s the boyfriend’s name?”

“Why would they need that?”

“They probably won’t. I might.”

“Harold Walsh. H-a-r-o-l-d, never H-a-r-r-y. I can get Amber’s photo and schedule down to Hyde Park later this morning. Think you can get things set up by then?”

“Of course. You’re dealing with Guie. Anything else?”

“Not on this end. You never told me how things have been with you lately.”

“I’ll keep in touch.”

Kubiak lingered around the condo until midmorning to avoid traffic, made the drive down to Hyde Park in under a quarter of an hour, parked in the campus visitors’ lot on Fifty-fifth. The wind was up, and the late March air was cold; they combined to make the walk to the red brick building that housed the University of Chicago Police Department seem longer than the half block it was.

Inside, it was all old school, with narrow hallways of green

walls and worn tile floors that made echoes of his footsteps. The door to the communications room opened to an area the size of a walk-in closet, where on one wall, a sheet of Lexan separated Kubiak from a much larger room containing everything and everyone else. He stated his business through it to the communications officer, a young man with a mustache, who listened with the low level of suspicion one expects to receive when talking through Lexan. At one point, the young man excused himself. Kubiak stared back at the other officers in the room staring at him, until they turned away and resumed their conversation. When the communications officer returned, his demeanor had softened a bit. He requested the information on Amber Torasella, and Kubiak slipped her schedule and photo through the slot at the bottom of the window. The man paged through the information, verified a point or two, making his own notations. Obviously Guie, as promised, had gotten through to someone.

Outside again, Kubiak turned in the direction away from his car. He had the urge to stroll about the century-old campus, maybe make his way down to the grassy Midway Plaisance and take in the students on break between classes. If the day had been warmer, he might have. Instead, he settled for a slightly longer hike back to the garage, circling the block, watching the serious-faced young men and women pass briskly between classroom buildings. It wasn't until he was

back inside his car, cranking the heater up, that he admitted to himself that there was only one student on this campus he was curious to see, and that was Amber Torasella. He wasn't sure why, supposed he didn't need a reason. He knew the name of the building she was in at just this hour, might be directed to it by any passing student. But then what? Loiter on the corner and ogle her exit, only to be tackled down by the same cops he had just arranged to have shadow her to her car?

He was nearly as curious to get a gander at her boyfriend. Oak Park, where Mr. Harold Walsh was home from school and staying tucked warm with his parents when he wasn't getting his kicks bruising women, was only a twenty-minute drive from here. Kubiak wondered what went through the mind of a kid like that every time his mother pounded on his bedroom door demanding he pick up after himself. He wasn't about to find out, though, for the reasons he had explained to Joe Torasella.

He went through the contents of the manila envelope again, found the page listing the names and addresses of the friends Torasella and Connie had tried to contact: Jennifer Tucker, an old high-school pal of Amber's with a Cicero address; a name with a phone number but no address, Bridgot Patterson; two names listed under the same address but with different phone numbers, Robert Fleming and Chad

Sloan. The numbers of the two males were to cell phones, most certainly. The address they shared was on Ingleside, just south of Hyde Park Boulevard, a five-minute walk from where Kubiak was sitting.

He cut the engine, buttoned the top button of his coat. There were other ways to satisfy his curiosity, and maybe get an answer or two for Joe in the process.

This stretch of Ingleside was on the fringe of Hyde Park, where a turn of the corner could take you from pristine, historic, million-dollar homes to stacks of ramshackle, subsidized apartments, and vice versa. It had been some time since Kubiak had walked the neighborhood, and he was surprised to find most of the buildings on this particular block standing empty, either having been renovated or waiting to be. Somebody was sending the struggling student tenants out, but their replacements with the deep pockets had yet to arrive, or the developer had gone belly-up along with the economy. The tenants Kubiak was looking for lived on the top floor of a stone three-flat that could have used new windows, but other than that still looked respectable. He pressed the buzzer more than once, waited, with the wind burning his cheeks and whipping his coattails, until he was certain no one was home. On his way back to the car, he glanced up the alley at the vertical rows of oversized porches tacked on to the backs of the buildings, remembered what Torasella had

said about Amber meeting Walsh at a porch party, realized, too, that there were a hell of a lot of back porches in the city of Chicago.

He had nothing else on his calendar besides lunch, so he decided to make the drive to Cicero and had better luck there. Jennifer Tucker worked nights as a waitress and was at home with her mother. Their house was on the south end of the suburb among grids of similar, closely spaced, one-story homes made of the same light color brick in the background of the photograph in Torasella's wallet. In fact, Jennifer said, the Torasellas lived just a few blocks north, though she hadn't seen Amber since some time over the holidays.

"That's three months ago," Kubiak said from the squat chair he had been offered after explaining he was an associate of Amber's father. The two stared back at him unblinking, as if wondering why he would feel the need to define the length of time between the start of January and the end of March. They sat on the couch, side by side, the daughter in a robe, the mother in a housecoat, the only thing separating them a quarter century of life.

"Did you and Amber have a falling out?" he asked Jennifer.

"No. Why would you ask that?"

He supposed his defining the relatively short length of time between high-school graduation and sophomore year in college would do him no good. Funny, Jennifer was the only high-school friend of Amber's whose name Torasella had written down, and hers was the first on the list. Kubiak had assumed they had been close.

The mother, perhaps reading his expression, added, "Amber is very busy at college. And Jennifer works nights."

Kubiak continued to address Jennifer. "You know Harold Walsh?"

"I've met him."

"What do you think of him?"

A shrug. Uncomfortable silence.

"Miss Tucker, Mrs. Tucker, Amber's father is concerned about the relationship between her and this Harold Walsh. He did express that to you?"

Nods.

"I just can't help but wonder why, if you think his concerns aren't justified, you wouldn't at least give him the comfort of offering him some assurances. And certainly if you think they

might be—”

Again, the mother interceded. “But, we just couldn’t say one way or the other. Like Jennifer said, we haven’t seen Amber in some time.”

“I understand that.”

More nothing.

“I’m sorry,” Kubiak said, continuing to address Jennifer. “It’s just that Joe gave me the impression you two were good friends.”

There was a tiny flash in Jennifer’s eyes, nothing much, but the first sign of life he had seen in her.

He asked, “Can you think of someone Amber was close to in high school who I might talk to, someone she might have trusted?”

“There was no one closer to Amber in high school than me.”

“Oh?” The sharper the barbs on the lure, he thought, the quicker the hook.

“But we’re not in high school anymore. And it isn’t just me. She doesn’t see any of her old friends. That’s not our fault.”

"It's Amber's?"

"I'm not saying that. It's just that she has her college friends now, and she hangs with them."

"And you don't."

"That's not my fault, either, although I wouldn't choose to, given the choice."

"Any reason in particular why you wouldn't?"

"They're snobs, is all. They're just not very nice."

"College friends. You mean like Robert Fleming and Chad Sloan?"

"Yes."

"You think they might be able to tell me something about Harold Walsh?"

"I'm sure they could, seeing as how he's part of that group. But I don't know what. I can't stand the lot of them, and if the feeling's mutual, that's fine by me."

Kubiak nodded, told her again that he understood. This time

he meant it.

If he was going to make another try at the student apartment on Ingleside, he didn't want to venture far, so he decided to have his lunch around the corner at Hawthorne, as the thoroughbreds were running there for another few weeks yet. He bought a program, two hot dogs, and a beer, and carried them up to the third level outdoor viewing section, to a seat in the top row where the wind couldn't reach him. He hadn't been to Hawthorne in some time. The old track hadn't changed, for better or worse: same old, electric tote board; same old, grumpy men at the betting windows; even the same old bird crap speckled over the front line of seats, dropped by the pigeons nesting in the eaves. Different pigeons, of course, these the far removed descendents of the original peckers and nesters.

He had taken his daughter, Maria, here occasionally when she was a kid. They had always sat up here, at her insistence, and she had become as interested in the birds as she was the horses. Kubiak at first had thought them merely a distraction due to the long periods between the races, but there were times when, even as the horses were coming down the stretch, his daughter's eyes were on the birds. She had even given them names, would claim she recognized a pigeon or two from previous visits. Denise had put a stop to the visits when Maria became a teenager, fearing the

influence a group of grizzled, old handicappers might have on a young lady “coming into her own,” so it had to be a dozen years or so since they were here together. He thought of her now, wished he’d had an idea earlier he might end up at the track so he could have phoned her and asked her to join him. She was probably home, doing whatever she did around the apartment until David got home from work. She had dropped out of college when she and David married, much to Denise’s chagrin. He had no doubt that Denise had felt a pang of dark envy when Joe Torasella had handed over that wallet and bragged about Amber’s scholarships. Right now, though, Kubiak couldn’t have been more content with his daughter’s choices.

He stayed for five races, burning through much of the afternoon and most of the cash in his pocket, fought traffic back to Hyde Park, tried the doorbell on the apartment building on Ingleside again, and this time got buzzed inside. The door to the third floor opened to a stereotypical student apartment—a lot of space, a little furniture, the front room dominated by a flat-screen television tuned to ESPN. The volume on the television was muted, and a stereo in the corner was playing a song Kubiak had never heard. A young woman straightened from a slump on the couch, and used a remote to turn the stereo’s volume down to a polite level. She would introduce herself as Bridgot Patterson. The young man who had opened the door was the one with his name on the

lease, Robert Fleming. He was tall, blond, with a square jaw and the inquisitive eyes of a student who might like to sit in the front row, and he didn't offer a chair, but after introductions and Kubiak's explanation of the reason for his visit, stated:

"You say you're a friend of Mr. Torasella. May I ask, if he wanted to talk to us about Amber, why isn't he here himself?"

"He told me that he tried talking to you and your roommate over the phone about her, but that you offered him very little cooperation."

"Well, I suppose that would depend on his perception of cooperation, wouldn't it?"

"Would it?"

"I can't speak for Chad, but when I talked to Mr. Torasella, he simply wasn't interested in hearing the answers I was trying to give him."

Chad Sloan, Robert's co-renter, had entered the room from the back of the apartment. He was holding a lit cigarette and a bottle of beer he had yet to open, was shorter than his roommate, darker, wiry. He leaned against the wall near the stereo, catching up on the conversation.

“What were the answers you were trying to give him?” Kubiak asked Robert.

Robert gave Chad a glance, and for an instant Kubiak wished he had chosen to speak to each alone, wondered why he should have felt the need to.

“I spent most of my time just telling him to calm down. You don’t understand, the calls were hardly Q and A sessions. They were interrogations. I resented his tone, and finally told him that if he wanted to know what was going on with Amber, he should talk to Amber.”

Chad added, “The last time he phoned me with his threats, I threatened him right back. I haven’t heard from him since.”

“Threats?”

“Yeah. When I started giving back to him the lip he was giving me, he told me he used to fight in the ring, and that he might come over here and teach me a thing or two. I told him I’ve done my share of kickboxing, myself, in high school, so he was welcome to come over any time, and that I’d be here waiting for him. He never showed.” Chad crossed to an ashtray on the table by Bridgot, gave Kubiak the once-over. “You don’t look like you’re here to do the job for him. What are you, a lawyer?”

“Something more like an arbitrator.” Kubiak addressed Bridgot. “What about you?”

She had been staring at the ash on Chad’s cigarette, turned to Kubiak, blinked. “Me?”

“Did Amber’s father threaten you?”

“No. What makes you think he even called me? I don’t even live here.”

“You look pretty comfortable. I’d guess you spend a lot of time here.”

“Yes, I do. You spend any time in student housing, you’ll know why. So what?”

“Joe Torasella gave me your name along with the others. Did he not phone you?”

She looked to Chad and Robert for help, got none, turned back to Kubiak. “No, I’m sure he did. But, he never threatened me.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing.”

“Why not?”

Robert interceded. “You don’t understand, Mr. Kubiak. The way Mr. Torasella was carrying on, we were all afraid of getting involved. These days, your name gets wrapped up in the sort of thing he’s been suggesting, even if you have nothing to do with it, it could get you thrown out of school.”

“That’s twice, Mr. Fleming, that you’ve told me I don’t understand. I think it might be you who doesn’t get it. You don’t have a daughter.”

“You’re right, I don’t. But then, you don’t have a student loan it will take a decade of hard work to pay off, and a future that’s entirely tied to a diploma from the U of C.”

“Did you at least discuss any of this with Amber?”

“Amber knows that the lines of communication with us are always open.”

“That’s not an answer to my question.”

“Isn’t it? Then, I suppose you’ll have to go without one. And, I think it is time you do go.”

Kubiak eyed the three of them. “I hope you all understand that

just being an associate of Harold Walsh makes you involved, and your silence—”

“What do you mean,” Chad interrupted, “*associate of Walsh?*”

“He’s your friend. I think that qualifies.”

“Friend? Downtown Downstate Harold Walsh? He’s no friend of ours. We haven’t seen Harold in . . .” He looked to Bridgot. “What?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “five, six months?” She addressed Kubiak. “Harold doesn’t even live up here. He goes to school in Champaign. Who told you he was our friend?”

“Jennifer Tucker, for one.”

She looked perplexed. Chad, cracking a grin, said, “You remember her, Bridgot. Amber’s neighbor, the waitress, set you straight about patriotism last Fourth of July weekend, just before she poured her beer in your lap.”

“Oh, that miserable thing.” She told Kubiak, “You might want to get your information from someone without an agenda.”

“What is her agenda?”

“Only that she wants to bring Amber back to the friendly confines of Cicero, and away from the big, bad wolves in the big, bad world where poor, little Jennifer just doesn’t fit in.”

“Considering the circumstances, don’t you think that might not be such a big, bad idea?”

Robert took a step forward, pulled his cell phone from his pocket. “Obviously she’s not the only one with an agenda. I’ve asked you once to leave, Mr. Kubiak, so I imagine in your capacity of something of an arbitrator you’re aware that at this point you’re trespassing. If you’re gone before I’m finished dialing 911, I promise not to press charges.”

It was after six by the time he got home.

“That must have been some conversation with the U of C police to run eight hours,” Denise said. “They didn’t find any outstanding warrants on you?”

“I stopped at Hawthorne for lunch.”

“Well, that explains it.”

“The rest of the afternoon I spent talking to Amber’s friends whose names were on that list Joe gave me.”

“I thought you said you couldn’t get directly involved for fear of

a backlash.”

“I did. It’s why I only tiptoed around the perimeter, to avoid any confrontation.”

“How did that go?”

“Reasonably well, until they threatened to call the police and have me arrested.”

“That subtle Kubiak charm. Did you at least find out anything that might help Joe?”

“Nothing, except that I might have been wrong about Amber and Walsh being an item. Her friends claim they hardly know him, and that wouldn’t be the case if he were close to Amber. But, if he is just some psycho nut occasionally commuting up here to stalk her, they’d have no reason not to cooperate with Joe. I can understand Joe’s frustration. Something is all wrong here, and I can’t put my finger on what.”

“Are there any other perimeters you can tiptoe through to find out?”

“None that come to mind. I think the best we can hope for is Harold Walsh eventually going away quietly all on his own, and taking any answers with him.”

The next evening, on his way home from a short happy hour at Jimmy Dee's, Kubiak detoured around the block to Park Tower's front entrance to check up on Joe and get any fresh news on Amber, only to find Purcell still parked at the front desk two hours into Torasella's shift.

"I have no idea where he is," Purcell said. "He just never showed, and nobody's answering the phone at his house. I know Joe's got you working on some trouble his daughter is in. Anything you care to share, so I can maybe keep him from getting written up and suspended?"

Kubiak said he was sorry, but had nothing to offer. Purcell didn't bother to hide his disappointment, added curtly, "By the way, you've got company. That Lieutenant Crawford, and some other fella with him I don't know." He checked his log. "Been up there about an hour now."

During the elevator ride up to Floor 7, Kubiak tried to figure the chance of Crawford just happening to show up on the same night Joe just happened not to, knew that wasn't the case when he entered his apartment and discovered that the "other fella" accompanying him was Danny Guie. Both men were on their feet, and the look on Denise's face told of a strained visit.

"Hell, Danny," Kubiak said, hanging up his coat, "if I had

known that what you expected in trade for that phone call to the U of C yesterday would be an evening with my wife, I might have asked for more on my side of the bargain."

Guie wasn't amused. "You've already asked for too much."

"Then I suppose there's no point in my asking what you two are doing here."

Crawford spoke up, all business. "When was the last time you talked to Joe Torasella?"

"Two days ago. Why?"

"What about his daughter Amber?"

"I've never met her." Kubiak addressed Guie. "I think I already told you that. Is she all right?"

"No," Guie told him. "But, she's in better shape than Harold Walsh."

Crawford glared, judging Kubiak's reactions. Kubiak showed his palms.

"Go ahead, it's all news to me."

Crawford offered it. "Walsh is dead."

“Dead how? When?”

“Three this morning,” Crawford said. “A knife wound to the chest. Butcher knife. They found him in his parents’ kitchen.”

“Who did, the parents?”

“No, they were out of town visiting relatives. Walsh was house-sitting while up here on spring break. But, you knew that.”

“The spring break part, yeah. Who did discover the body, then?”

“Officers responding to the 911 call.”

“So, Walsh had time to pick up the phone. What did he tell the dispatcher?”

“Nothing. He never made a peep. It was Joe Torasella made the call. He announced that he had killed Walsh, and was glad he did, and that he would wait there quietly for the police. Sure enough, when they got there, he was sitting at the kitchen table smoking a cigarette and helping himself to the family’s gin.”

Kubiak glanced at Denise, remembered Joe sitting

uncomfortable and anxious in their chair, warning them of what he might do to Walsh if he had occasion to confront him.

“You said something about Amber not being all right. What happened?”

Guie came up close beside Kubiak, a little too close. “I’ll tell you what happened,” he said, the words coming sharp, along with a light spray of spittle landing on Kubiak’s cheek. “Just what you knew was going to happen. Harold Walsh beat the living hell out of Amber Torasella, but not before you managed to toss this mess in my lap.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the schedule you set up. The university had an officer stationed outside of Amber’s classroom building at five thirty yesterday afternoon, as per your request. She came out of it about ten minutes later. She was with a young man. They walked together, seemed to be getting along with one another. Turns out, from the description, that it was Walsh, though the officer didn’t know it at the time. He didn’t make his presence known, again as per your request, but kept them under observation, followed them up to Fifty-third where they stopped in a pizza joint and settled into a booth by the window. Like I said, they appeared to be getting along, so our guy took off. About an hour later, on a lark, he thought to

check on Amber's car. It was still in the visitor's lot, so he went back to the pizza joint, but they were gone.

"Nine o'clock, the phone calls started coming in to the university P.D. from Connie Torasella saying that Amber wasn't home yet, and she thought they had a deal where the cops were supposed to get her home safe at night."

Crawford interrupted, asked Kubiak, "Is that what you told her?"

"I never even spoke to her."

Guie continued, "Our guy went back to the visitors' lot and found Amber's car gone. The calls kept coming, now with Joe Torasella on the extension once he got home from work and found out what was going on. Then the calls stopped, right about one thirty in the morning. It turns out that's when Amber finally got home looking like hell. She tried going straight upstairs to her room, but didn't before her father got a look at her face, and that was when he decided he didn't need the cops any more. Now we've not only got a nineteen-year-old U of C student beaten, but another student dead, both under the watch of a few good university cops who are bound to get hung out to dry. I told you from the start I didn't want to get these guys involved in anything that could come back at them."

“Guie, I asked you to arrange an umbrella service, plain and simple. That’s all they got involved in. The fact it didn’t work —”

“No, not so plain and simple, because Amber Torasella wasn’t involved in arranging it, and because she knew nothing of its existence, which removes any culpability she might have for walking out of that building arm-in-arm with Walsh and lays it all right at the feet of the U of C. And me. And you. You can’t tell me that it’s a coincidence Walsh beat the crap out of that girl within twelve hours of our setting up that service. Either you had a better idea than you let on to me that the beating was imminent, or something set off Walsh, most likely the service itself, which only makes things worse.”

Kubiak thought of his visits that afternoon to the university campus and Cicero, shook the idea away. “Maybe your guy was spotted.”

“He swears he wasn’t. My guess would be that either the mother or the father let word of the service slip to Amber, who told Walsh about it in that pizza joint, and he didn’t like hearing it, and took it out on her face.”

Kubiak, nursing a knot forming in his gut, stepped away from Guie, moved across the room to the short bar by the picture

window overlooking Lake Shore Drive. He had made a point of having Joe make Amber take the family car to and from campus. If she had pressed her mother hard enough on why her father thought it necessary . . .

He poured himself a bourbon, neat, turned back to Guie. "All right," he said. "So, what do you expect me to do at this point?" He sipped the warm liquor, tilted the glass toward Crawford. "And why the escort?"

Guie only glared. Crawford stated flatly, "The only reason I'm here is because when you dragged Guie into this, you dragged the Chicago P.D. into it. But his point is real. This kind of situation, this kind of news story, blame gets kicked around until everybody involved gets smeared by it. Fortunately, though, or unfortunately, depending on how you feel about it, there's a wrinkle or two in this particular situation you might be able to help us straighten out, put an end to the thing before it gets out of control."

"What kinds of wrinkles?"

"Little discrepancies. The biggest is the time line. Amber got home at one thirty in the morning. Joe Torasella was out the door immediately, but didn't make the 911 call from Walsh's kitchen until three. That's an hour and a half for an angry man to drive ten minutes and shove a kitchen knife into a kid's

chest. You figure he and Walsh might have argued first, but from what I understand Torasella knows how to use his fists, and there was no sign of a struggle. Walsh was unscathed from head to toe except for that one, clean stab wound to the heart.”

“How does Joe explain it?”

“He says it took him time to get up the nerve to make the call. But, it also gave him time to wander all over the kitchen, extract the knife from the body and put it on the table, tromp through the blood, basically make a mess of the crime scene. And, it makes the time of death that more difficult to pinpoint.”

Kubiak finished his bourbon. “But he’s already confessed. The only reason he’d feel the need to muddy the time of death . . .”

“Exactly. If he wasn’t the one who killed Walsh. Figure Torasella walks into the kitchen, finds Walsh dead where his daughter left him. It took Amber ten minutes to get home, took him ten minutes to get there. Walsh has already been dead a minimum of twenty-five minutes before Torasella can even think of picking up the phone and taking the rap for his daughter. Granted, there was no guarantee the first responders would catch the fact that the body was a half hour dead already, but with him waiting an extra ninety minutes,

they never had that chance.”

“You think he’s that smart?”

“I think he’s that determined, and the fact he’s exhibiting more quiet determination than self-righteous satisfaction only convinces me more that he didn’t kill Walsh, but Amber did. But I can’t be sure, and the Oak Park P.D. is even less certain.”

“What’s Amber saying?”

“Nothing. Not one word to anyone.”

“That’s odd.”

“And with her having taken that kind of beating, we can only push her so hard for answers.”

“Sure. But I go back to my same question. What do you want from me?”

Crawford approached the minibar. Kubiak offered a glass. Crawford refused.

“Right now,” he said, “the only person we know of who Joe and Connie Torasella trusted to deal with their daughter’s situation was you. Either of them might listen to you.”

"You want me to talk Joe into giving up his daughter on the homicide?" "We want you to get him to tell the truth."

Guie spoke up. "It's pretty clear things went down the way Crawford is saying, and if that's so, and you can get Torasella to admit it, it'll just happen to work out in everyone's best interest. Sure, we all might still get kicked around some, but the simpler the case is, the quicker it will die, and there's a lot more gray in a father avenging his daughter's beating than in a girl using a knife in self-defense. The way I see it, all you have to do is convince the mother that her daughter has a better chance of walking on this than her husband does, which is a pretty safe bet."

Kubiak considered.

"You realize," Crawford said, "that as soon as lawyers get involved they'll be the ones telling the family what to say, and then we won't know what to believe. We don't have much of a window here."

Still, Kubiak said nothing. Crawford pulled a manila envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket, laid it on the bar. "You want to see what Walsh did to her face?"

Kubiak stared at the envelope, opened his mouth to say no, hesitated. He had seen his share of police photos. He

thought of the no-nonsense harsh lighting accentuating the bruises and lacerations, the cold expression bound to be on Amber's face. Then again, what if his imagination were worse than the reality of the damage Walsh had inflicted? Either way, he would never again picture her as that little girl in the photo in her father's wallet.

"No, thanks," he said.

"I didn't think so." Crawford picked up the envelope, pocketed it. "These will make for a good defense."

Guie stepped forward to make another point, but Crawford met him halfway and quieted him by laying a palm on his shoulder, used the palm to turn him around toward the door, nodded to Denise. "I gave you the number to my cell phone. You two want to talk it over, go ahead, but get back to me either way over the next couple of hours. I can send a car."

Kubiak didn't acknowledge the men's exit, continued to say nothing for a full minute after they were gone. It was Denise who finally broke the silence.

"You did say," she told him, "that the best we could hope for was that Walsh would just go away and take any answers with him."

"I believe I said go away quietly. Not being able to speak up because there's a knife in your chest doesn't qualify."

"Do you think there's a chance Guie and Crawford are wrong, and that Joe did kill him?"

"No. Joe wouldn't have used that knife even if Walsh were coming at him with it. He would have used his fists. And, he wouldn't have killed him. He would have left him just barely alive enough to suffer through a lecture on how much worse it would be for him if he ever came near Amber again."

"Then, why the hesitation, if it's true what Guie says that Joe only has to tell the truth and everybody wins?"

"Everybody but Amber. I got a lecture, myself, yesterday on the importance of keeping a clean record to ensure the kind of golden future a University of Chicago degree opens. You've got to figure it's not a bad trade. Joe's giving up sitting behind a desk in an apartment building lobby for the next twenty years in order to give Amber that. Besides, I don't feel right convincing Joe of anything until I'm convinced of everything. I told you last night some things just don't add up, and they still don't."

She waited for more, and when he offered nothing, she left him to work through his thoughts, the thoughts that still were

causing the knot in his gut that the two fingers of bourbon had not been able to loosen, that were telling him he had already guessed the worst, that if any one person was responsible for the way this mess had turned out, it was himself.

Guie was right that he couldn't argue with the timing of it. Something had set Walsh off. The chance of the cop being spotted for what he was, was slim; even slimmer was the idea Joe would have let slip the umbrella service to Amber. Connie? That was more a maybe, but doubtful. No, most likely was that somehow it had been Kubiak tiptoeing around those perimeters. But how would word of that have gotten to Walsh in a matter of under six hours, especially when everyone Kubiak had talked to claimed they barely knew Walsh? It would have had to have been through Amber. But Amber had been in class right up until the time she was seen leaving the campus with Walsh. And, even if her old high-school friend or one of her college friends had phoned or texted her to tell of Kubiak's visits just hours earlier, why would she mention it to Walsh except to maybe warn him that her father was bringing other people in to deal with the situation, a fact guaranteed to anger him?

It all took Kubiak right back to the question he'd had last night: If Amber were dating Walsh, her friends had a choice of either covering for him or indicting him. Claiming to hardly know him, as they were doing, was a likely option only if

Walsh really was just some strange kid coming up to stalk Amber. But, if that were true, what was she doing walking off campus to have a pizza with him? And, why wouldn't she have phoned the cops herself, the minute he laid a hand on her?

And, then, strangest of all was how it all had turned out in that kitchen, two men who were accustomed to approaching a confrontation with their fists raised, neither of which having had a chance to take a shot at the other. No sign of a struggle, Crawford had said. Not a single blow exchanged. Kubiak had to wonder if, upon entering that kitchen, during that split second before it registered that his daughter had killed Walsh, Joe actually was disappointed that the man had died before he had a chance to knock a few of his teeth loose.

Not a single blow exchanged. That wasn't how Crawford had put it, though. What had he said? Unscathed. No sign of a struggle. That couldn't be entirely true, could it? Then, why had Crawford said it?

Kubiak imagined a few scenarios where it might be possible, though each one seemed farther out in left field than the next. Still, he thought each out, worked each back until a contradiction gave him a reason to dismiss it. There was one idea, though, he was unable to dismiss right off, so he

worked it harder, tougher, searching for any reason to prove it impossible. And, when he had exhausted it, he was left with nothing but the feeling he was an idiot for not thinking of it before.

He reached for the phone, called out to Denise for the number Crawford had given her.

“You’re having him send that car?” she called back.

“Car, hell. I’m getting him back here right now. I want a look at those police photos.”

In the past, when Kubiak needed every person of interest in a homicide investigation together in order to thrash through the details fast, usually before Crawford could put the kibosh on it, he had found the act of gathering them all in one place to be a long process involving tricks, threats, and bartering. This time the roundup was a cinch, probably because the only two current persons of interest already were in custody.

Jennifer Tucker and her mother had been aching to come to Amber’s aid since they had gotten the news of what had happened; apparently all it took to get two old high-school friends back together was a beating followed by a homicide. Once Kubiak phoned them, they made it to the Oak Park Police station in about the time it had taken Joe Torasella to

get to Harold Walsh's kitchen. They were accompanied by Mr. Tucker, Jennifer's father, a large man who spent most of his time nodding and listening, but who never left the sides of his wife and daughter.

Bridgot Patterson, David Fleming, and Chad Sloan weren't too many minutes behind them. Kubiak had given them basically the same line he had gotten from Guie, that it was in everyone's best interest, including golden-futured U of C students, to get this business wrapped up quietly and within a twenty-four hour news cycle.

The Oak Park P.D. had offered their Chicago brothers the use of a meeting room off of the chief's office. Whether they were humble enough to realize any investigation could use all the help it could get, or if it was the result of another of Guie's connections, Kubiak didn't know, didn't ask. The room was windowless, with a counter along one wall, and an oblong oak table in its center, around which were a dozen chairs on casters. In one corner, high and nestled between a set of emergency lights, a very discreet video camera monitored the room's proceedings for the protection of everyone involved.

If any of the attendees had noticed the camera's presence, they hadn't let on. Jennifer and her mother sat on one side of the table, the father between them. On the other side, facing

them, were Bridgot, who sat hunched forward with her hands folded on the table and her thumbs doing a nervous little dance; Robert, more casual, sitting with his hands in the pockets of his jacket and his body as far back in the chair as a body can sit; and Chad, showing nothing but defiance, with his arms folded squarely across his chest and a glare fixed on Kubiak. Kubiak sat at the head of the table, across from Crawford. Guie stood back against the wall, next to the Oak Park chief of police who was monitoring the room's proceedings not quite as unobtrusively as his video camera.

"When do we get to see Amber?" Jennifer asked.

"That depends," Kubiak told her. "I'd like to say as early as tomorrow morning, though it might be some time down the road, subject to visiting hours at Dwight Correctional Center."

"But, I thought . . . You said you wanted us here so we could clear things up and get her out of jail."

"I said I needed you here in order to clear up some points before we proceed to release her from jail. How quickly we manage that is up to all of you."

Mr. Tucker's meaty hand on his daughter's arm couldn't keep Jennifer from continuing. "Well, let's get to clearing them up, then," she demanded. "I'm sure everyone here would like to

do what they can.” Her upturned chin gave a slow, disdainful sweep of the three on the other side of the table, lingering on Bridgot, whose patriotism at least, according to her, was already in question.

“All right,” Kubiak said. “Let’s start with you. You were at Robert and Chad’s apartment last Fourth of July weekend.”

Jennifer swiveled back to him, her eyes wide. “How did you know that?”

“It was a summer porch party. You poured your beer in Bridgot’s lap.”

“What does that have to do—”

“You met Harold Walsh there?”

“Yes.”

“Had you met him there before?”

“No.”

“Since?”

“I haven’t been back there since. That was the last I saw of any of those people.”

"Yet you assumed Harold Walsh was a part of their group. Might he not have assumed the same of you?"

Bridgot interrupted. She kept her hands intertwined on the table, though from the look on her face she would have preferred them around Jennifer's neck. "What's the point of going over this again?" she asked Kubiak. "It's just what we told you yesterday."

"Yesterday Harold Walsh wasn't dead."

Robert let out a breath, addressed Crawford. "That sounds very dramatic, but what I think Bridgot means is that this is the second time we've been willing to cooperate with Mr. Kubiak, and he doesn't seem to appreciate that. He doesn't believe us when we tell him that Harold Walsh was just a casual acquaintance, someone we hardly knew."

"Oh, I believe that now."

Chad argued, "Maybe if you had believed us yesterday, Harold Walsh wouldn't be dead today."

"On the contrary," Kubiak told him, "if I had been smart enough to see through your lies, I might have been able to save that kid's life. That's the part of this that makes me the sickest."

Chad's hands were now kneading the sides of the chair, his defiance turning to anger. "What's sick is that we have to sit here and take this when we haven't been charged with anything."

"Oh, you will be," Kubiak said, getting to his feet. "The reason I was surprised yesterday when you told me you hardly knew Walsh was because what I couldn't figure from the get-go was why Amber would stay silent about the abuse she had been taking from him if he wasn't her boyfriend, which, from what you all said, he didn't appear to be. In fact, it seems Amber was telling her father the truth when she said Walsh was just a guy she met at a porch party, a kid so smitten with her he was still coming upstate on weekends in a vain attempt to try and steal her away from the young man she was seeing."

As Kubiak rounded the table toward the three college students, Jennifer argued, "But, if he wasn't her boyfriend, why didn't she call the police the first time he hit her?"

"That was my question," Kubiak said. "And her silence was the only reason I believed him to be her boyfriend. So, supposing he wasn't, the only explanation that finally made any sense was that he never did hit her. The person who was taking out his anger on her arms, on her back, and finally on

her face, had to be another young man, one she was close to, one she would stay silent for, and one her college friends would feel the need to cover for.” He stopped behind Robert’s chair. “Mr. Fleming, you’re the only one here whose hands I haven’t yet seen tonight. Would you mind taking them out of your pockets?”

Robert again looked to Crawford, received nothing in return but a cold stare, addressed Kubiak without bothering to turn and look at him. “I don’t get it,” he said. “Why would you want to see my hands?”

“Because the other thing I couldn’t figure out was how Walsh couldn’t have a mark on him except for that knife wound. Lieutenant Crawford told me there was no sign of a struggle, and I suppose there wasn’t between you and him because he wasn’t expecting you to shove that knife in his chest. But, how could we all have believed that he had just finished savagely beating Amber Torasella in that same kitchen, and not been left with so much as a scratch from her fingernails or a bruised knuckle from the bones of her face? Of course, it was possible, but doubtful. And I’m sure the officers involved in the investigation would have come up with the question themselves, in time, but we all agree that time is of the essence here, so would you please waste no more of it and simply show me your hands?”

Robert hesitated a moment more, then smiled, and with a self-deprecating chuckle pulled his hands from his pockets and held them up, swiveling from side to side in his chair and displaying the backs of his red, swollen fingers to the room. "All right," he said. "I suppose it would be ridiculous at this point to claim this happened from punching a wall, so, I'll tell you the truth. I did hit Amber. I'm not proud of it, and I'm willing to face the consequences for it. But that doesn't mean I killed Harold Walsh, and if you had a shred of evidence I did, you and I would be sitting alone in an interrogation room right now, wouldn't we?"

"Evidence, right now, I don't need. There will be time and resources enough to come up with that. You have to understand, we're only gathered here in the first place because the police have reason to believe that Joe Torasella did not kill Walsh; in fact, it's pretty clear, at least to the detectives in this room, that all he's guilty of is doing a sloppy job of corrupting a crime scene. That's why Amber is in custody, because they, like her father, believed that she murdered Walsh in self-defense while he was in the act of beating her. But now that you've confessed to the fact you were the one beating her, they know she had no reason to kill Walsh, no motive at all. So she'll be released, even if her father isn't. Right now, she doesn't trust the police enough to tell them anything; she can't even admit that Walsh wasn't the one who hit her because she thinks things might go even

worse for her father if he were to get nailed for the murder of a completely innocent man. But once the investigation focuses on you, and with you already under arrest for the beating, it won't take much to convince her that the quickest way to get her father sprung is to tell the truth.

"I can guess how she'll tell it. Of course, the first part I know: I set you off when I showed up yesterday. You saw me as yet another threat from her old man and, as usual, you blamed her. She was with Walsh, having pizza, just blocks from your apartment when I left you. You contacted her, and the fact she was with Walsh maybe made you even angrier. At some point in the night, Walsh went home, and you wound up alone with her, probably at your apartment. Amber will fill in those details. She'll also tell us whether, after you beat her, she went to Walsh's home knowing she couldn't go to her own home looking like she did, or if she just phoned him from her car because she had no one else she could talk to. I'm guessing, just from the time line, that she went to Oak Park. But one way or the other Walsh found out and he contacted you. Phone records will prove that. He either threatened you directly or threatened to call the police, and you told him in that smooth, logical voice of yours to slow down, wait until you talked to him face to face, man to man. He would have shooed Amber home just before you got there in order to keep things from escalating, leaving a twenty-five-minute

window before her father arrived. During that window, things did escalate anyway when he still wouldn't listen to your arguments. There went that golden future of yours, entirely tied up to your degree at U of C. He wouldn't listen to reason, so you reached for a knife because you're the kind of man who reserves his bare fists for women.

"Go ahead, Robert. Tell me the details I've got right and the ones I've got wrong. Either way, the gist of it is that it was you who had every reason to kill Walsh, and that's what you did. I don't know how you thought you could manage to get away with it, though I imagine a fellow like you thinks he can manage anything, especially when you have girls like Amber covering for you. I'm pretty sure she's done with that now, what with you planning to sit back and let her father take the rap for the murder. In fact, judging from the looks on your friends' faces, I think everyone is done covering for you at this point."

With his glare fixed on Kubiak, Robert didn't see the looks on Bridgot's and Chad's faces. He also did not see that Danny Guie had moved up on the other side of him in the event he should leap to his feet and lunge at Kubiak, which it looked like he might do, and was precisely what he did.

Guie's tackle stopped him short. Still, Kubiak followed through with a blow to Robert's jaw from a defensive swing

already in motion. He supposed he could have checked it, had he really tried. It was a moment he would both regret and savor over the next few days each time he rubbed his bruised knuckles.

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LITTLE BROTHER

ANN WOODWARD



Art by Linda Weatherly

It was a time when summer lingered beyond its season, distilled into pleasant warm days of sun and nightly rains. The gardens surrounding the house of the princess were still green and full of the white blooms she preferred, and the morning glory vines in the small private courtyard of the Lady

Aoi were a wall of blue along the veranda. Lady Aoi was not one of those who loved the mists and decay of autumn. To her they meant dying. Warmth and light were what opened her spirit; even the glowing maples of the Ninth Month were not compensation for the shriveling of the leaves, the sopping rains, the frost on the gravel paths, and the doleful honking of departing geese. She was grateful for the delay of all that. Typically, the princess did not agree with her but fretted and fanned. They sat together beside a slightly raised blind, sewing autumn robes for her husband. The cloth across their laps was indeed hot, Aoi thought, but she did not complain. She was feeling sad for the princess, so concentrated on her stitches. Because even russet silk and brocade will not bring the prince here just now, she thought. He was known to be visiting these days a young widow who lived in a house in the Third Ward of the city. It was said he was so often there that his relatives feared he would bring her into his quarters at the palace as a third wife. He was always throwing up to them a quotation from Taoist medicine that advised frequent and varied sexual activity. Aoi wondered where he had found this passage; she would never have let him see it in her scrolls on Chinese medicine. She thought that Taoists were not good models for a man like the prince.

O-hana, Aoi's maid, opened the sliding door a bit and announced a visitor. It was a woman Aoi knew well and she told O-hana that she would see her in her own quarters.

"No, no," said the princess. "I would like to meet your friend." She told O-hana not to bother setting up a curtain screen because it was so hot and they could all be ladies together. This made Aoi uneasy. With this guest lately there usually also came problems, and she thought that her mistress had enough problems of her own. O-hana took away the sewing and ushered in a thin woman who was unusually tall.

"Lady, I intrude," the visitor said to the princess, bowing low as if she wished she could disappear. Aoi could tell that she had hoped for a private conversation.

"No, no. I am happy to see you. Lady Aoi speaks of you."

It was Lady Teishi, widow of a man who had died during the previous summer's epidemic of smallpox.

As was the custom, Aoi expressed sympathy briefly and incompletely. "I know it must be so difficult for you . . ." she said.

The woman opposite, whose figure was striped by shadows from the blinds, opened her fan and raised a corner of her sleeve to blot tears. She was a little untidy in her dress, the outer robe of bronze-colored silk wrinkled and not quite set on her shoulders and her long hair straying here and there

from its confining travel ribbons. Aoi noticed that the princess was observing avidly the tears of another unhappy woman.

“But,” said Aoi “you have the consolation of your beautiful daughter.” And to the princess, “You have heard of this daughter, possibly?”

“Ah, yes. So that is your . . . But they say . . .”

Aoi wondered at once if this was the wrong topic to bring up because young women of marriageable age were often not consolations but worrying puzzles. Rumors of a girl of good family who is well favored were common, and commonly exaggerated. For peeping and illicit intimacy were sports among the men, accepted and deplored but not criminal, and if the man was highborn enough, not vigorously protested. Unmarried girls must be protected with discretion from spying and from invasion of privacy. And then when a man wanted to visit with the intention of marriage, parents had the difficult task of assessing his sincerity. For if, after careful negotiation, they allowed the overnight visits to begin and then the man did not complete the three consecutive times that meant marriage, the girl's reputation suffered and everyone was unhappy. Worst of all was if a prying man managed to get to the girl in her own house and spend the night making love to her. Then he would brag to others and that young woman would not be considered fit for a fine

match. Daughters could be married to those of high rank and thus increase the influence of their fathers and all their relatives. Of course, there was an opposite advantage if it was a man who married into a higher family. It was because of this possibility of social and professional advance that the matter of marriage was such a serious one.

“Ah, I knew you would understand,” Teishi said. She paused and looked doubtfully at the princess. “If I may speak personally?” And then to Aoi, “I need your advice. There is a worse problem than you can imagine. But you are so wise and I hope I may ask you . . .”

Aoi was known in court circles for her unwomanly accomplishments, which included reading Chinese, and through that a knowledge of herbs and medicines. She was often called to attend to physical problems, though her advice was usually simple common sense. She had been credited with removing a troublesome spirit by opening the sickroom to fresh breezes, tempting the evil possession to creep out and be blown away. There was no doubt, however, that the medicines in her little chest with the many drawers always worked. Because Aoi only used those that had worked in the past. Yet seeing her successes with a dose here and there or massage of cramping muscles, people thought her to be wise in the matter of personal problems as well.

“You see,” said Teishi, “it is Little Brother.”

“Ah. Tell me what he has done now.” It was the princess who spoke, to Aoi’s surprise. She would be glad to hear of the misbehavior of a highborn man who was not her husband, it seemed.

Aoi knew this Little Brother, whose name was Masahira. He was a brother, as had been Teishi’s husband, of the Great Minister of the Left, that man who ruled as one of the heads of the government, sharing power with the Great Minister of the Right, who was the father of the princess Aoi served and Aoi’s special friend. There was the emperor, of course, but he had no actual power and it was the princess’s father who was the effective and active force in making decisions, while he of the Left was allowed to be highly visible in his gorgeous robes, displaying perfect dignity and courtesy and receiving petitions and requests for favor, and many, many gifts. His brothers—the one who had died and the younger one now left—shone with light reflected from such brilliance and had places in the government hierarchy. For the youngest, the one known universally as Little Brother, his position in the Ministry of Domestic Affairs was famously not enough.

The story came out between times of weeping and times of choking on indignation and fury. To compensate for his insignificance, Little Brother had amassed more and more

parcels of land, a source of income for all aristocrats. He had encouraged the peasants on these estates to develop a specialty of making rice wine, which was so good that Little Brother was able to trade the famous barrels for almost anything. First of all, of course, he wanted more land, and then he had let his friends cancel all taxes on his property and its produce. He lived in a house they had assigned him, they sent him cloth and food and carriages and horses. For this younger brother, called by the illustrious head of the family "the little one," pursued all manly pleasures: riding the hills and woods after deer and wild boar, shooting from the saddle with an enormous bow, drinking and banqueting, and often adding wives to his household. He was always to be seen in hunting dress that was much worn and he seemed to take pride in their ragged and dirty condition.

All these things Aoi knew, as the did princess, she thought. They knew also that when Teishi's husband died, Little Brother had driven her from her splendid house and given her a lesser one and a small stipend to live on, saying that he had a friend who was owed a favor and who wanted to return to the capital after his stint as governor in a distant province. The house would be given to him. Teishi had been helpless without the influence of any men in her family, who had all died or been driven into exile by the Great Minister of the Left for their threatening prominence. Thus when the middle brother married Teishi, he had failed to gain any political

advantage but he had not minded, being much attached to his wife.

What Aoi did not know was that Little Brother had no children and had decided to adopt Teishi's daughter and make her available soon for marriage. He was pressing her to turn over the child at once.

"She is too young," the grieving woman moaned, "and she is quite small in her body. She cannot bear a child with so little growth and . . ."

"And," the princess said, "you are out of your mind with worry. We quite understand."

"He seeks advantage by marrying her to someone high up." Teishi, in a gesture of rage and impotence, tore her hair aside so fiercely that Aoi expected to see a sheaf of it fall onto the polished floor. "I have kept her close to me, especially since her father died, and we—her old nurse is still with us—we have seen to her education. They are already saying how perfect she is, and though I know that none of those men has had even the smallest sight of her, she is almost all that they say. She plays the lute quite acceptably and she likes especially to make swift ink drawings to illustrate poems. Her handwriting is unusual and interesting and it will improve with time. Her hair lies well and is almost

to the floor already. Really she is perfect, though I should not say it. But she is so young, not yet fourteen!”

For a moment the justified pride of a mother softened her features. Aoi sighed. “But if her uncle asks,” Teishi went on, “I must produce her. If only her father had not died!”

“This serving woman you mention—”

“Her name is Shosho.”

“Yes. Is she loyal, does she truly care for her?”

“Oh, yes. She came to us from my husband’s family when our child was born. She is much more upset by all this than I am.”

“That is good,” Aoi said. “For often in a situation like this, the closest servant is persuaded or forced to betray the family.”

Aoi observed that Teishi became still in the midst of a motion to straighten her collars. Immediately suppressing her distress, she dropped into a bow of leave-taking. There were mumbled and confused explanations and Teishi left abruptly.

“Unh?” said the princess.

“Ah, she was always sort of a sudden person. Please do not mind. It is plain how upset she is just now.”

"Yes," said the princess with more relish than sympathy.

Left alone, Aoi thought with dismay of Masahira, the Little Brother. He had recently sent for her and she had tried to avoid going by replying that she was ritually unclean because of the death of a person who had consulted her. She had not foreseen that he would discover that no one whom she would have seen in that way had recently died. He became furious and sent again, saying that he would expect her in the evening. Again she put him off, but the next day he could not be denied entry to the princess's house and he sat beside Aoi's curtain and confided that he had a trifling problem.

Hearing of pains and fallings down and loss of weight, seeing between the curtain panels that there was a bounding pulse in his throat and that his eyes were yellow, she told him as carefully as she could that if he continued to drink rice wine to excess, she could not expect many more months for him of the sports he enjoyed. He took this as an insult to his strength and to his judgment and to his manhood and left in a temper.

Aoi did not think to be afraid, but she would have to be very careful if she were to help Lady Teishi and her daughter. She found a warm spot just out of the sun and set herself to thinking.

For the next few days the sublime summer held. Knowing it could not be long before rain and cold winds, Aoi spent time beside the blue flowers, which was where O-hana found her.

"That person has come to the kitchen," she said.

"Oh? I have not sent for him. What does he want?"

"He is as filthy and drunk as ever, says he wants rice, won't stay to speak to you, as if we would let him into the house."

"I see." This was the Combmaker, a man of odd talents who could be sometimes called upon for discreet investigations in the city. "Can you bring him? Yes, after a wash . . ." Aoi knew that it was usual for O-hana to throw a bucket of water on the Combmaker and scrub a bit before allowing him into Aoi's presence.

O-hana returned to say he could not delay, but he would be beside her morning glories dressed as a gardener at the end of the day. He had filled his hands with rice balls and staggered against the gate guard on his way out.

At dusk he appeared with a can of water and a basketful of dead blossoms. Aoi was in place behind the screen of vines.

"Am I to be greeted by a well-spoken person this time," Aoi said. "No pushing your chest along the ground? No lisping

and slurring of compliments?"

"Now, lady, do not mock me. I have bad things to tell you. I am afraid for you."

"Ah," said Aoi, too surprised to make a whole sentence. If the Combmaker was not bothering with his usual act of exaggerated awe and submission, this must be serious indeed. "Tell me," she said.

"I see things, you know, down in the city. And this time they may have seen me. That is why I could not linger earlier, why I had to leave with food in my hands."

"And what is it you have seen?"

"Two men, and they were wearing the old uniform of the guard of the Great Minister, he of the Left."

"Old uniform?"

"Well, you know he is always changing their shoes or their hats or the colors of their belts. And these men wore the fashion of three years ago. And that means . . .?"

Aoi was at a loss. "Means what?"

With elaborate patience he explained. "His brother buys up

the out-of-fashion uniform pieces and puts them on his own men out in the country. So you see this means . . .”

“It means that Little Brother has brought rough men to the city.”

“Yes. And you made him angry and doubting of himself. Lady, I fear for you and you must be careful.”

“But I merely said . . .”

He looked down, giving her a chance to reflect on the character of Little Brother.

“Hmm.”

“You must have a guard. Or can you move to the house of the princess’s father?”

“I can. But I will not.”

“Then, lady, we will watch you.” And before she could reply he had splashed his water on the roots of the vines, tossed aside the can, changed his shape to that of a man with a bent leg and was gone into the shadows of the garden. The basket of dried petals sat tipped against a stone where he had been.

Aoi sighed. They would watch, some of his army of waifs and cripples, and she would never know they were there. But O-hana must warn the cook and the boy who fetched charcoal and the maid who brought water from the well. She wanted no alarms from unexpected collisions and no reports of ghosts.

It was only a day later that a wiry boy of twelve or so spoke to O-hana outside the gate. "I am supposed to say it was not her," he said.

"Unh?"

"Just a message—I don't know what it means."

But another message soon arrived, from Lady Teishi. Aoi sent for O-hana. "That lady who is in trouble . . ." Aoi always confided in this sensible woman from the country and they often consulted together. "She says that Shosho, the one who cared for the young daughter, has run away." Aoi indicated a folded bit of paper.

"I see. But why?"

They looked at each other, both easily imagining why. This Little Brother was a bully who would have tried at once to pressure the poor nursemaid to help him in his efforts to take

the girl into his own house. Nodding, they agreed on the unspoken idea between them.

“And do you think she would really leave the child unprotected? It is my impression that she was extreme in her devotion.” Aoi felt sick, the alternative to running away was too violent to contemplate. “And,” she said miserably, “there is that strange message from the Combmaker that I am not the one.”

“He means,” said O-hana, “that it is someone else who has been harmed.”

Nodding, puzzled, increasingly unhappy, they began to make a plan. Aoi wrote on a large piece of paper, O-hana gave it to the messenger boy to take to Lady Teishi’s house and then began to pack. The princess was given a brief explanation and agreed to Aoi’s absence and said she would let her father’s steward know how many to expect. The Great Minister of the Right was not in the city just now but would return within a few weeks.

The day had been steadily darkening but the storm held off until they were safely inside the mansion in the First Ward. Aoi wanted their passage to be observed and reported because, by this move, they declared the source of their support and they were assured of safety. Even the brother of

such a high minister as he of the Left would not dare to displease the mighty Minister of the Right.

Lady Teishi brought only a few servants—her personal woman, a very young replacement for the missing Shosho, a cook to help out in the kitchen, and two men to take care of the carriages and the oxen. Her own small house was left almost unguarded. It meant nothing to Teishi if she could not use it to shelter her daughter.

The girl's name was Takako but Teishi addressed her as Sister, though she had no siblings. Seeming too frightened to speak, she shrank into her robes, tiny and bewildered. Aoi touched her carefully, marveling at the perfectly oval face and springing hair that streamed in a brilliant flood to the edges of her gowns, but seeing also the immaturity that could not understand the significance of her own beauty. She thought to reassure her in this enormous house, stroking and patting but requiring no response. They let her retire to her private space and Aoi's conversation with Teishi was not ended until long after dark.

"We fear," Aoi said, indicating O-hana and making sure it was understood that her maid was a part of this conference, "that your woman has been . . . eliminated. I know you are shocked. But rough men have been seen and they were connected to Little Brother—of that we are sure. Now the

woman is gone, the men are gone, and . . .”

“But would they have . . .?”

“Oh, yes. Think! Think who it is you are dealing with. A man so doubtful of his own worth that he has spent his life living off of others. This will not be the first time he has killed—”

A gasp escaped Teishi, hearing the word spoken.

“—killed to get his way.”

It took some time to calm Lady Teishi so that they could explain to her what they meant to do.

“He will find you. We will see to that. In fact, he probably already knows. We did not try to hide our journey. But as long as we are here, he can do nothing rash. What he will do, we think, is to try to put one of his own women into your service.”

Teishi’s aversion was violent and immediate.

“This you must allow,” Aoi said.

At length they persuaded her.

Aoi sent for the Combmaker. When he came, the servants received him calmly. They were well trained and they knew

that their master had dealings sometimes with people from the back alleys. He came in on his knees, flopping about as if too drunk to know which way was upright. His weak eye rolled in and out of focus, never looking at the curtain screen that concealed Aoi. Finally he lost the battle to stay vertical, collapsing onto the floor and pushing himself forward with awkward heaves, all the while intoning sentences of submission.

"Thish lowly pershon has come . . . Ah, lady, you have requesht . . . have done me the honor . . ." Here he paused to congratulate himself on an unslurred phrase. ". . . to . . ." And he drew his limbs together, focused his eyes, sat into a graceful bow, and finished in a perfect imitation of highborn speech, "to ask for my humble advice? Is that it?"

Aoi smiled behind the curtain. That was the essence of it: This man was many men in one disgraceful bundle.

"Have you found out what happened to the girl's servant?"

"Not yet. But we know. She is surely lying garroted in a ravine somewhere. We can take that as true."

"Yes. I think so, too. We have them here and they are safe. But we must save them from him. And here is what we thought of. We need your help to find a lacquer maker you

can trust. We must have . . .” And she gave him a list.

After the storm on the day they moved to the mansion of the princess's father, there were days of rain and cooler temperature. Overnight, it seemed, the leaves curled and lost their grip on the branches, falling in dips and slides, scuttling in drifts around the courtyards and having to be fished from the water of the garden lake.

As expected, Little Brother offered to send a replacement for the nurse, and the woman came and was competent and reserved. They kept her, at first, to only brief contact with Takako. Her mother attended to bathing and dressing her, nervous and with a set face, steadfast in following the plan.

Meanwhile, the Combmaker visited again and left a packet and two small bottles with O-hana. Then came a secret privacy while the woman from outside was visiting the house of Little Brother. Though she said she needed clothes she had left behind, they knew she had gone to report to him.

The girl was undressed and covered with a cloth, leaving her shoulders exposed. O-hana brought a thin mixture of lacquer and red cinnabar powder, Aoi herself painted a broad irregular birthmark along the base of the girl's throat but far enough back that it was easily concealed under clothing. Teishi was hysterical between giggles and tears, the girl

seemed delighted to be involved in a conspiracy, and urged Aoi to make an even larger imperfection. But Aoi was not to overdo the plot. Anything too outrageous would be suspect, she thought. In the end, there was a small stain, pale red like a couple of wilted flower petals, not actually unattractive but definitely a mark.

The woman came back and was greeted courteously, which rather caused her to open her eyes. Though they had not received her rudely, they had been cool. That night when it was time to retire, she was asked to help her mistress settle the girl for the night. Aoi and O-hana listened and, indeed, heard a small cry from the girl's quarters. They exchanged serious glances, afraid to smile.

Then they waited. The woman bustled away first thing in the morning to the house she had visited the day before. O-hana saw her going and remarked that they might need her, but the woman pretended not to hear. Little Brother could not be kept waiting for this tremendous news.

First he sent a letter, all grace and compliments and expressions of affection for his brother's wife and admiration for the Great Minister of the Right, their protector. With it came a cask of rice wine and a set of lacquer cups from which to drink it. After only a day more, he asked to visit. They invited him to come at a time near dusk, when the light

would be uncertain.

Aoi met him in the broad reception corridor. She was dressed in clothes that were rich but of subdued color, her fan held just below the eyes, her attitude that of extreme respect. He surged toward her then checked his pace and came on more slowly. He wore hunting clothes, as usual, but elegant ones, not at all mussed and stained. Aoi had not seen him for two months, since the disastrous session about his health. He looked unusually presentable, but she observed that the excessive pulse still pounded at the sides of his neck, that his eyes were as off-color as before. He was not a handsome man, but he was sturdy and heavily built. The word "little" did not apply. For the briefest moment he glanced up as they entered the main part of the house, and his eyes betrayed a blind and bitter hope, instantly shut down. He thought to see the minister, Aoi believed, and that he would think well of his colleague's brother. But surely he knew that the Great Minister of the Right was not in the city. Everyone always knew that sort of thing. What a pity he is not here, Aoi said to herself. I should have liked for him to see that glance, so adeptly shuttered. Masahira regarded her with an overbearing stare and a manner of brushing aside in advance anything that might be said to him.

She led him to a cushion made of rushes, where he sat before a wide curtain screen, behind which were Teishi and

Takako. Aoi, in her capacity of lady-in-waiting, was not customarily as concealed as family women, but she joined the others behind the screen. She did not think it safe to let Teishi feel lonely in this situation. O-hana came with a flask of wine and some grilled vegetables in a spicy sauce. They surprised him with thin slices of duck, a gift from one of the minister's friends. At first he made a show of refusing the food, the ultimate insult, but then he began to eat and finished everything.

"This trouble with your daughter," he began.

Teishi, suddenly rigid, countered in her rash way, "Trouble? We have no trouble. Except that something has happened to a valued woman of my house and we feel threatened."

"And is that not trouble? And is it not because of your stubbornness about your daughter? You must agree that it is only I who can see her safely married."

"I do not want— She does not want—"

"She is said to be attractive."

"Ah, as for that—" Teishi looked to Aoi for help.

"But now I hear of a defect." He overrode anything Aoi had meant to say. "How can there be such a thing, when everyone

says . . . What are you concealing?" Such a question in a rising voice from such a man was terrifying to Teishi and she could not speak.

Aoi said, "It is true there is a mark, a small one. But it will disappear as she grows, I have seen it before."

He became so agitated that she feared a blow to destroy the fabric between them. Suddenly he was shouting, "I will be shown this girl! She is my responsi—" But he choked and could only grind his teeth, gasping for breath, curbing his temper. Was there fear in his glance aside, as if he might find the owner of the house listening? Aoi had a moment of doubt, but she could not allow any softening of her purpose.

"Yes, yes," they both said. "We understand. We are prepared ____"

Teishi brought forward her tiny daughter, who leaned into a deep bow to her uncle. They put her between them, turned her head so that falling hair shielded her face, and carefully exposed the red place on her shoulder.

He stared.

"It is not extreme," Aoi said. "It will fade in just a few . . ."

But he had turned away, anger winning over caution in his twisted face. "How could you do this to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It is only a small spot . . . Some consider such a thing a mark of celestial favor."

"It—is—disgusting."

He could not leave soon enough, his bow only a trifling bend, his feet loud on the floorboards as he shouted for his men and the woman he had sent, also. The carriage waited beside the veranda, propped on its traces and level with the floor, for easy entry. He bent to lift the back curtain but folded helplessly downward and crashed to the floor, bones knocking as he fell, and blood shot from his mouth.

Aoi had not foreseen the hemorrhage but nothing else about this death surprised her. It was almost as if the blow of seeing his niece's birthmark had been a physical one, too much for his weakened condition. Yet she could not feel satisfaction that she had been right about the danger of an extreme pulse.

The Great Minister of the Left gave Masahira, his despised Little Brother, an elaborate funeral, though he did not observe the whole prescribed time of mourning but appeared in robes

of emerald and light blue too soon after. Aoi and O-hana returned to the house of the princess. Her father came back from his trip and sent for them, shaking his head but unable to hide his satisfaction. "How is it," he said, "that while I am away, the most troublesome man in the capital is demolished by a few women?"

O-hana hid her face. Aoi forbore to look pleased. The last moments of Little Brother's life had not been anything they had hoped for and she would not see what they had done as a victory, would not let herself feel relief that he had died. She had not needed death to solve this problem.

"We dealt with him gently," she said. "If he died by violence, it was not our doing."

"Well. But you seem sure that he had the woman Shosho killed because she stood against him in his plan. Don't you see some justice here?"

Aoi only turned her face away.

"And the girl?"

"We cleaned off the mark and she and her mother have retired to a village by the shore. The Great Minister of the Left will provide for them and they will perhaps never return. But

that is a truly beautiful young girl, she has every gift of nature. Her mother will protect her for a time. Then . . .”

She sat feeling dissatisfied and cross. “We could have tried to talk to him,” she said, remembering the look of hope and knowing that it was a thing she could never explain. “We could have appealed to reason . . . Ah!” The minister’s face told her what she knew: that there would have been no possibility of reasoning with that man. Yet she felt—what? Sad? Guilty?

A poem occurred to her, which she did not voice.

*One can easily
Create so simple a thing
As an outer flaw.
But to do this secretly—
Is not that a flawconcealed?*

Ah, Aoi, she said to herself, why not accept a good result? Outside, mist dimmed the red of the maples and the gardens dripped with dew from every leaf, under a ghost of sun. Finally she felt that she had discovered the root of her discontent. I would have liked, she thought, for Little Brother to have been happy for just one day. But who could have given him that?

“You are sad for him,” said the minister. “It is good that someone grieves.”

“Yes. I grieve for the Second Man, the man he might have been.”

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THE PAIN OF OTHERS

BLAKE CROUCH

*The bite of conscience,
like the bite of a dog into a stone, is a stupidity . . .
Can you give yourself your own evil and your own good
and hang your own will over yourself as a law?*

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Letty Dobesh, five weeks out of Fluvanna Correctional Center on a nine-month bit for felony theft, straightened the red wig over her short brown hair, adjusted the oversize Jimmy Choo sunglasses she'd lifted out of a locker two days ago at the Asheville Racquet and Fitness Club, and handed a twenty-spot to the cabbie.

"Want change, miss?" he asked.

"On a nine seventy-five fare? What does your heart tell you?"

Past the bellhop and into the Grove Park Inn carrying a small leather duffle bag, the cloudy autumn day just cool enough to warrant the fires at either end of the lobby, the fourteen-foot stone hearths sending forth drafts of intersecting warmth.

She sat down at a table on the outskirts of the lounge, noting the prickle in the tips of her ears that always started up right before. Adrenaline and fear and a shot of hope because you never knew what you might find. Better than sex on tweak.

The barkeep walked over and she ordered a San Pellegrino with lime. Checked her watch as he went back to the bar: 2:58 P.M. An older couple cuddled on a sofa by the closest fireplace with glasses of wine. A man in a navy blazer read a newspaper several tables away. Looked to her like money—top-shelf hair and skin. Must have owned a tanning bed or just returned from the islands. Two Mexicans washed windows that overlooked the terrace. All in all, quiet for a Saturday afternoon, and she felt reasonably anonymous, though it didn't really matter. What would be recalled when the police showed up? An attractive thirtysomething with curly red hair and ridiculous sunglasses.

As her watch beeped three o'clock, she picked out the sound of approaching footsteps—the barkeep returning with her Pellegrino. He set the sweating glass on the table and pulled a napkin out of his vest pocket.

She glanced up. Smiled. Good-looking kid. Compulsive weightlifter.

“What do I owe you?”

“On the house,” he said.

She crushed the lime into the mineral water. Through the windows she could see the view from the terrace—bright trees under gray sky, downtown Asheville in the near distance, the crest of the Blue Ridge in the far, summits headless under the cloud deck. She sipped her drink and stared at the napkin the barkeep had left on the table. Four four-digit, handwritten numbers. Took her thirty seconds to memorize them, and a quick look around confirmed what she had hoped—the window washers and the hotel guests remained locked and absorbed in their own worlds. She lifted the napkin and slid the key card underneath it across the glass tabletop and into her grasp. Then shredded the napkin, sprinkling the pieces into the hissing water.

One hour later, she fished her BlackBerry out of her purse as she stepped off the elevator and onto the fifth floor. The corridor plush and vacant. No housekeeping carts. An ice machine humming around the corner.

Down the north wing, Letty flushing with the satisfaction that

came when things went pitch-perfect. She could have quit now and called it a great haul, her duffle bag sagging with the weight of three high-end laptops, six hundred and forty-five in cash, one cell phone, two iPods, and the contents of three fully raided minibars.

Standing in front of the closed door of 5212, she dialed the front desk on her stolen BlackBerry.

"Grove Park Inn Resort and Spa. How may I direct your call?"

"Room 5212."

"Certainly."

Through the door, she heard the phone ringing, and she let it ring five times before ending the call and glancing once more up and down the corridor.

The master key card unlocked the door.

The room was the modest one of the four—a single king-sized bed (unmade), tiled bathroom with a shower and garden tub, the mirror still beaded with condensation. In the sitting area, an armoire, loveseat, leather chair, and floor-to-ceiling windows with a three hundred fifty dollar a night view of the Asheville skyline, the mountains, and a golf course—

greens and fairways lined with pines and maple trees. A trace of expensive cologne lingered in the air, and the clothes on the bed smelled of cigar smoke.

She perused the bedside table drawer, the armoire, the dresser, the drawers under the bathroom sink, the closet, the suitcase, even under the sofa cushions, which occasionally yielded big scores from the rich too cheap or lazy to use the hotel safe.

Room 5212 was a bust—nothing but three Romeo y Julieta cigars, which she of course pocketed. Bonuses for the bellhop and barkeep.

On her way out, Letty unzipped her duffle bag and opened the minibar, her BlackBerry buzzing as she reached for a 1.5 ounce bottle of Glenlivet 12 Year.

Pressed TALK. “Yeah?”

“What room you in?”

Letty told him.

“Get out of there. He’s coming back.”

She closed the minibar. “How long do I have?”

“I got tied up giving directions. You might not have any time.”

She hoisted the duffle bag onto her shoulder, started toward the door, but the unmistakable sound of a key card sliding into the slot stopped her cold.

A muffled voice: “I think you’ve got it upside down.”

Letty opened the bifold closet doors and slipped in. With no doorknob on the inside, she had to pull them shut by the slats.

People entered the hotel suite. Letty let the duffle bag slide off her shoulder and onto the floor. Dug the BlackBerry out of her purse, powered it off as the door closed.

Through a ribbon of light, she watched two men walk past the closet, one in a navy blazer and khaki slacks, the other wearing a black suit, their faces obscured by the angle of the slats.

“Drink, Chase?”

“Jameson, if you’ve got it.”

She heard the minibar open.

The man who wasn’t named Chase poured the Irish whiskey into a rocks glass and cracked the cap on a bottle of beer

and the men settled themselves in the sitting area. Letty drew in deep breaths, her heart slamming in her chest, her knees soft, as if her legs might buckle at any moment.

“Chase, I need to hear you say you’ve really thought this through, that you’re absolutely sure.”

“I am. I only went to Victor when I realized there was no other way. I’m really in a bind.”

“You brought the money?”

“Right here.”

“Mind if I have a look?”

Letty heard locks unclasp, what might have been a briefcase opening.

“Now, you didn’t just run down to your bank, ask for twenty-five large in hundred dollar bills?”

“I went to Victor.”

“Good. We’re still thinking tomorrow, yes?”

“Tomorrow.”

“I understand you have a son?”

“Skyler. He’s seven. From a previous marriage.”

“I want you to go out with your son tomorrow morning at ten. Buy some gas with a credit card. Go to Starbucks. Buy a coffee for yourself. A hot chocolate for Skyler. Wear a bright shirt. Flirt with the barista. Be memorable. Establish a record of you not being in your house from ten to noon.”

“And then I just go home?”

“That’s right.”

“Can you tell me what you’re going to do? So I can be prepared?”

“It’d be more natural, your conversations with the police I mean, if you were truly surprised.”

“I hear you on that, but I’ll play it better if I know going in. It’s the way I’d prefer it, Arnold.”

“Where does your wife typically shower?”

“Upstairs in the master bath, right off our bedroom.”

“As you’re stepping out of the shower, is the toilet close?”

“Yeah, a few feet away.”

“You’re going to find her on the floor beside the toilet, neck broken like she’d slipped getting out of the shower. It happens all the time.”

“Okay.” Chase exhaled. “Okay, that’ll work. I like that. Then I just call the police?”

“Call 911. Say you don’t know if she’s dead, but that she isn’t moving.”

“The police won’t suspect I did this?”

“They may initially.”

“I don’t want that.”

“Then don’t have your wife killed. It’s not a neat, easy transaction, and you shouldn’t do business with anyone who tells you it is. The husband will always be suspected at first, but please understand I am very good at what I do. There will be an autopsy, but assuming you hold it together, it’ll be ruled an accident. Now what does your wife do for a living?”

“Not really anything now. She used to be a registered nurse. Why?”

“Just a little piece of information that helps me to prepare.”

“That manila folder in the briefcase contains a recent photograph of Daphne. Address. House key. Floor plan. Everything you asked for. And I’ll make sure the third window to the right of the front door is unlocked.”

“I’ll need your help distracting her while I’m getting inside. I want you to call her at precisely ten fifteen A.M. Tell her you can’t find your wallet. You got a bedside table?”

“I do.”

“You say you think you might have left it there, and would she please go check. That’ll get her upstairs, give me time to get in.”

“I should write this all down.”

“No. Don’t write anything down.” The black-suited man rose to his feet. “I’m exhausted. I’m going to grab some shut eye.”

They came toward her, and Letty realized that Chase was the tanned and moneyed specimen she’d seen in the lobby.

“Once you walk out the door, Chase, there’s no going back. You need to understand that.”

She watched them shake hands and then Arnold opened the door and saw Chase out and came back in and closed and locked the door.

He went past the closet and sat down on the end of the bed. Pulled off his shoes and his black socks, and as he sat there rubbing his feet, it occurred to her that he still wore his jacket, that he would want to hang it in the closet. He stood and took off his jacket and started toward the closet.

The vibration of his phone stopped him. He flipped it open. Sighed.

“Yeah . . . No, it’s fine.” He unbuttoned his white Oxford shirt.

Letty’s hands trembled.

“The floral pattern, Jim.” He lay his jacket across the dresser and turned his back to the closet. “Remember we talked about this?” His pants fell to his ankles, followed by his boxer shorts. He stepped out of them, climbed onto the bed, and lay on his back, his feet hanging off the end. “No, Jim. With the daffodils.”

Already forty-five minutes late for work, Letty peered through the slats, saw Arnold’s chest rising and falling, the man otherwise motionless and perfectly silent. She’d been

standing in the same spot for almost ninety minutes, and though she'd abandoned her heels, the closet didn't afford room, with the doors closed, for her to sit down or bend her knees to a sufficient degree of relief. Her legs had been cramping for the last half hour, hamstrings quivering.

She lifted her duffle bag, and as she pushed against the closet door, a rivulet of sweat ran down into the corner of her right eye. Blinking through the saltwater sting, she felt the door give, folding in upon itself with a subtle creak.

She stepped out into the room, glanced at the bed. Arnold hadn't moved.

At the door, she flipped back the inner lock, turned the handle as slowly as she could manage. The click of the retracting deadbolt sounded deafening. She eased the door back and stepped across the threshold.

She sat in the lobby, now noisy and crowded with the onset of cocktail hour. In her chair by the fireplace, she stared into the flames, the BlackBerry in her right hand, finger poised to press TALK.

She couldn't make the call. She'd rehearsed it three times, but it didn't feel right. Hell, she didn't even know Daphne's last name or where the woman lived. Her story would require

a leap of faith on the part of the investigating lawman, and when it came to credibility, she held a pair of twos. She couldn't use her real name, and meeting face-to-face with a detective could never happen. Letty had been convicted three times. Six years of cumulative incarceration. Her fourth felony offense, she'd be labeled a habitual criminal offender and entitled to commiserate sentencing guidelines at four times the max. She'd die in a federal prison.

So seriously, all things considered, what did she care if some rich bitch got her ticket punched? If Letty hadn't hit room 5212 when she did, she'd already be at the diner, flirting for the big tips and still glowing from the afternoon's score. She tossed the BlackBerry back into her duffle. She should just leave. Pretend she'd never heard that conversation. She stole from people, innocent strangers, every chance she got. It never kept her up nights. Never put this torque in her gut. She'd get out of there, call in sick to work, buy two bottles of Merlot, and head back to her miserable apartment. Maybe read a few chapters of that book she'd found at the thrift store—*Self-Defeating Behaviors: Free Yourself from the Habits, Compulsions, Feelings, and Attitudes That Hold You Back*. Pass out on the sofa again.

And you'll wake up tomorrow morning with a headache, a sour stomach, a rotten taste in your mouth, and you'll look

at yourself in that cracked mirror and hate what you see even more.

She cursed loud enough to attract the attention of an older man who'd dolled himself up for the evening, his eyes glaring at her over the top of the *Asheville Citizen-Times*. She slashed him with a sardonic smile and got up, enraged at herself over this swell of weakness. She took two steps. Everything changed. The anger melted. Exhilaration flooding in to take its place. In the emotion and fear of the moment, it had completely escaped her.

Room 5212 contained the manila folder with Daphne's photograph and address, but also a briefcase holding twenty-five thousand in cash. Steal the money. Steal the folder. Save a life.

Even as she scrounged her purse for the master key card, she knew she wouldn't find it. In those first ten seconds of entry into Arnold's room, she'd set it on the dresser, where she imagined, it still sat. She could feel the heat spreading through her face. The barkeep and the bellhop, her only contacts at the hotel, were already off-shift. There'd be no replacement key card.

She started through the lobby, wanting to run, punch through a Sheetrock wall, do something to expend the mounting rage.

She'd stopped to calm herself, leaning against one of the timber columns, her head swimming, when thirty feet away a bell rang, two brass doors spread apart, and the man named Arnold strode off the elevator, looking casual in blue jeans, cowboy boots, and a sports jacket. She followed his progress, watching him thread his way through the crowd, finally arriving at the entrance to the Sunset Terrace. He spoke with the hostess at the podium, and without even thinking about it, Letty found herself moving toward him, wishing she'd honed her pickpocket skills during one of her stints in prison. She'd known a woman at Fluvanna who had it down so cold she'd once lifted fifty wallets during a single day in Disney World. Arnold's back pockets were hidden under his navy jacket, no bulge visible, but people with sense didn't keep their wallet there. Inner pocket of his jacket more likely, and she knew enough to know it took scary talent to snatch it from that location. You had to practically collide with the mark, your hands moving at light speed and with utter precision. She didn't have the chops.

Arnold stepped away from the hostess podium, and she watched him walk across the lobby into the Great Hall Bar, where he slid onto a barstool and waited to be served.

Letty cut in front of a striking couple and elbowed her way to the bar. The stool to Arnold's left sat unoccupied and she

climbed onto it, let the duffle bag drop to her feet. She recognized the scent of his cologne, but she didn't look at him. Watched the barkeep instead, his back to her, mixing what appeared to be a Long Island Iced Tea, pouring shots from four different liquor bottles at once into a pint glass filled with ice.

Arnold drank from a long-necked bottle of Coors Light, picking at the label between sips. Something about his hands fascinated Letty, and she kept staring at them out of the corner of her eye.

When after two minutes the barkeep hadn't come over to take her drink order, she let slip an audible sigh, though in reality she sympathized. The lounge was crowded and she could tell the guy was doing the best he could.

She glanced over at Arnold, back at the bar, thinking he hadn't noticed her predicament. Like everyone else, exclusively engaged in his own world.

So it startled her when he spoke.

"Bartender."

And though the word hadn't been shouted, something in its tone implied a command that ought not be ignored. Clearly

the barkeep picked up on it, too, because he was standing in front of Arnold almost instantaneously, like he'd been summoned.

"Get you another Coors?"

"Why don't you ask the lady what she wants?"

"Sorry, I didn't know she was with you."

"She's not. Still deserves a drink before the icecaps melt, don't you think?"

The barkeep emanated a distinct don't-fuck-with-me vibe that gave Letty the feeling he'd probably killed a number in medium security. A hardness in the eyes she recognized. But those eyes deferred to the customer seated to her right, flashing toward her with a kind of disbelief, like they'd grazed something harder than themselves and come away scratched.

"What would you like?"

"Grey Goose martini, little dirty, with a free-range olive."

"You got it."

Now or never. She turned toward Arnold who'd already

turned toward her, anticipating the attention, the tips of her ears on fire again, and got her first good look at him. Forty years old, she would have guessed. Smooth shaven. Black hair, conservatively cropped. His collar just failing to hide the end of a tat, what might have been an erotic finger strangling his neck. Green eyes that exuded not so much hardness as an altogether otherworldly quality. She didn't know if it was Arnold's confidence or arrogance, but under different circumstances (and perhaps even these) she might have felt a strong attraction to the man.

"You're a lifesaver," she said.

He broke a slight smile. "Do what I can."

She fell back on her break-in-case-of-emergency smile, the one that had disarmed a cop or two, that she'd used to talk her way out of a hotel room in Vegas.

"I'm Letty."

"Arnie."

She shook his hand.

"So's Letty short for—"

"Letisha. I know, it's awful."

“No, I like it. Nothing you hear every day.”

The barkeep placed a martini in front of Letty, slid a fresh beer to Arnold.

“I got these,” Letty said, going for her purse.

“Get out of here.” Arnold reaching into his jacket.

“Actually,” the barkeep said, “these are on me. Sorry about the wait, guys.”

Letty raised her martini by the stem, clinked her glass against the neck of Arnie’s bottle.

“Cheers.”

“New friends.”

They drank.

“So where you from?” Arnie asked.

“Recently moved here.”

“Nice town.”

“S’okay.”

She could already feel the conversation beginning to strain, climbing toward a stall.

“I have a confession to make,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“I shouldn’t. You’ll think I’m awful.”

“I already think you’re awful. Go for it.” He bumped his shoulder against hers as he said it, and she loved the contact.

“I’m here for a blind date.”

“What’d you do? Ditch the guy?”

“No, I’m chickening out. I don’t want to go through with it.”

“You were supposed to meet him in the lobby?”

“This bar. I got scared. Saw you sitting here. I’m a bad person, I know.”

Arnold laughed and slugged back the dregs of his first beer.

“How do you know I’m not the guy?”

“Oh God, are you?”

He raised his eyebrows as if dragging out the suspense.

Finally said, “No, but this poor sap’s probably walking around trying to find you. He know what you look like?”

“General description.”

“So you want to hide out with me. Is that it?”

She dusted off her cute, pouty face. “If it’s not too much trouble. I can’t promise to be witty and engaging but I will get the next round.” She sipped her drink, staring him down over the lip of the martini glass, the salt of the olive juice and the vodka burn flaring on the sides of her tongue.

“Do you one better,” he said.

“How’s that?”

“Well, if we’re really going to sell the thing, totally throw this guy off your trail, you should probably have dinner with me.”

They told each other lies over a beautiful meal, Letty becoming a high-school English teacher and aspiring novelist. She would rise at four every morning and write for

three hours before driving into work, the book already five hundred pages, single-spaced, about a man who bears a strong likeness to a movie star and uses that resemblance to storm the Broadway scene and ultimately Hollywood, to comic and tragic ends.

Arnold worked for a philanthropist based out of Tampa, Florida. Had come to Asheville to investigate and interview the CEO of a research and development think tank that had applied for funding.

“What exactly are they involved in?” Letty asked after the waiter had set down her steak and topped off her wineglass, and she’d sliced into the meat, savoring both the perfection of her medium-rare porterhouse and the impromptu train of bullshit Arnold rattled off about bioinformatics and cancer applications.

They killed two bottles of a great Bordeaux, split a chocolate lava cake, and wrapped things up with a pair of cognacs, sharing a couch by a fireplace in the lobby, Letty adding up the three martinis, her share of the wine (more than a bottle), and now this Rémy Martin which was going down way too easy. Part of her sounding the alarm: *You’re letting it get away from you.* The rest wondering how fast the Hispanic bellhop pulling a cart of luggage toward the elevators could score her some tweak and would Arnold be down for it if he

did?

In the dull brass doors, she watched her and Arnold's warped reflection. He kissed the back of her neck, those fascinating hands around her waist which she was too drunk to bother sucking in.

They stumbled out onto the fifth floor, and by the time she realized her mistake, there was nothing to be done, having instinctively turned down the north wing toward room 5212, as if she'd been up here before.

"I have another confession to make," Letty said while Arnold rummaged through the minibar.

"What's that?"

"I'm not a redhead."

He glanced over the top of the open door as Letty tugged off her wig.

"You look upset," she said.

He stood up, kicked the door closed with the tip of his boot, set the bottles of beer on the dresser beside the keycard Letty had left behind four hours ago.

Sauntered toward her in slow, measured steps, stopping less than an inch away, his belt buckle grazing her sternum.

“Are you upset?” she slurred.

He ran his fingers through her short, brown hair to the base of her neck. She thought she felt his hands tightening around her throat, her carotid artery pulsing against the pressure. Looked up. Green eyes. Suspicion. Lust. She swayed in her heels. He ran his hands down her waist, over the curve of her hips, moved his right hand into the small of her back and pulled her against him.

Music bled through from the next room, something mid-tempo and synthesized from the eighties—Air Supply or worse.

They kept dancing after the music had stopped, a mutual drunken stagger, Arnold working them back toward the wall, where his hand fumbled for the light dimmer.

She woke in the middle of the night with a violent thirst, and even lying on a pillow it felt like someone had caved her skull in while she slept, the red digits of the alarm clock continually descending into place, like the endless motion of a barbershop pole. The bulk of a man snored beside her, his rank breath warming the back of her neck. She lay naked

with a cover twisted between her legs. Couldn't recall passing out. The events after returning to this room lay in shards of memory in between slamming shots of Absolut out of tiny bottles.

She wondered if she'd said anything to undermine the evening's lies, and just the threat of it, considering the man whose bed she shared, broke a cold sweat across her forehead. She shut her eyes. Heard her father's voice—all cigarette growl and whiskey-tongued—that whispered to her on nights like these, lying in the beds of strange men and the darkness spinning, or in a lonely cell, cursing her back to sleep. Words that, deep in her heart, she knew were true.

Threads of light stole in around the blinds.

Nine twelve A.M.

A line of painful brilliance underscored the bathroom door, the shower rushing on the other side. She sat up in bed and threw back the covers and brought her palms to her temples, pressing against the vibrant ache.

Out of bed, onto her feet, listing and nauseated. Stepped into her knit cashmere dress and pulled the straps over her shoulders. Last time she'd seen that leather briefcase full of money, it was sitting on the floor beside the loveseat, but it

had since been moved. She got down on her hands and knees and peered under the couch, then under the bed.

Nothing.

As she opened the closet, Arnold yelled from the shower, "Letty, you up?"

The briefcase leaned against the wall on the top shelf inside the closet, and she had to rise on the balls of her feet to grasp it.

"Letty!"

Pulled the briefcase down, walked over to the bathroom door.

"Yeah, I'm up," she said.

"How do you feel?"

"Like death."

She squatted down, fingering the clasps on the briefcase.

"I didn't mention it last night," he said, "but I've got this meeting to go to."

“This morning?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Is this with the think tank?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

Her thumbs depressed two buttons. The clasps released.

“I wanted to have breakfast with you,” she said and opened the case.

“We could do dinner.”

Twenty-five thousand in cash didn’t look all that impressive—just five slim packets of hundos.

“You staying here tonight?” she asked, lifting one, flipping through the crisp, clean bills, breathing in the ink and the paper.

“I would,” he said, “if you wanted to get together again.”

The shower cut off. She heard the curtain whisk back. Tossed the packet into the briefcase, grabbed the manila folder, leafed through the contents: floor plan, house key, one page of typewritten notes, and a black-and-white photograph

of a woman who couldn't have been more than a year or two past thirty. The shot was candid, or trying to be, Daphne in the foreground, in startling focus, surrounded by clusters of blurry rhododendron. Her hair long, black, straight. Skin preternaturally pale. A remote and icy beauty.

Arnold was toweling off now.

"We could definitely meet for dinner tonight," Letty said as she scanned the address on the page of notes: 712 Hamlet Court.

The tiny motor of an electric razor started up. She closed the briefcase. Her heels lay toppled on the carpet at the foot of the bed, and she stepped into them, slung her duffle bag onto her shoulder.

"Maybe we could grab dinner downtown," Arnold said over the whine of his razor. "I'd like to see more of Asheville."

"Absolutely," she said, lifting the briefcase. "I'll take you barhopping. I know a few good ones. We'll hit the Westville Pub. Great beer bar."

"Now you're talking."

Twelve feet to the door, to being done with all of this. Her biggest score.

She turned back the inner lock, reached down for the handle.

Arnold said something from the bathroom that she missed. Letty saw herself slipping out into the corridor, heard the soft click of the door shutting behind her. Felt the tension of waiting for the elevator.

Letty turned back from the door, returned the briefcase to the closet shelf. Hardest thing she'd ever done.

She set her bag down and knocked on the bathroom door. "Can I come in, Arnie?"

"Yeah."

He turned off the razor as she opened the door, frowned when he saw her. Steam rising off his shoulders. "You're dressed."

"I want to go back to my apartment, get a shower there."

"You can stay here while I go to my meeting."

"I need to let my dog out, get some papers graded. I'll leave my number on the bedside table."

He stepped away from the sink, embraced her, the towel

damp around his waist, said, “I can’t wait to see you tonight.”

And she kissed him like she meant it.

Letty ran through the lobby, past the front desk, out into a cool, fall morning. She forced a twenty into the bellhop’s hand, and he relinquished the car service he’d called for another guest.

“You know Hamlet Court?” she asked when the bellhop had shut her into the backseat of the Lincoln Town Car.

The driver glanced back, a light-skinned Haitian with blue eyes. “I will find. You have street number?”

“Seven twelve.” As he punched the address into the GPS unit, Letty handed a hundred-dollar bill into the front seat. “I’m sorry, but I need you to speed.”

Through the streets of the old, southern city, the downtown architecture catching early light—City Hall, the Vance Monument, the Basilica of St. Lawrence, where a few churchgoers straggled in for morning mass—and on the outskirts of Letty’s perception, secondary to her inner frenzy, a spectrum of Appalachian color—copper hillsides, spotless blue sky, the Black Mountain summits enameled with rime ice. A classic autumn day in the Swannanoa Valley.

They turned onto an oak-lined boulevard, red and gold leaves plastered to the pavement.

“We’re going into Montford?” Letty asked.

“That’s what the computer says to me.”

Hamlet Court was a secluded dead end off the B&B bustle of Montford Avenue, approximately a half mile long, and home to a dozen Victorian mansions.

The entrance to 712 stood at the end of the cul-de-sac, through a brick archway just spacious enough to accommodate a single car.

“Stop the car,” Letty said.

“I take you all the way up.”

“I don’t want you to take me all the way.”

She climbed out of the car at 10:04. Hurried to the end of the street and under the archway, glancing at the name on a large, black mailbox: Rochefort.

The residence sat toward the back of the property, which sloped up across a masterfully landscaped yard shaded with maples and spruce trees, dotted with stone sculptures—

fountains, birdbaths, angels—and not a leaf to be seen on the pockets of lush green grass.

An engine turned over near the house. Letty stepped off the drive and crawled into a thicket of mountain laurel as a boxy Mercedes rolled past. Through the branches and tinted glass, she glimpsed Chase at the wheel, a young boy in a booster in the backseat. The car ride over had only intensified her nausea, and as the diesel engine faded away, she put her finger down her throat and retched in the leaves.

She felt instantly better. Weaker. Less drunk. But better.

When the Mercedes had disappeared, she climbed out of the bushes. Shivering, shoulders scraped, head pounding not only with a hangover, but a new element of suffering—coffee-deprivation.

She jogged uphill to where the driveway widened and cut a roomy circle back into itself. Up the brick steps onto the covered porch, where she rang the doorbell twice, struggling to catch her breath.

It was 10:08 by her BlackBerry as footsteps approached from the other side of the door.

When it finally opened and Daphne Rochefort stood in the

threshold in a lavender terrycloth robe, Letty realized she had given no prior consideration to exactly what she might say to this woman, had thought through and executed getting here, but nothing after.

“Yes?”

“Daphne?”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “What can I do for you?” Though at face value the words were all Southern hospitality, the delivery carried a distinct Northern draft.

Letty rubbed her bare arms, figured she probably still reeked of alcohol and vomit.

“There’s a man coming here to kill you.”

“Pardon?”

“I know this must sound—”

“You smell like booze.”

“You have to listen to me.”

“I want you off my porch.”

“Please, just—”

“I’m calling the police.”

“Good, call the police.”

Daphne retreated to slam the door, but Letty darted forward, planting her right heel across the doorframe. “I’m trying to help you. Just give me two minutes.”

Letty followed Daphne past the staircase, down a hallway into an enormous kitchen full of marble and stainless steel and redolent of chopped onions and cooking eggs. Daphne went to the stove, flipped an omelet, and began to peel a banana. “What’s your name?”

“It’s not important.”

“So talk,” she said.

Letty stood across the island from her, light flooding in through the large windows behind the sink, the coffeemaker at the end of its brewing cycle, gurgling like it’d had its throat cut.

“Here’re the Cliffs Notes,” Letty said, “because we don’t have much time. I went to the Grove Park Inn yesterday. Someone hooked me up with a master key card, tipped me off to which

rooms might be worth hitting.”

“You’re a thief.”

“I was in one of the rooms when the guest came back unexpectedly. I had to hide in the closet.”

“I’m failing to see—”

“Chase was with him.” Daphne stopped slicing the banana. “Your husband gave this man, Arnold, a key to your house. A photo of you. A floor plan. And twenty-five thousand dollars to murder you.”

Daphne looked up from the cutting board, her bright, black eyes leveled upon Letty like a double-barreled shotgun. Her smile exposed a row of exquisite teeth.

“I want you to leave right now.”

“You think I’m lying? I didn’t *want* to come here. I had a chance to steal the twenty-five thousand this morning. Could’ve gone home, had nothing more to do with any of this. You don’t know me, but this isn’t like me, this . . . selflessness. I’ve been to prison too many times. I can’t take another felony charge. Getting involved in this was a great risk for me.”

Daphne took up the knife again, continued cutting the banana.

Letty spotted the clock on the microwave. "I can prove it to you. It's 10:11. In exactly four minutes, your husband will call you. He'll tell you he can't find his wallet. He'll ask you to go upstairs to your bedroom and check in his bedside table. If he calls, will you believe me?"

Daphne glanced at the microwave clock, then back at Letty. Honest to God fear in her eyes for the first time. A solemn, crushing focus. She nodded. The eggs burning.

"How will he reach you?" Letty asked. "Landline? Cell?"

"My iPhone."

"Can we take the Beamer in the driveway?"

"I'm not leaving with you."

"You don't understand. By the time your husband calls you, it'll be too late. The point of the phone call is to get you upstairs so Arnold can break in."

"You want to leave right now?"

"This second."

Daphne moved the pan to a cold burner and turned off the gas. They walked back down the hall, past a wall adorned with family and individual portraits and a collage of photographs—grinning babies and toddlers.

In the foyer, Daphne plucked a set of keys from a ceramic bowl beside a coat rack and opened the front door. The yard brilliant with strands of light that passed through the trees and struck the lawn in splashes of green.

Ten steps from the silver Beamer, Letty grabbed Daphne's arm and spun her around with a hard jerk.

"Ouch."

"Back inside."

"Why?"

"There's a car parked halfway up your driveway behind the rhododendron."

They went back up the steps.

"You have the house key?" Letty asked.

They crossed the porch, Daphne struggling with the keys as

they arrived at the door, finally sliding the right one into the deadbolt. Back into the house and Daphne shut the wide oak door after them, relocked the deadbolt, the doorknob, the chain.

“I should check the back door,” Daphne said.

“It doesn’t matter. He has a key and Chase left a window open. You have a gun in the house?”

Daphne nodded.

“Show me.”

Daphne ran up the staircase, Letty kicking off her heels as she followed. By the top of the stairs, her pulse had become a thumping in her temples—exertion and panic. They turned down a hallway, passed an office, a bright-white studio filled with sunlight and tedious acrylic paintings of mountain scenes, then two children’s bedrooms that emanated the frozen perfection of unlivd-in space. At the end of the hall, French doors opened into a master suite built in the shape of an octagon, the walls rising to a vaulted ceiling that was punctured with skylights.

Chirping crickets stopped them both. Daphne withdrew her iPhone from the pocket of her robe and forced a smile that

managed to bleed through into her voice.

“Hi, honey . . . no, it’s fine . . . upstairs . . . sure.” Daphne stepped into a walk-in closet, hit the lights. Letty lingered in the doorway, watched her reach through a wall of suits, emerging a moment later with a pump-action shotgun.

She mouthed, “Loaded?”

Daphne nodded. “Chase, it’s not in here. Want me to check downstairs?” Letty took the gun from Daphne. “All right,” Daphne said. “You two have fun.”

Letty whispered, “Call 911,” and while Daphne dialed, Letty flicked off the safety and racked a shell into the chamber. She peered around the corner, down the hall. The house stood silent. She moved out of the closet and into a lavish master bath the size of her apartment, the tile cool on her bare feet.

Garden tub. Immense stone shower with a chrome fixture a foot in diameter. Long countertops cut from Italian granite.

Letty opened the glass shower door and cranked the handle. Preheated water rained down. The glass steamed. She returned to the bedroom, shutting the door behind her, found Daphne standing just inside the closet.

“Why’d you run the shower?” she whispered.

“Are the police coming?”

“Yes.”

Letty killed the lights. “Go crouch down in the corner behind those dresses and turn your phone off.” As Daphne retreated into the darkness, Letty pulled the door closed and padded out into the hall, making her way between the easels in the studio to the big windows that overlooked the front yard.

The car in the driveway hadn’t moved. A black 4Runner. Empty.

She walked out into the hall, straining to pick out the whine of approaching sirens.

Had the central heat been running, it would’ve completely escaped her notice, and even in the perfect silence she still nearly missed it—just around the corner and several feet down, the faintest groan of hardwood fibers bowing under the weight of a footstep.

Letty backpedaled into the studio and stepped behind the open door.

Through the crack, she eyed the hall.

Arnold appeared without a sound, wearing blue jeans and a fleece pullover. For a second, she thought there must be something wrong with his hands, their paleness. Latex gloves. Navy socks with strips of rubber gripping kept his footfalls absolutely silent and he moved slowly and with great precision down the hall, a black pistol at his side that had been fitted with a long suppressor.

Arnold stopped in the doorway of the master suite.

Waited a full minute.

Nothing but the white noise of the shower.

In the time it took Letty to step out from behind the door and peek into the hall, Arnold had disappeared.

She held the shotgun at waist-level and started toward the master suite. The half-speed fog of her hangover was replaced with a throbbing vigilance and a metal taste in the back of her throat that had come only a handful of times in her life—fights in prison, the three occasions she'd faced a judge to be sentenced, her father's funeral.

She entered the master suite again. Steam poured out of the bathroom and Arnold stood in the doorway with his back to

her. She felt lightheaded and weak, unable to summon her voice just yet, not fully committed to the idea of being in this moment.

Arnold walked into the steamy bathroom and Letty edged farther into the room, past the unmade bed and the stair climber, the shotgun trained on Arnold's back through the open doorway, slightly obscured in the mist.

"You have a shotgun pointed at your back."

He flinched at the sound of her voice. "Don't turn around. Don't move. Drop the gun." Arnold didn't move, but he didn't drop the gun either. "Don't make the mistake of thinking I'll tell you again." It clattered on the tile. "Kick it away from you." The gun slid across the floor, coming to rest against the cabinets under the sink. Letty closed the distance between them, now standing in the bathroom doorway, close enough to smell the remnants of his cologne. "Keep your hands out in front of you and turn around." When he saw her, his eyes betrayed only a glimmer of surprise. "Sit down, Arnold." He sat at the base of the shower as Letty stepped into the bathroom, clouds of mist swirling between them.

He said, "What are you, a cop?"

"I was in your room yesterday afternoon when you and Chase

came in. I hid in the closet. Heard everything you said.”

“So you’re a thief. That means we can work this out.”

“How’s that?”

“Can I get something out of my pocket?”

“Slowly.”

He reached into his fleece jacket, withdrew a set of keys, let them jingle. “The 4Runner’s new. There’s a briefcase with twenty-five thousand in cash in the front seat.”

“I know about the briefcase.”

“I can just go home. That’s a good score for you Letty. Bet you never had a payday like that.”

“And you go back to doing what you do?”

He smiled, shook his head. “The people I work for . . . if they want someone dead, that person’s going to die. It’s *their* will that causes it to happen. Not mine. They pull the trigger. I’m just the bullet. The damage. And I’m not the only bullet. So really, Letty. Why get yourself tangled up in this? You’re a thief, a tweaker. You been to prison?”

“Yeah.”

“So why not stay out of the affairs of the spoiled rich? Why do you care so much to interfere, to put yourself at risk, which you’ve done?”

“Late at night, when you’re alone, do you ever feel like somewhere along the way, you crossed this line you didn’t see? Actually sold your *self* out?”

Arnold just stared at her as the shower beat down on the stone.

“I thought I was completely lost, Arnie. And then I found myself hiding in that closet in your room, and I saw a chance to go back to the other side of the line.”

Letty heard the closet door swing open. Daphne came and stood beside her.

“My husband paid you to kill me?”

Arnold made no response. Daphne walked over to the sinks, bent down, picked up his gun.

“You shouldn’t touch that, Daphne. The police are coming.”

“Not yet they aren’t.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re an ex-con. I don’t want you taking any flak considering you were stealing from the guests of the Grove Park Inn when you got involved. Take his car and his money. I’ll call the police after you’re gone.”

“That’s your money, Daphne.”

“No, it’s Chase’s.” She aimed Arnold’s gun at him. “Keys.”

He tossed them to Letty.

“I don’t want to leave you here alone with him, Daphne.”

“I’ll be all right.” She took the shotgun.

“I’m not leaving you.”

“You saved my life, Letty. I’ll never forget it. Now go.”

Five days later, at 6:01 P.M., Chase Rochefort stepped off the elevator, dressed to the nines in a light gray Coppley and a cobalt Oxford, engaged with his iPhone as he breezed through the lobby of the neo-gothic Jackson Building, whose twelfth floor housed his law practice—Rochefort, Bloodsworth and Sax, LLC. The stunning redhead followed him out onto

the street, sprouting her umbrella against the drizzly Friday evening. Trailed him along South Pack Square to North Market, and then several blocks to the intersection with Woodfin, where Rochefort entered the Sheraton Hotel.

He sat at the corner of the chophouse bar, letting his Chilean sea bass turn cold and drinking double Powers on the rocks with twists of lemon like his life depended on it. Halfway through his sixth, the barstool beside him opened up and Letty claimed it and ordered a glass of Merlot.

While the barkeep poured her wine, Letty reached over, patted Chase's hand, and asked with faux empathy, "How you holding up?" Searched his face for some tell of the preceding weeks' stress, but no indication presented aside from a darkness under his eyes that had mostly been erased with concealer and the blush of Irish whiskey.

He worked up a glassy-eyed smile, slurred, "We know each other?"

"Well, I certainly know you."

The barkeep returned with her wine. "That's ten dollars. Would you like to start a—"

Chase tapped his chest. "My tab."

“Of course, Mr. Rochefort.”

Chase banged his rocks glass against Letty's wineglass and threw back the rest of his whiskey. “Have I sued you before?” he asked, excavating the lemon from the melting cubes of ice, crunching the rind between his back molars.

“No, you haven't sued me.”

“Good.” He grinned. “I've sued half the people in this town.”

The barkeep arrived with a fresh double Powers on the rocks and swapped it out for Chase's empty glass.

“But I was curious about something,” Letty asked, letting her left knee brush against his leg.

“What's that?”

“I've read the *Citizen-Times* cover to cover for the last five days and there's been no mention of it.” He sipped his new drink, Letty wondering about the depth of his intoxication, how much of this was sliding past him. “I've called your home. Never got an answer. You and Skyler have been living out of this hotel all week, and you come down here and drink yourself into a stupor every night.”

His face paled slightly through the Powers glow. “Who are you?”

“I was there, Chase.”

“Where? What are you talking about?”

She leaned over, whispered in his ear: “Room 5212 at the Grove Park Inn when you met with Arnold LeBreck and hired him to murder your wife. I was in the closet. I heard everything.”

He drew back, the noise of the chophouse swelling—thirty separate conversations intermingled with the clink of glassware and china.

She said, “Last Sunday morning, I went to your house in Montford. I told your wife everything—”

“Oh Jesus.”

“—and when I left, she was holding a shotgun on Mr. LeBreck and on the verge of calling the police. I should never have left her . . .

“But as I just mentioned, nothing in the papers. No sign of Daphne. So I’m sitting here wondering what happened, but before you answer, let me tell you that I’ve written a letter to

the Asheville Police Department providing a firsthand account, and it will be delivered tomorrow by a friend of mine should I become scarce." This last part was a lie. She'd only just thought of it.

Chase drained his whiskey in one shot and slammed the glass down on the bar.

"Why won't you go back to your house, Chase? What did you do there on Sunday morning after I left? What did you do to your wife?"

Chase grabbed the side of the bar to steady his hands. He closed his eyes, opened them again. The barkeep set another Powers in front of him and took away his cold, untouched dinner plate.

"You have no idea what you've done," he said.

"I'm going back to your house," Letty said. "Tonight. Am I going to find her dead? Why won't you tell me, instead of sitting here in denial, pretending none of this has happened?"

Chase stared down the length of the bar for a full minute, then rubbed his palms into his eyes, smearing a bit of eyeliner.

Another greedy sip of Powers and he said, "I met Daphne after my first wife died. Skyler was two, and my parents kept

him for a week, made me take a trip. We met in Oranjestad. You know Aruba? She could be so engaging when she wanted to be.

"We'd been married a year when I caught the first glimpse of what she really was. Friend of ours had gotten divorced and Daphne was consoling her on the telephone. It was a small thing, but I suddenly realized what she was doing. My wife had this way of talking to you so you'd think she was comforting you when she was actually salting your wounds. I saw her do it again and again. Even with me. With my son. It was like the pain of others attracted her. Filled her up with this black joy. Please," he slurred. "Don't go back there. Just leave it alone."

"So it turns out your wife's a bitch after all, and you want her dead. That's so original." Letty had a strong desire to take the Beretta 84 pistol out of her purse and jam it into Chase's ribs, make him come along with her, rub his face in whatever he'd done. Instead, she climbed down from the barstool, said, "Have a wonderful night of freedom, Chase. It may be your last."

Letty parked her 4Runner in the cul-de-sac and walked up the driveway toward the Rochefort residence. The rain had further dissolved into a cold, fine mist, and all she could see of the Victorian was the lamplight that pushed through a row

of tall, arched windows on the second floor. At the front door, she peered through a panel of stained glass, saw a sliver of the lowlit hallway—empty.

She knocked on the door and waited, but no one came.

The third window on the covered porch slid open. She lifted the shade, saw the living room illuminated by a sole piano lamp on the baby grand. Climbed over the back of the upholstered sofa and closed the window behind her.

“Daphne?”

The hardwood groaned under her footsteps as she moved through the living room and up the stairs. The bed in the master suite looked slept in, covers thrown back, sheets wrinkled, clothes hanging off the sides.

Letty went downstairs into the kitchen, and as she stared into a sinkful of dirty dishes, noticed the music—some soothing adagios—drifting up from a remote corner of the house.

She walked around the island to a closed door near the breakfast nook.

Opened it. The music strengthening.

Steps descended into a subterranean level of the residence,

and she followed them down until she reached a checkerboard floor made of limestone composite. To the left, a washing machine and dryer stood in the utility alcove surrounded by hampers of unwashed laundry that reeked of mildew.

Letty went right, the music getting louder.

Rounded a corner and stopped.

The brick room was twenty by twenty feet and lined with metal wine-racks, the top rows of bottles glazed with dust.

Beside an easel lay a Bose CD player, a set of Wusthof kitchen knives, and boxes of gauze and bandages. Hanging from the ceiling of the wine cellar by a chain under her arms—Letty's eyes welled up—Daphne.

Then the lifeless body shifted and released a pitiful wail.

Letty recognized the tattoo of the strangling hands as Arnold LeBreck painfully lifted his head and fixed his eyes upon Letty, and then something behind her.

Letty's stomach fell.

She spun around.

Daphne stood five feet away wearing a black rubber apron streaked with paint or blood and a white surgical mask, her black hair pinned up except for a few loose strands that splayed across her shoulders.

She pointed a shotgun at Letty's face, and something in that black hole suggested the flawed philosophical underpinnings that had landed Letty in this moment. No more hating herself, no avoiding the mirror, letting her father whisper her to sleep, no books on learning to love yourself or striving to become something her DNA could not support. She was facing down a shotgun, on the verge of an awful death, not because she was an evil person, but because she wasn't evil enough.

Letty thought fast. "Oh, thank God. You're not hurt."

Daphne said through the mask, "What are you doing here?"

"Making sure you're okay. I ran into Chase—"

"What'd he tell you? I warned him to let me have a week with Arnold, and then I'd be out of his life."

She was facing down a shotgun, not because she was an evil person, but because she wasn't evil enough.

"He didn't tell me anything, Daphne. That's why I came over.

To check on you.”

Arnold moaned and twitched, managed to get himself swinging back and forth over the wide drain in the floor like a pendulum.

“That man was going to kill me,” Daphne said.

“I know, honey. I saved you. Remember?” The smell was staggering, Letty’s eyes beginning to water, her stomach to churn. “Well, I see you’re okay, so I’ll slip out, let you—”

“You shouldn’t have come back.”

“I didn’t see anything in the papers about your husband or Arnold. I thought something had happened to you after I left last Sunday.”

Daphne just stared at her. The face mask sucking in and out. At last she said, “You think what I’m doing is—”

“No, no, no. I’m not here to . . . that man was going to kill you. He deserves whatever happens to him. Think of all the other people he’s murdered for money.”

“You saw my painting?”

“Um, yeah.”

“What do you think?”

“What do / think?”

“Do you like it?”

“Oh, yes. It’s . . . thought-provoking and—”

“Some parts of Arnold’s portrait are actually painted with Arnold.”

Daphne’s arms sagged with the weight of the shotgun, the barrel now aligned with Letty’s throat.

“I saved your life,” Letty said.

“And I meant what I said. I won’t ever forget it. Now go on into the wine cellar. Just push Arnold back and stand over the drain.”

“Daphne—”

“*You’d* be a lovely subject.”

Letty’s right hand grazed the zipper of her all-time favorite score—a Chanel quilted leather handbag she’d stolen out of the Grand Hyatt in New York City. Thirty-five hundred in Saks

Fifth Avenue.

“Get your hand away from there.”

“My BlackBerry’s vibrating.”

“Give it to me.”

Letty unzipped the bag, pulled out the BlackBerry with her left hand, let her right slip inside. Any number of ways to fumble in front of a gaping shotgun barrel.

She tossed the BlackBerry to Daphne, and as the device arced through the air, Letty’s right hand grasped the Beretta and thumbed off the safety.

She squeezed the trigger as Daphne caught the phone.

The shotgun blasted into the ceiling, shards of blond brick raining down and Daphne stumbling back into the wall as blood ran in a thin black line out of a hole in her throat.

Letty pulled out the pistol—no sense in doing further damage to her handbag—and shot her three times in the chest.

The shotgun and the BlackBerry hit the limestone and Daphne slid down into a sitting position against the wall. Out from under her rubber apron, blood expanded through little

impulse ripples whose wavelengths increased with the fading pump of her heart. Within ten seconds, she'd lost the strength or will to clutch her throat, her eyes already beginning to empty. Letty kicked the shotgun toward the washing machine and walked to the edge of the wine cellar, breathing through her mouth; she could taste the rotten air, now tinged with cordite.

She looked at Arnold. "I'm going to call an ambulance for you."

He nodded frantically at the pistol in Letty's hand.

"You want me to . . . ?"

He let out a long, low moan—sad and desperate and inhuman.

"Arnie," she said, raising the Beretta, "I'm not even sure you deserve this."

Letty walked down the long driveway toward the 4Runner. The rain had stopped and the clouds were breaking up, a few meager stars shining in the southern sky, a night bird singing to a piece of the moon. For a fleeting moment, she felt the heart-tug of having witnessed a beautiful thing, but a crushing thought replaced the joy—there was so much beauty in the

world, and in her thirty-six years, she'd brushed up against so little of it.

At the bottom of the driveway, she took her BlackBerry out of the ruined handbag, but five seconds into the search for Chase Rochefort's number, powered off her phone. She'd done enough. Much more than enough.

The alarm squeaked and the 4Runner's headlights shot two brief cylinders of light through what mist still lingered in the cul-de-sac. Letty climbed in behind the wheel and fired up the engine. Sped away from that house, from lives that were no longer her problem. Felt a familiar swelling in her chest, that core of inner strength she always seemed to locate the first night of a long bit when the loneliness in the cell was a living thing.

And she promised herself that she'd never try to be good again.

Only harder, stronger, truer, and at peace, once and forever at peace, with her beautiful, lawless self.

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ET TU, VALENTINUS

R. T. LAWTON



Art by Kelly Denato

Yarnell felt guilty about having the thin guy from the mortuary sleeping in his front closet. As he'd explained to his wife Patricia after she went to get her overcoat the next morning, his and Beaumont's Halloween night break-in from the storm sewer into the basement of the jewelry store hadn't gone

quite as planned. There had been a slight miscalculation in measuring the distance from the manhole in the alley over to the correct spot to knock a hole in the sewer wall, and they ended up in a mortuary and if it hadn't been for the assistant undertaker sleeping in a coffin because his wife cleaned him out in a divorce settlement and he couldn't even afford rent on a park bench, they wouldn't have made a dime on that job.

"The Thin Guy," continued Yarnell, "opened the office safe for us on the condition that Beaumont and I cut him in on the loot, plus we now have to teach him how to burgle so he can make some quick cash on the side. Guess you could say me and Beaumont got us a protégé."

"And he's sleeping in our closet because . . . ?"

This was part of what Yarnell felt guilty about. "Because the owner of the mortuary didn't know his assistant was hiding on the premises, waiting until after the business got locked up for the night. That's when the Thin Guy snuck out of his hiding place and slept in the only comfortable spot he could find. But, after our burglary, the Thin Guy didn't think it wise for him to sleep in their coffins anymore, so he needed a new place."

"And he picked our closet?"

"Well," replied Yarnell, "we've only got a one-bedroom flat

and your worthless nephew is crashing on the living room sofa, not that I'm complaining, understand, but it doesn't leave much else. Besides, this guy's used to sleeping in tight places."

"Why didn't your partner take him in?"

Yarnell rubbed the upper edge of his hand over his chin.

"You know how bad the economy is right now. Turns out Beaumont had a short month and a long payment. He had to borrow a little cash from somebody who knew somebody, but then things didn't work out so well on the repayment plan. Now Beau changes residence every time his hallway floor squeaks."

"Let me guess, loan sharks."

Yarnell nodded. "Bent Nose Tony from Seventy-ninth Street, one unforgiving individual when it comes to monetary matters, if you ask me."

"So we end up with a permanent guest? Where am I supposed to hang my coat?"

"As soon as the guy makes enough money which he doesn't have to declare on his income taxes," Yarnell replied, "then

he'll move out."

Patricia kept her arms crossed tightly over her chest, as the toe of her right shoe beat a grim funeral march on the kitchen linoleum floor. Yarnell hoped she was merely contemplating how to cope with circumstances concerning their new boarder. A wordless silence dragged out between them. Then her left eyebrow arched.

"What's with the guy's pinstriped suit?" she finally inquired. "Makes him look more like an old-time gangster than an undertaker."

"He bought it out of the trunk of a Cadillac down on lower Fifth Avenue. Only place he could afford to shop after the divorce."

"Now that's something to think about," said his wife.

Yarnell's sinking feeling caused him to throw his arms out in surrender. "Look, babe," he exclaimed in desperation, "I've got a little extra money saved up and I was thinking maybe we should take a cruise for our wedding anniversary a few months down the road. You know, that being Valentine's Day and all. We could get away for a few days. Forget about this other stuff, leave all our problems behind."

He had no idea if this diversion would work, but then Patricia

surprised him by immediately jumping on the suggestion. Turned out she'd been reading magazine articles about couples taking various romantic cruises, but always thought it beyond their current budget. And that was how, almost three months later, Yarnell found himself on a downhill run in the Atlantic Ocean headed toward, as the brochure said, tropic breezes, sandy beaches, waving palm trees, exotic rum drinks, and snorkeling over the reefs. Since his knees hadn't seen the sun in almost thirty years, he figured he'd skip anything having to do with swimming suits, bobbing up and down in salt water, and the risk of becoming potential shark bait. He'd already seen enough movies and documentaries on TV about large, hungry fish to figure he'd be nothing more than a floating hors d'oeuvre waiting to be gobbled. Nope, he'd stick with the on-board casino and their tall, tulip-shaped glasses with tiny bright-colored umbrellas leaning out the top and small chunks of fresh fruit impaled on sword-shaped plastic toothpicks. Better to be the consumer, rather than the consumed. That was the plan.

All went well, until Day Two of the cruise, when he stepped out of his cabin, thinking to take a stroll around the upper deck while his wife got dressed for the first seating in the main dining room. He hadn't quite shut the cabin door behind him when the sight of a short, chubby man hurrying by drew him up short.

“Beaumont!”

The man turned.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

His chubby partner in crime put his right index finger to his lips. “Shhh, that’s not the name I’m using.”

“Then who are you?”

“Let’s just say I’m someone else for now.”

From inside the cabin, Yarnell’s wife yelled out, “Did you say something?”

“Damn,” he muttered, “she’s got some kind of radar that kicks in every time you’re in the immediate vicinity.”

Whenever he found himself about to be caught in a bad situation, Yarnell usually relied on his unwritten motto: “Given enough time, I can explain everything.” Unfortunately, the hazards of his profession meant that suspicious cops, disgruntled business proprietors, and gun-wielding homeowners seldom gave him the time he needed to come up with a good explanation before loud noises and high-speed projectiles pursued him to the nearest corner. That’s when a good pair of running shoes came in handy as his

backup solution.

However, under the present circumstances running wasn't the answer, thus he decided a simple lie to his wife would probably suffice. He poked his head back through the cabin door. "I was just talking with the room steward, telling him what a great job he was doing."

"Well, tell him to quit laying my nightie out on my side of the bed at night while we're gone off to supper. Freaks me out when someone messes with my lingerie. You know how private I am about personal stuff."

Yep, Yarnell definitely knew that. If Victoria had a secret anywhere in his domicile, it was going to stay that way forever. Most of what he'd managed to see over the years, before the lights got hurriedly turned off, had been patterned and sewn from long flannel, even in summertime.

Out of habit, he nodded his head, even though Patricia couldn't possibly see him from her position in front of the mirror in the bathroom. "I'll be sure to mention that."

He popped his head back out of the cabin, quietly shut the door, and commenced to whisper. "I told you months ago, I needed to take a few days off in February to keep peace in the family. If the wife finds out you're here, she'll think I'm

using our wedding anniversary cruise as an excuse for us to pull off another job. Then she'll start remembering about our junior burglar sleeping in the closet back home and I'll be on the hot seat again."

Beaumont pursed his lips like he was about to impart some sage advice.

Pause.

"Better not tell her I'm here then."

"*I'm* not going to tell her, but you need to stay out of sight."

Beaumont acted like he was considering the request.

"Okay, I'll conduct business on my own."

"What business?"

"Didn't you see all that expensive jewelry them women was wearing at the Captain's Welcome Aboard Party last night?"

"Hey, I'm supposed to be on a romantic anniversary vacation here, rekindling the fires of connubial devotion, so to speak," Yarnell explained. "Anyway that's what Patricia calls it. I'm *not* supposed to be looking at other stuff."

"Well, it's there, and I'm working on an angle to get some of it." He paused. "The jewelry, I mean."

"Well, make like you're invisible and do it on your own."

"Some partner you are." Beaumont stomped off down the hallway for two whole steps. Then he hesitated and turned.

"Just out of curiosity, where'd you leave our protégé?"

"Back at the flat. He's supposed to be watering that potted plant I gave Patricia for Christmas so it don't dry out and die while we're gone."

"You got your wife a potted plant for Christmas?"

"Yeah, I was making like a customer in this florist shop to see where they kept their safe when some Salvation Army bell-ringer reminded me it was Christmas Eve already. I hadn't picked up a gift for Patricia yet, so it turned out to be a last-minute thing."

Beaumont nodded his head. "Lucky for you."

"Yeah. If the store owner hadn't been busy locking up his cash register, I'd have never gotten the thing out the door. It was a little big to hide in my coat."

“What kind?”

“What kind of what?”

“The plant.”

“Oh, it’s one of them Orange Jasmine trees, dwarf size.”

“Ah, a *Murraya exotica*.”

“Huh?”

“Always green, lots of fragrant white flowers, smells like citrus.”

Now Yarnell bobbed his head. “Sounds like it.”

“Nice choice.”

Then Yarnell remembered Beaumont’s earlier question about just being curious. “Wait a minute, why’d you ask where the thin guy was?”

Beaumont opened his mouth to say something, apparently changed his mind, and finally settled for, “Oh, nothing.”

While Yarnell was still digesting this reply and trying to figure out if there was something else he should be asking,

Beaumont turned, was down the passageway, and gone from sight.

For a few moments, Yarnell continued staring at the empty corridor, then finally turned in the opposite direction and made his way to the elevator. On the ride up, he was still mulling over in his mind some of the words from the conversation with his partner in crime when the elevator door slid open. He stepped out and joined the moving crowd, everybody going someplace else to find their next fun.

That night at supper, Yarnell and his wife joined three other couples at a large, round table with reserved seating. After taking his assigned chair, Yarnell realized that by looking slightly to the right of the person sitting across from him, he had a nice view of the captain's table. Sure enough, there was an expensive jeweled necklace sparkling in the lights from the ship's overhead chandelier, and that necklace was draped across the upper chest of some white-haired lady in a designer dress. The entire ensemble screamed M-O-N-E-Y. Beaumont was right, this was a target-rich environment for burglars. Too bad he himself was on vacation and forbidden, by Patricia, to indulge in his chosen profession for this one week.

Then he wondered where Beaumont was sitting so as to observe all these intended targets. Trying to be unobtrusive,

Yarnell gradually swiveled his head left, then far right to check out occupants of nearby tables. No Beaumont. That was probably a good thing.

Yarnell relaxed as best he could and let his wife carry the conversation with the other couples at his table, especially since he had found out at an early age that he had a very small comfort zone. Strangers in close proximity always bothered him, gave him a twitchy feeling, which usually necessitated the freedom to wander.

According to his street psychologist, Lester Formlick, a head doctor with two online degrees prominently displayed on his portable folding table, these two elements of psychosomatic behavior derived from traumatic incidents within Yarnell's youth, although Lester never did say which incidents had caused the problem. And that would be ten bucks, please. Any deeper analysis into the roots of the issue came at a highly increased rate.

Yarnell had paid the ten dollars, not sure he wished to delve any deeper into his psyche at the moment. However, to his way of thinking, both elements of his behavior seemed to derive from a short stretch he'd done during his younger years in an iron bar-hotel upstate. Not exactly what one referred to as a posh resort.

These days, the only people he felt truly comfortable with were other burglars in a setting where he could openly discuss professional techniques, who the good fences were, and which gentlemen of the night got away with whatever valuables weren't guarded well enough by their previous owners. It was like discussing a pro baseball player's stats, except these statistics involved scores made, estimated value of the purloined objects, and the actual dollars earned after said objects were laid out to a fence. Getting caught by the law and the number of years thereafter spent in confinement went into a negative statistics column. Close calls and spur-of-the-moment evasion made for legends in this business, but it wasn't something a guy could talk about with strangers. Try telling a group of dentists, accountants, or office workers that you were a burglar and see how quick the party stopped.

Just before dessert was served, Yarnell found himself staring at the centerpiece on the captain's table. From this distance, it appeared to be a potted plant, green, with lots of little white flowers. Almost reminded him of the one he'd bought his wife for Christmas, but he decided not to bring that to her attention on what was allegedly their romantic cruise of a lifetime. Instead, he leaned over and whispered in her ear. "I got to make a pit stop."

Wandering up the steps from the dining room and on down

the hallway, Yarnell entered the men's room. He was standing at the urinal when another man stepped up beside him on his left and muttered at the wall.

"Did you see him?"

"See who?" asked Yarnell without turning his head.

"The Thin Guy," responded Beaumont.

Yarnell glanced quickly back over both shoulders. The rest of the room looked vacant to him, although for some reason he felt tempted to check under the stall doors.

"What are you talking about?"

"I thought you were staring right at him," said Beaumont.

"When?"

"At supper."

"Where were you?"

"Never mind where I was. Was that him?"

"If you're talking about our protégé," replied Yarnell, "no, I haven't seen him. He should be back at my flat watering the

plant, plus working day shift at the mortuary. Why?"

"I swear I keep getting glimpses of him here and there on the ship, but when I get closer, zip, he's gone. And, I don't see him anywhere."

"Have you considered glasses?"

There was no answer.

Assuming that Beaumont's silence was the result of a bruised ego from Yarnell's insinuation of middle-age failing eyesight and therefore maybe Beaumont needed to see a doctor about acquiring spectacles, Yarnell waited a few more seconds before glancing over to his left to see how his partner was taking it.

Nobody there.

He zipped up and turned around.

Other than his reflection in the mirror, the remainder of the room was empty.

Yarnell hurried back to the dining room and took his seat. Risking a quick look at the captain's table, he noticed that the centerpiece was now gone. Strange. But before he could mull over any good reasons for a potted plant to disappear

from the middle of that particular table, his wife interrupted his thoughts.

“Do you smell something?”

Cautiously, he sniffed twice. “Like what?”

“Like citrus. There seems to be the faint scent of oranges in here. The aroma reminds me of home.”

Mentally searching for a way to change the subject, Yarnell was in the process of drawing out a long “Ahhh . . .”, when the lady on the other side of his wife leaned over and rescued him.

“It’s just that stuff maintenance sprays into the air-conditioning system,” the lady chimed in. “You know, to freshen up the air, make it smell good.”

“That’s right,” said Yarnell. Then, he glanced hurriedly around, not sure what he expected to see.

On the surface, everything appeared normal.

For the next two days at breakfast, lunch, and supper, Yarnell checked out the captain’s table, but the potted plant never returned. And any centerpiece which did appear on that table was always smaller and arranged in a more artistic manner.

Yarnell could now see the face of whoever was seated on the other side of the table decorations, thus he also noticed that the guests seated with the captain kept changing from day to day. He surmised there was a kind of rotating schedule in place that allowed some of the higher-paying customers to claim the boasting privilege of having rubbed shoulders with the ship's captain. That was fine with Yarnell; he personally preferred the safety of anonymity. However, he found himself constantly checking out other tables to see if that same potted plant had found a new location as centerpiece.

The rest of the week was uneventful.

Until Day Six.

On the late evening of Day Six, Yarnell was in the casino having one of his favorite tropical rum drinks with fresh fruit chunks speared by miniature plastic swords and a green toy umbrella perched in a tall tulip-shaped glass—you could buy these same souvenir glasses in the ship's gift shop if you had the inclination to take home a memento of your romantic cruise—when a lady screamed. Yarnell, who had just that very moment punched a brightly lit button that instructed his slot machine to gamble the maximum amount allowed, almost pulled the arm off the one-armed bandit. And his subsequent quick inhalation of breath inadvertently drew a gust of high-proof rum up through his drink straw. Tears

flooded his eyes. Through the mist, he craned his neck in the general direction of the scream. Frantic word segments came with the woman's second outburst.

"My jewels are gone," was the most Yarnell could decipher out of the jumbled words, but that was enough to galvanize him. He was out of his chair in a flash and had taken two long strides toward the nearest exit when he realized that he personally hadn't done anything illegal. This was one time he was innocent of whatever was happening to someone else's personal possessions. Besides, as he glanced forward at the doorway to safety, he observed one very large steward now blocking the exit. Yarnell had always prided himself on recognizing undercover security when he saw it in action. Evasion tactics automatically kicked in. Doing a quick left wheel, eight short steps, then an abrupt left face, he turned back toward the commotion, but was at least now standing in the rear of the crowd and off to one side, an anonymous face among many.

From his position of relative safety, Yarnell noted a well-dressed man with hard cop eyes attending to the screamer. Her volume gradually trailed off, dropping at least an octave or two lower in pitch. This was soon followed by a smattering of nervous giggling on her part, although the ensuing laughter of people around her seemed to be of a more genuine nature as the crowd began to disperse.

The muscle-bound steward at the exit was seen to relax and soon melted back into the casino décor.

“He’s good,” was the thought going through Yarnell’s mind. “I’ll have to keep an eye out for that one.” And he once again reminded himself that he was not currently engaged in any illegal activities, nor was he allowed to do so during the remainder of the cruise.

It wasn’t long before his curiosity gained the upper hand. So what had all the ruckus been about if no one was concerned now? Tapping the shoulder of an old man who was none too gently clearing a path through the crowd with a walking cane, Yarnell politely inquired, “What happened back there? The screamer?”

“Not much,” replied the oldster in a raspy voice. “Some old biddy thought her jewels were stolen.”

“Were they?”

“Nope, clasp broke on her necklace, but when it fell away, one end snagged on her blouse. Her diamonds were still there, she was just too blind to see them.”

“Fortunate turn of events in the end,” replied Yarnell.

The old man snorted. "Damn near broke my eardrums."

"There is one thing," said Yarnell.

"What's that?"

"The way she was taking on, we know them diamonds were real and not paste."

The old man snorted again. "Like I care."

"Yeah," Yarnell murmured to himself, "but there are those onboard who do." Feeling suddenly overcome with the need to wander, he turned away and beat the old man out the door. Air, he needed air, free air and room to think.

It wasn't until Yarnell found himself alone on the aft upper deck that he realized he still had his tropical drink in hand; two flavors of rum, chunks of golden pineapple, green toy umbrella, red-striped straw, souvenir glass, the works. He paused near one of the tarp-covered life boats to lean on an outboard rail and suck up any residual alcohol.

As he stood there, a full moon broke out of the high clouds, casting a silvery glaze on the ocean waves, painting dark stripes and shadows along the upper deck. Light breezes sprang up, keeping the night cool. A quiet place to meditate on potential circumstances.

On his left, one edge of the white boat tarp turned upward.

“Psssst.”

Yarnell shook his head.

The white tarp moved a little farther back and whispered.

“Hey.”

“No pssst,” replied Yarnell, “no hey.”

“Is anybody else in sight?” came the next whisper.

“Only me,” muttered Yarnell.

“Good.” The tarp moved just far enough for Beaumont’s upper body to pop out of the lifeboat. “Watch out, I’m coming down.”

Yarnell took a step sideways, stared straight ahead, and sipped the last of his drink.

Beaumont moved close and rested his elbows on the rail.

“Not sure how you found me, but you’ve got excellent timing.”

“I don’t want any part of whatever you got in mind.”

Beaumont opened his dinner jacket and started unwinding a long rope. "I merely require your assistance for a short while."

"Forget it."

"Five minutes tops," urged Beaumont.

"Not if the world were about to end."

Beaumont tied one end of the rope to the top rail and started fashioning a loop in the other end while he talked. "You realize that if I don't make some quick money to pay off Bent Nose Tony, then you and Patricia are going to have another houseguest when we get home."

"Yeah," Yarnell challenged, "where you gonna sleep? My worthless nephew already occupies the couch, and the Thin Guy has dibs on the closet."

"Forget about it, you won't even know I'm there," Beaumont continued. "All I need is a good-sized nightlight when I retire for the evening. TV works fine that way as long as the volume isn't up too loud, but I'd probably best tell you now I've got a bad habit of waking up the next day and the darn screen is still talking. And, I'll admit up front that sometimes I walk in my sleep, but what, you only got three, four rooms so I can't go too far."

A long silence ensued.

Waves lapped against the ship.

A lone night bird cried out before settling on a communications antenna overhead.

Beaumont finished tying his loop.

"This is blackmail," said Yarnell.

"Attaboy," replied Beaumont. "Now all you got to do is let me lower you down to that veranda a couple decks below us, then you go in the unlocked outside door, get the jewels, any cash laying around, and then come right back up. Ten minutes, we're done."

"I thought you said five minutes."

"I did, but I'm allowing five extra minutes in case you're slower than me and have to search around for the jewels."

"Why don't you go then?"

Beaumont patted his belly. "Cuz I'm heavier than you, and you wouldn't be able to pull me up. Now put your foot in the loop and hold onto the rope. Believe me, in the end, Patricia will

thank you for this.”

Yarnell slowly swung one leg over the rail and then the other leg. As he stepped into the loop and grabbed the rope, he came face to face with his partner. “Patricia had better not ever hear about this.”

Beaumont immediately kicked Yarnell’s shoe tip toehold loose from the deck and lowered away on the rope. “Don’t look down,” he hissed.

Swinging on the far end of a rope, feeling much like the pendulum on a grandfather clock, Yarnell realized he still had the souvenir glass in his hand as he dangled multiple stories above the ocean. Naturally, he looked down.

Sea foam churned at the fantail of the ship. If he fell, those giant propellers down there would chop him into shark sushi. He closed his eyes, therefore taking several seconds later for his feet to tell his brain that they were now resting on solid wood.

Opening his right eye to a bare slit, he found himself standing on the top edge of a veranda rail outside one of the more expensive cabin suites. If it hadn’t been for his iron grip on the rope holding him up, his knees would have buckled, dropping him perilously close to becoming the main

character in a man overboard situation with no reporting witnesses. In which case, Patricia would have always wondered where he'd disappeared to on the High Seas.

He allowed himself two minutes of deep-breathing exercises before gaining the courage to step out of the loop and testing the veranda's outside door handle. It moved easily. He put his ear to the glass pane. Snoring. The occupants were safely asleep.

Carefully opening the door, Yarnell slid through the entry and shut it behind him. In the closed compartment, the ship's conditioned air moved the light fragrance of oranges past his nose. The damn smell seemed to be everywhere, there was no getting away from it. Moving farther into the room, he tried to stay focused on the job.

Soft moonlight through the veranda glass produced enough illumination for him to distinguish large objects in the cabin; a king-sized bed, large-screen television, table along one wall, and built-in chest of drawers. In the bed, two long lumps lay under the sheets, heavy breathing from one lump, snoring from the other.

The snorer rolled over and quit snoring.

Yarnell dropped down out of sight and started duckwalking

for cover. Not a good time to be caught in the open.

He listened.

Still no snoring.

Hoping it was only sleep apnea and that the snorer would soon regain his regular deepbreathing pattern, Yarnell opted to seek temporary refuge under the table along the wall. He drew his long legs in behind him and scooted back as far as he could until he bumped into . . .

What the hell was a potted plant doing under the suite table? On impulse, he reached over and parted the white flowered branches. A long white face stared back at him.

“Wha—”

“Shhh,” whispered the white face.

“You’re supposed to be at the flat watering Patricia’s dwarf tree so it don’t die,” Yarnell whispered back.

“It’s okay,” replied the Thin Guy, “I brought it with me.” He pointed at the pot.

“But how—”

"I phoned up a Department of Agriculture form."

"But the—"

"Yeah, I told the guard at the departure gangplank that my floral delivery van was double parked, so I'd hurry right back."

"But why'd you—"

"Your worthless nephew."

"What's my nephew got to do with—"

"He was throwing loud parties in your absence. The noise aggravated the neighbors, so cops kept coming to the door."

"No, no, no cops at my door."

"Your nephew's not old enough to drink legally, so his friends threw all their beer cans into my bedroom. Some were still half full."

"Bedroom? You mean my closet. You don't have a bedroom."

"And I got fired."

"How do you get fired from a mortuary?"

“Anyway, I missed you and Beaumont, so here I am.”

“Here you are? You’re sitting under a table in someone else’s cabin suite.”

“Yeah, I lifted the woman’s cabin key and now I’m stealing their jewelry.”

Yarnell opened his mouth to say more, but the king-sized bed took this moment to give off a squeak.

Quickly, he jammed his hand over the Thin Guy’s mouth.

Somebody was getting out of bed.

Yarnell turned his feet sideways to become smaller.

A pair of skinny white legs shuffled past the table. The bathroom door opened and a light came on. The door closed.

“We got to get out of here,” whispered Yarnell.

“Okay, I already got the jewels in my pocket.”

Yarnell bolted for the cabin door in a slow motion bent-knee run, turned the handle, and stepped out into the corridor. The Thin Guy was right behind him. Gently, so as to make the

softest clicking noise possible, Yarnell released the door handle and let it latch before breathing a sigh of relief.

“Now what?” asked the Thin Guy.

“Now you go back to wherever you’ve been hiding on the ship and I don’t want to see you again until we get home. Then you fence the jewelry and move out of my closet.” Yarnell paused to see if he’d covered all the bases. “And, you might have to make a small loan to Beaumont.”

“Why?”

“Cuz he’s trying to steal the same jewels and I don’t want him living with me.”

“Uh-oh.”

Yarnell turned.

“No uh-oh, just make the loan.”

The Thin Guy raised his empty hands chest high.

It took Yarnell a moment. “Where’s the tree?”

“I left it under the table.”

“Go back in and get it.”

“Can’t, I left the cabin key inside on top of the chest of drawers.”

For once in his life, Yarnell considered using an act of violence, an action contrary to his nature. When he had finished muttering to himself and kicking the air three or four times, he finally calmed down enough to put a smile on his face and loop one arm around the Thin Guy’s neck as if they were the best of buddies.

The Thin Guy tried to shrink back, but the grip was too tight.

“Did I ever tell you,” began Yarnell, “the story about Valentinus?”

“Who’s he?” inquired the Thin Guy.

“You probably know him as Saint Valentine,” replied Yarnell.

“Oh, the little cupid guy with the bow and arrow.”

“No,” said Yarnell, “I was thinking about the martyr who was killed by the Romans.”

“The Romans killed Saint Valentine?”

“Actually, the Romans killed all three guys named Valentinus. The Italians were pretty thorough in them days. We don’t know which guy Valentine’s Day was actually named after.”

“Man, that’s brutal.”

“Yes it is. So now I’m gonna tell you what you’re gonna do.”

“Sure.”

“First, you’re gonna go up to the top aft deck. You’re gonna find Beaumont standing there looking over the side. He’s got a rope tied to the top rail. Next, you’re gonna put your foot in the rope loop and he’s gonna lower you back down to the cabin you just burgled. Then you’re gonna go inside, retrieve Patricia’s jasmine tree, exit the cabin, beat me home, and be gone from my flat before we get there. *Capisci?*”

“Is that last word Italian like the old Romans used to talk?”

“I think you’re starting to get the message,” said Yarnell.

The Thin Guy swallowed hard.

“Sure, I can do all that stuff you said. No problem. Upstairs, find Beaumont, down the rope, get the tree.”

Yarnell slowly released his tight hold from around the Thin

Guy's neck and nudged the man forward toward the stairs. If this all worked out without repercussions, he'd be surprised. All he wanted was his closet and his quiet life back. Was that too much to ask?

By the time he quit talking to himself, he was alone in the corridor. What was it he was gonna do? Oh yeah, find Patricia and renew his romantic anniversary cruise for their last night onboard. Of course they'd need to pack tonight and be the first ones off the ship early tomorrow morning before a hue and cry was raised over the missing jewelry. With any luck, Patricia would never get wind of Beaumont's caper. Or was it the Thin Guy's? Anyway, there'd soon be room in the coat closet again.

Now, all he had to figure out was what to do with that damn souvenir glass he still had clutched in one hand.

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CATCHPHRASE

NEIL SCHOFIELD

Frank put his arms around Donna's throat in a pretend choke hold and said, "Get out of that." Over her head, he grinned at her in the mirror.

Donna said, "Do you mind? Very much not? Doing that?" She was trying to apply lipstick and her mouth was distorted so that the words came out all twisted. "And especially not using that thing of his." She was blonde, and pretty when she wasn't doing that with her lips.

"What thing?"

"That thing that Georgie says all the time. *Get out of that one.* Or *Get out of this one.* Every time he thinks he's scored some big, like debating point he says that. It's like his—"

"His catchphrase."

"Why do they call it that? Do you know?"

Frank shrugged. "Beats me," he said. He moved restlessly around the room. This was always the worst time for him,

after they had had the sex, when there wasn't much to say, and he wished quite simply that she would go home.

"He's really getting me down," she said. "I think he's suspicious."

"Suspicious."

"Of me. I think he thinks I'm up to something."

Frank grinned. "Well, he's right about that. You are up to something. Up to here."

"Don't joke about it. He's really after me at the moment. Like, when I go back to the house today, he'll be checking the sales tickets to see where I bought what and what time. He's that snoopy."

"Go along with it. And if he ever comes out with it, deny, deny, deny. That's the only thing to do. He can't prove a thing."

"Easy for you to say," she said. "You don't have to live with him. Sometimes, I have this urge . . ."

"Urge to do what?"

"To tell him. Flat out. About you and me."

Frank felt the hair rise on the back of his neck.

“Jesus,” he said, “you do that, he’ll do both of us.”

“I know,” she said. “Oh, Frank, what are we going to do?”

“Carry on carrying on,” he said. “Business as usual.”

“But I want you. I want us to be together.”

“So do I,” he said, wondering whether it was wholly a lie, or just partly. “So do I, kid. But that’s the way things are.”

“If he wasn’t there, we could be . . .”

“Yes, but he is there,” Frank said.

“He might not always be there, Frank. Something might happen, mightn’t it? I mean, on a job? Something could go wrong, couldn’t it?”

Frank stared at her.

“You mean, I could make something go wrong?”

She shrugged.

“You always say it’s a risky business. You never know what

people are going to do. Something could happen. Something could happen on this job up north tomorrow. And anyway, if something did happen to Georgie, you'd move up. Those People like you, you said so yourself."

That much was true. Those People did like him because he was efficient and neat, never caused a fuss. Even Georgie had said so. "Nice job on the Ukrainian, Frank," he would say. "They're pleased. Very pleased." And that was all you got.

But you took your money as a second string, which was pretty good even so, and went on being a second string. He went into the bathroom and stripped off his shirt.

"Because honestly, Frank," she was saying now, "I don't know how much longer I can go on like this."

He stared at himself as he shaved. There was always a moment like this, he thought. And if he were wise, this would be the moment to end it, before it got too dangerous.

"Frank? I really don't know if I can go on. I have this urge to tell him. All the time. And let him do whatever he wants to. And if I left him, what could he do?"

He could kill you, Frank thought, he could kill you with that big

.45 of his. Kill you deadlier than anything. He checked himself in the mirror. Still good looking. Even better, still alive.

Back in the bedroom he put on a clean shirt and knotted the yellow tie he liked to wear with it.

She came towards him.

"I want us to be together, Frank," she said. "I want to take care of you." She stroked his cheek. "Look at the state of you. You've got blood all over that tie."

He looked in the mirror. He had nicked himself shaving, and the tie had a large smear of blood right there on the knot. He stripped it off.

"I could have that cleaned for you," she said, "put it in with Georgie's things."

"You think Georgie doesn't know how many ties he's got?" he said, and threw it into the linen basket. He was irritated now. That was a good tie. He looked good in it. He looked at his watch.

"Okay," she said, "I get the point. Let me use the bathroom and I'm out of here."

While she was in the bathroom, he chose another tie, but it

wasn't the yellow one and it didn't feel right.

After she had gone, he sat down and cleaned his guns. He laid them out on the table, the Glock 19 and the FN Browning that he especially liked. He spent the afternoon quite happily, cleaning and oiling and finally loading. He wondered whether taking both of them was really necessary. Georgie would be sure to twit him about it. Georgie figured that if it couldn't be done with a .45, it wasn't worth doing. But that was Georgie.

Tomorrow they were going to see the—what was their name?—the Galapagos twins up there in the North. No, not Galapagos, that was turtles, but something close. Greek anyway, and with a Greek tendency to do foolish, reckless things. So it was a comfort to have the two, they might come up with some ill-considered Greek foolery.

He watched some television and made himself a meal. He didn't think about the job tomorrow. That would go well or it wouldn't. There was no point in worrying about it.

The following morning, he was showered, shaved, and dressed by nine o'clock. He looked out at the weather. There were a few snowflakes in the air, but nothing substantial, nothing that settled. Not enough for Georgie to decide to do it another day. He stood drinking a final cup of coffee and watching the snow and thinking about Donna. It was maybe

the time to end it now. He knew he had to do it. She was just dippy enough to do something stupid if she got into a fight with Georgie. He liked his job. He didn't want to lose it or have Georgie after him. The whole thing had been stupid anyway from the start.

He had never thought about Georgie's private life, never wondered if he had one, never imagined him being married. Then one night, he'd come across them in a bar, Georgie and this good-looking woman on his arm. Georgie had appeared as embarrassed as Georgie ever allowed himself to look, had barely taken the time to introduce Frank as a colleague from the office. A colleague from the office. Some office. But the girl he introduced as Donna, his wife, had looked at Frank consideringly, and had looked back at him when they left him there at the bar, drinking whiskey.

The next day, he was getting his car out of the car park beneath the block, and there she was in front of the main door, quite by chance, how strange the ways of the city. She had looked at him and shrugged with a lopsided rueful smile, and that had been the start of it. He didn't know why, perhaps she liked the danger, or perhaps she liked the thought of what he did for a living, take your pick.

He had finished his coffee by the time the auto-porter sounded.

Georgie said, "You coming down or what?" He sounded sour, as if he had been expecting Frank to stand about down there in the freezing cold, with getting on for three pounds of artillery in his pockets, four if you counted the ammunition. Frank put on his overcoat and left.

Georgie's Lexus was double-parked in front of the building, forcing bad-tempered traffic to weave around him. Frank climbed in and Georgie started immediately, giving him no time to shut the door, which ended up nearly cutting Frank's leg off at the knee. A taxi behind them just about stood on its head to avoid rear-ending them. There was an anguished chorus of car horns, which Georgie ignored as he always did.

There was a traffic cop talking to a driver at the side of the road. The traffic cop turned his head at the braying of horns but without interest. The driver he had pulled over looked, too, but without much interest in the problems of others. Georgie looked at them and laughed softly.

"Get out of *that* one, fool."

Another thing about Georgie was that he hated major roads. Once out of the city, he always headed for the country roads, where he said he could breathe a little without having some bastard in a semi trying to climb into the back seat. Frank

didn't mind that. To be truthful, he was always a little nervous when being driven. And Georgie wasn't a talking driver like some others. He sat grimly in his seat, his vast stomach pressing against the wheel, and concentrated on the road with a fierce unblinking stare.

Frank felt the need to talk. About something. Maybe it was the guilt coming out. He wasn't breaking bread with Georgie, but he was being driven by him in his Lexus, and that made him feel guilty. Normally he didn't. But here he did. There you go. And he felt the need to make conversation.

He said, "These Greeks going to be a problem?"

Georgie said, "Problem, what problem? We brace 'em, we take a look around in the safe, see what they been taking off the top. Then we see what the options are."

Frank nodded. There was a river up there. With a river you always had options.

" 'Course, they could always start something silly," said Georgie. "That case, it's simple."

He lapsed into a silence. "Simple," he said half to himself.

After a couple of hours driving they were up in the forested country, running down a two-lane road, with pine forests on

both sides.

Georgie slowed down. There was a muddy track cut into the forest on the right, a logging road, or something like that. Georgie pulled over onto the muddy entry.

"Gotta take a leak," he said. "You should do likewise."

He got out of the car and trotted into the trees. Frank sat for a moment. Then he pulled out the Glock which had been giving him trouble since they started and flipped open the glove compartment. Georgie's .45 was in there; he put the Glock in with it, and closed the lid.

He got out of the car and followed Georgie into the trees. There was a little snow, but it didn't look like it was going to settle. The pines or spruces or whatever they were, were thick here, but he could see Georgie up ahead in a little clearing sort of, with his back to Frank, and with little wisps of steam rising around him.

Frank stopped a little short of Georgie, and turned away to open his fly. He peed and then fastened his trousers. When he turned towards Georgie, Georgie was facing him with a gun in his hand. It wasn't the .45, that was back in the car. This was a smaller gun, a revolver, probably a .38, Frank thought idly. Georgie's backup.

“Okay,” said Georgie, “this is where it stops.”

“Look, Georgie,” said Frank, looking for words, looking for ideas. What was this about? “Look, Georgie.” But Georgie wasn’t in the mood, Frank could see that and he backed away a little to try and put a bit more space between him and that .38 or whatever it was. He stepped on a small log which rolled beneath his foot and suddenly he was off balance and falling. Georgie fired. The shot was a flat clap of sound among all those trees, and Frank heard a chunk of wood come flying off one of them. He was clawing in his pocket for the Browning; it came out, a miracle, with no snagging. Georgie fired again. This time it was a better shot and a branch next to Frank jumped a foot in the air.

Frank said, “No.” Not knowing why he was saying that, no to Georgie, no to the .38, no to getting shot. He pointed the Browning at Georgie and fired. The bullet took Georgie full in the middle of the chest. Georgie sighed and turned with a tired look on his face. The .38 went off one last time, the bullet going nowhere, aimlessly. Then he knelt and fell over onto his right side.

Frank waited. There was no sound in the forest. The snow was falling more heavily now, but, filtered through the trees, was still hardly more than individual flakes. Frank got to his

feet. He was breathing as though he had run five miles. He walked over to Georgie with the Browning aimed at the fat man's body. He kicked the .38 away from Georgie's hand. Then he sat down on a nearby log, and looked at Georgie.

"Well, Georgie," he said, "this is a mess."

Georgie didn't say anything. His face was half buried in dead leaves, his eyes staring at something just in front of his face.

Frank thought for a bit, taking his time. There was no one about. He couldn't even hear traffic on the road. But that wasn't going to last. There would be people, forestry people working here, people passing on the road, and a Lexus sitting there with no one in it invited questions.

He wondered if Georgie had a shovel in the car, but decided Georgie wasn't one to go dirtying up his nice new Lexus with shovels and such.

He got to his feet, feeling about a hundred years old. He stared around him. Over to his right there was a sort of hollow, or appeared to be. He got a grip on Georgie's overcoat collar and started to pull him across. Georgie weighed a ton; by the time Frank reached the hollow, he was sweating like a pig. The hollow was in fact a steep dip in the ground; Frank laid Georgie on the lip of the depression and

let him roll down to the bottom. There was an old tree trunk, rotted away inside, poised on the lip. He pushed it experimentally with his foot. It rocked a little and then stopped. He pushed it harder, and this time it swiveled suddenly, catching him by surprise so he had to leap back, then it slowly trundled over the edge and down into the hollow, coming to rest on Georgie as if it had been made for it.

Frank went back to where Georgie had fired at him. He found the .38 lying among the leaves. He wiped it with the tail of his coat, then pushed it barrel first into the earth and stamped it well down. He took out the Browning and wiped that, too, then hurled it into the trees as hard as he could. Okay, let them sort it out for themselves when the proverbial man walking his dog came across the body. He turned away and walked through the trees and the thickening snow to the Lexus.

He walked round the front and climbed into Georgie's seat. Incredibly, it was still warm from Georgie's body. He started the motor and did a U-turn. There was no point in going on with this. The only thing to do was to get back to town, two hours say, dump the Lexus, then ring Those People, say, "I don't want to cause no trouble, but I'm sitting here waiting for Georgie; we were supposed to go up north today."

That was the thing to do, and the other thing to do was *not* to call Donna. Let it lie for a couple of days. But keep calling

Those People to ask where's Georgie, I haven't seen him for a bit, is he okay?

That was the thing to do. Yet another thing *not* to do was to ask himself if Georgie had been told to kill him. Had he done something to annoy someone? Possible. There were some nervy, unpredictable people around. But he almost never came into contact with them. Georgie was his boss, his cut-out. So what was it?

He'd found out about Donna and him. Was that it? A possibility. But he would have made some sort of noise before this. And why wait until they were in the middle of nowhere? That wasn't Georgie's style. Georgie didn't care. He'd shoot someone in the middle of the city if he felt like it. He could have walked up to Frank's place this morning, shot him there, no problem. No, that didn't feel right. There was something else here, something he didn't know about. Well, he'd have to find out. There were ways.

The snow was coming down thicker now. It was about midday, but he seemed to have been on the road for days. He switched on the sidelights.

And it must have been that that caused the police car to approach him from behind and flash its headlights and give him a yelp from the siren. He swore. This he didn't need. He

pulled over onto a gravel patch and waited. The first cop came alongside the driver's window. Frank pressed the button and rolled the window down.

"Good morning, sir," the policeman said. He was young and fresh faced, he looked like he could have been just out of training college. "Did you know that one of your taillights is out?"

"Really?" Frank kept his tone light with no irritation. He got out of the car.

"Is this your vehicle, sir?"

"No, it belongs to a friend. I'm taking it back to town for him. He got held up, up north," Frank said. Well, it was all true except for the bit about Georgie being a friend.

"Can you bring the car registration with you, please, sir?" said the cop.

Frank reached across to the glove compartment. He opened it and felt inside for the car documents. Then he closed the glove box again. If they wanted to search the car, that would mean he was in trouble anyway.

He got out of the Lexus and walked back to where the two policemen were standing looking at the rear of the car.

“It’s the near side,” said one, pointing. Frank looked. Sure enough, dammit, the taillight was out.

The second policeman was looking with interest at the bodywork.

“Looks like you’ve had mice here,” he said. Frank went and looked. There was a neat small hole in the bodywork just there where it housed the taillights.

“Looks more like someone took a shot at you,” the first one said.

The second policeman said, “You mind opening up, sir?”

Frank said, “No.” He went and took the keys from the ignition. Then he went back and put the key in the trunk lid. Then he opened it.

“Jesus Christ,” said the first policeman.

After that, Frank knew a number of things. He knew that Georgie did carry a shovel. It was right there next to Donna. He also knew where that last stray shot of Georgie’s had gone. It had gone through the sidelight’s wiring and had ended up in Donna’s forehead, though there wasn’t much blood because it hadn’t killed her. What had killed her was

the yellow tie that was around her throat, embedded really deep in the flesh, but not so deep you couldn't see the large stain where Frank had bled onto it. The yellow tie that poor, brainless Donna had sneaked out of the linen basket in his bathroom because she wanted to show how she could look after him. And Georgie had known exactly how many ties he owned and what color.

"You said this vehicle belongs to a friend," said the first policeman.

They were flanking him now, one on each side.

"That's right," he said. "Check the registration. George Wentzell."

"Any idea about where we can find Mr. Wentzell?" the second policeman asked, almost casually.

The final thing, Frank thought while they were putting the cuffs on him, was that now he knew why it was called a *catchphrase*.

Get out of this one, Georgie whispered in his ear.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

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JACK RITCHIE

I yawned, rubbed the stubble of my beard, and reflected once again what a boring and basically awkward process it was for me to shave myself every evening. Janos—my man—had done the task for me until two months ago, when I had had to let him go. I simply could not afford to feed him any longer. I...

Top of MYSTERY CLASSIC

FICTION

DEPARTMENT

SELECTED AND INTRODUCED BY STEVE RITCHIE

Cardula and the Mystery Writer

Jack Ritchie became interested in mystery fiction during World War II when he was stationed on Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands. Years later he would explain that after having read everything else available on the island, boredom forced him to turn to the small collection of mystery novels in the company's paperback library. To his surprise, and to our benefit, he found that he liked them.

So when in the 1950s he decided to try his hand at being an author, he naturally wrote mysteries. However, he didn't limit himself to them—he wrote in every genre he could manage. His stories from that period range from crime and mystery, sports, and westerns to science fiction, fantasy, and even some romance.

Though the subject matter of his stories from that time covers a wide range, they are nonetheless filled with the deft use of language, twists of logic, and economy with words

that would later come to define his style. His newspaper romances in particular are mostly humorous wordplay, with very little actual romance.

Having been a boxer in college, he also wrote a number of stories set in the boxing ring. Eventually, he combined boxing with a supernatural theme in a story about a mysterious boxer who never ate, was incredibly strong, and would only fight at night.

That story, "Kid Cardula," was published in AHMM in June, 1976. Later this character would return as a detective and become Jack Ritchie's second series, coming a few years after the start of his Sherlockian Ralph and Henry stories. Altogether he would write nine Cardula stories, and a few others featuring an unnamed vampire.

One notable element in the series is that Jack Ritchie never tells us what Cardula is, even though his unique condition is essential to solving the mystery. The oblique references to vampiric powers and limitations become a conspiratorial wink between the author and the reader. A "poor night for flying" is a common and factual statement, but when it is used in the context of merely traveling across town . . .

This game with the reader reached its peak in Dial an Alibi

when he actually included his home telephone number in the story, just to see if anyone would call. He was betting no one would, though, since whenever we do see a phone number in a story we naturally assume that it couldn't possibly be legitimate.

And that's one of the great aspects of a Jack Ritchie story: None of your assumptions are safe.

So with that in mind, let us continue on to the shadowy world of Cardula.

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Next Article

THE CARDULA DETECTIVE AGENCY

JACK RITCHIE

I yawned, rubbed the stubble of my beard, and reflected once again what a boring and basically awkward process it was for me to shave myself every evening. Janos—my man—had done the task for me until two months ago, when I had had to let him go. I simply could not afford to feed him any longer.

I climbed out of bed and went to the dark windows. It was raining heavily. Certainly no weather for flying.

I plugged in my electric razor and went to work. I was becoming a bit more skilled at the job. Actually, of course, putting a straight part in my hair was much more difficult. When I finished shaving, I slipped out of my pajamas and showered.

I moved on to the closet and surveyed my two remaining suits. Top quality, certainly, but both had seen better days. I sincerely hoped that some night soon I might replenish my wardrobe with something new, possibly even other than black.

I finished dressing and donned my black raincoat. I checked

to make certain that I carried my tobacco pouch. There was no telling where circumstances might force me to spend the day.

Outside my apartment building, I raised my umbrella and began walking toward my office, slightly more than a mile away.

The rain slackened to a light drizzle as I proceeded down Wisconsin Avenue, crossed the bridge, and turned into the alley shortcut I usually take when I find it necessary to walk.

I had almost reached the opposite street—East Wells—when someone leaped upon me from behind, hooking his arm under my chin.

Clearly I was being mugged.

I reached back, grasped his collar, and flipped him head over heels some twenty feet into the side of a brick wall, from which point he dropped to the alley surface and remained still.

But apparently he was not alone. Another and larger figure sprang from a building recess and threw an overhand right which caught me squarely on the jaw. I distinctly heard several phalanges of his fist fracture and he yelped with

surprise at the injury.

I then lifted him high overhead and sent him crashing across the alley to join his inert companion.

I brushed off my raincoat, picked up my umbrella, and continued on to my office. Really, I thought, this was outrageous. It was no longer safe for an innocent pedestrian to walk the streets or alleys at night.

When I reached my office, I found a young woman, probably in her late twenties, waiting at my office door.

She seemed a bit startled when she first saw me, but then most people are. She looked at the keys in my hand. "Do you work for the Cardula Detective Agency?"

I smiled sparingly. "I *am* the Cardula Detective Agency." I unlocked the door and we entered my one-room office.

She sat down, produced a silver case, and offered me a cigarette.

"No, thank you," I said. "I don't smoke."

She lit her cigarette. "My name is Olivia Hampton. I phoned about an hour ago. A recording said your office hours are from eight P.M. to four A.M."

I nodded. "They vary according to the solstices."

"It's my Uncle Hector," she said. "Someone shot at him while he was dressing for dinner. The bullet went through his bedroom window and missed him by inches."

"Hm," I said thoughtfully. "Since you came to me, I gather that you did not go to the police."

"We regard the incident as a family matter. All of the logical suspects are relatives. Except for Uncle Custis Clay Finnegan. I mean, he's a relative but not one of the suspects because he has millions of his own."

"Why does anyone want your Uncle Hector dead?"

"Because he's going to change his will tomorrow morning when he sees his lawyer. He called us into his study and told us that he was cutting all of us out of his will."

"Why would he want to do that?"

"He said he read a book and now he doesn't believe in individuals inheriting wealth. He's going to give his money to various charities."

"How much money does he have?"

"The last time he mentioned the subject, I think he said three million."

"Aha, and you want me to find out who's trying to kill him?"

"If you can, of course. But the main idea is for you to see that Uncle Hector is still alive when he sees his lawyer at nine tomorrow morning. After that, there won't be any motive for any of us to kill him because we'll be out of the will anyway."

I drummed my fingers for a moment or two. "I'm afraid I can guarantee his safety only until approximately six A.M. tomorrow. After that I have another commitment."

She thought about that. "Well, it's better than nothing, I suppose. I don't imagine I could get anybody else at this time of the night." She got up. "I think we'd better get going right away. If anyone's going to murder Uncle Hector, it's got to happen tonight. I have a car and chauffeur waiting downstairs."

It was still drizzling when we walked half a block and turned into a parking lot.

As we approached a Volkswagen minibus, the driver's door burst open and a small uniformed chauffeur hopped out. He rushed forward and kissed the back of my hand.

It was Janos.

"Count," he breathed fervently. "It is so wonderful to see you again."

Olivia smiled. "It was Janos who recommended that I come to you. Did he call you Count?"

I shrugged. "That was yesterday and today is today."

"His highness has fallen on bad times," Janos said, "through no fault of his own."

I sighed. "At one time the subject of money never disturbed my mind. I had extensive holdings in Cuba, the Belgian Congo, Lebanon, Angola, and Bangladesh. What wasn't confiscated or nationalized was destroyed."

Janos slid back the side door of the minibus. "In the old country the people's government has made his castle a state shrine. Busloads of school children and tourists stop there every day, and the grounds are sprinkled with souvenir and food stands. The entire lower east gallery has been converted to public restrooms."

As Olivia and I rode the minibus, she gave me some background on the members of Uncle Hector's household.

There was Cousin Albert, whose right arm was three inches longer than his left, and Cousin Maggie, who liked red port, and Cousin Wendy, who wrote the kindest rejection slips, and Cousin Fairbault, who detested crustaceans.

After some twenty miles of freeway travel, we took an off-ramp and continued on a two-lane road into the countryside, where only an occasional farmyard light broke the darkness.

It began to rain heavily again. Lightning flashed across the sky and thunder rolled—truly a splendid evening.

It was nearly ten thirty when we turned in at a pair of gateposts and followed the graveled and bumpy driveway through a cordon of grotesque, bare-branched trees. In the revelation of another bolt of lightning, I saw ahead the looming monster of a Victorian mansion. Here and there a light gleamed dully from behind pulled drapes.

Janos stopped the Volkswagen and Olivia and I rushed up the wide steps to the shelter of the porch. She opened a huge door and we stepped into a large, dimly lit vestibule.

I heard a muffled crash from somewhere deep inside the house followed most instantly by a brief series of splinterings. Strange, I thought, it sounded exactly like a bowling alley.

"I'll introduce you all around," Olivia said. "And we might just as well start with Albert." She led me through a passageway and then down a flight of stairs to high-ceilinged cellars.

I looked about as we proceeded. Stone walls, stone floors, roomy, damp, musty-smelling, grimed by a century of dampened dust.

I heard the crashing noise again, this time much closer.

Olivia opened a door and we stepped into the bright lights of an elongated room containing a two-lane bowling alley.

A gangly man in his thirties, concentrating intensely, stood poised to bowl. He took a five-step approach and delivered the ball smoothly with a flawless follow-through. The ball hit the pins solidly and he had a strike.

The automatic pin-spotter scooped up the pins and returned the ball.

"Albert," Olivia said, "this is Mr. Cardula. He's a private detective and he's spending the night with us to see that Uncle Hector doesn't get killed."

Albert shook hands, but he seemed eager to get back to his bowling.

I glanced at his score sheet. He had a string of seven strikes. I nodded approvingly. "What is your average?"

He brightened. "I have a 257 over the last one thousand games."

Was he pulling my leg? A 257 *average*? I smiled slightly. "Magnificent bowling."

He agreed. "I practice ten hours a day. I would make it more, but that's about all the bowling the human body can take."

I glanced down. Yes, his right arm did seem to be several inches longer than his left.

"When I'm not bowling," Albert said, "I do all of the maintenance work down here. I can even take the pin-spotters apart and put them back together blindfolded." He smiled. "I have 983 perfect games so far."

Nine hundred and eighty-three perfect games? Oh, come now, I thought.

But he nodded earnestly. "And the alleys aren't grooved or anything like that. They could pass inspection anytime by the American Bowling Congress."

When we left him, Olivia said, "Albert's father was something

of a local bowling celebrity in his hometown. He and Albert's mother were killed in an automobile accident when Albert was ten. He spent six years in an orphanage before Uncle Hector heard about him and got him out. But by then . . ." She sighed. "Uncle Hector had the alleys built because bowling seemed to be the only thing that interested Albert."

I followed her through an archway. "Albert shouldn't have to brood about being cut out of the will. If what he says about his bowling is true, he is the greatest bowler this world has ever seen or is likely to. He would sweep any tournament he entered, and what with endorsements and such, he could easily become a millionaire in a relatively short time."

Olivia shook her head. "No. Albert has never left these grounds since the day he came here. He doesn't want to see any other part of the world, no matter what it has to offer."

She led me to another door and switched on a light.

I found myself gazing upon bushel baskets and boxes of apples, potatoes, beets, rutabagas, squashes, and bins of sand which I surmised contained carrots and other root vegetables. One side of the room was totally shelved and occupied by an array of glass jars containing preserved tomatoes, green and wax beans, and dozens of other fruits and vegetables. Two large top-loading freezers stood at one

end of the room.

“Cousin Fairbault does all this himself,” Olivia said. “The seeding, the cultivating, the harvesting. Then he cans and freezes and preserves. He’s converted the carriage house into a barn and he raises all our beef, and pork, and chickens. He also makes sausages and hams and even cheeses.”

She closed the door. “Fairbault was a navy pilot. He got shot down and was washed ashore onto a tiny uninhabited island not more than an acre in size. It had three palm trees and all kinds of miscellaneous vegetation, but none of it edible. He couldn’t even fish, because he had nothing to fish with. But there were spider crabs and slugs and all kinds of things that crawled and scuttled and came out mostly at night. Fairbault was on that island for seven years before he was rescued—he was down to eighty pounds. He spent another five years in an asylum where he tried to hoard food under his mattress.”

We took the stairs up. “When Fairbault first came here, he kept that room locked at all times. We had to ask his permission whenever we wanted anything for the kitchen and he would watch over us while we got it. But he’s been here eleven years now and he trusts us so much that he leaves the room unlocked and we are free to take anything we want at any time, just as long as we don’t waste it.”

We returned to the first floor and entered a large, well-ordered kitchen. In one corner, a heavyset woman in her fifties sat at a table working a jigsaw puzzle. A half-empty bottle of red wine and a glass were at her elbow.

Olivia introduced me to Cousin Maggie. "She does the cooking for us and she's really the best cook in the world."

Maggie beamed. "I try to do the best I can and I don't touch a drop until seven. Are you hungry, Mr. Cardula? Could I fix you a snack?"

"No, thank you," I said. "I had something last week."

She blinked. "Last week?"

I cleared my throat. "I mean I have taken nourishment lately enough to not be hungry. How do you feel about your Uncle Hector changing his will and leaving you all out of it?"

Maggie shrugged. "Well, it's his money and I wasn't really counting on any part of it, even assuming that I would outlive him." Her eyes clouded with worry. "Just as long as I have my job here. That's all that really counts."

We left Maggie to her jigsaw puzzle and bottle and proceeded to the second floor.

"You employ a *cousin* to do the cooking?" I asked.

"Maggie likes to be useful."

"Why is she worried about the possibility of losing her job here? If she's as good a cook as you claim, she shouldn't have any difficulty getting another job."

"Unfortunately, whenever she worked anywhere else, she began drinking as soon as she woke in the morning and kept it up long as she was able to stand, or sit. She was continually getting fired without references and was in quite desperate straits when Uncle Hector found her."

Olivia stopped at an open doorway.

I looked into an abundantly furnished room. A plump balding man sat comfortably ensconced in a deep easy chair, puffing a large curved pipe and engrossed in a book whose jacket read *Secrets with Broccoli*.

Olivia introduced me to Fairbault.

He offered me wine, but I declined.

He held his own glass to the light. "Six years in the cask. I call it Fairbault 71. Because of the climate here, I am forced to

concentrate on the northern grapes. Not nearly as ideal for wine as the sweet California varieties, but one must make do.”

I glanced at the bookshelves. All of the volumes seemed concerned with vegetable and fruit gardening and animal husbandry. One entire shelf contained what was very likely eleven years of an organic gardening magazine. “Do you do any greenhousing?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No. Greenhousing would expand the season to twelve months a year and too much is too much. Besides, half of the fun of gardening is to store and stock and preserve during the winter months and read gardening magazines and make plans for the spring.”

We left Fairbault and continued down the corridor. We turned a corner and found a somewhat hefty and firm-jawed lady in her forties, nearly supine in a window seat, her face deathly white with perhaps a few touches of green. A cigar, one inch smoked, dangled from her somewhat limp square hand.

Olivia sighed. “Why don’t you give up trying to smoke cigars, Wendy? You know you just can’t do it.”

Cousin Wendy opened her eyes. “One of these damn days I’ll find the right brand.”

“Cousin Wendy is the founder and editor of the *Trempleau County Poetry Review*. It has one hundred and ten subscribers from all over the country and one hundred and nine of them are also contributors.”

Cousin Wendy nodded. “Believe me, it makes for a twelve-hour day. Last month I had to plow through eight hundred manuscripts before I could make up the November issue. But I suppose nobody really appreciates all the work I put in and the correspondence and the free constructive criticism.”

“Now, Wendy,” Olivia said, “you know that every one of your readers is absolutely *depending* on you to sift and winnow, to separate the wheat from the chaff.” She turned to me. “Cousin Wendy is not only an editor, but she is also a top poetry person.”

Cousin Wendy shrugged modestly. “I try to keep my hand in when I have the time.”

When we left her, I said, “Trempleau County? Isn’t that about three hundred miles north?”

“Yes. That’s where Cousin Wendy used to live. She was a waitress in a roadside café and wrote poetry on the side. Then one day a trucker came on a batch of her poems and started reading them out loud to the customers. So she

crushed his skull with a counter stool. She was still in prison when Uncle Hector heard about her and vouched for her at the parole hearing.”

“Just one moment,” I said. “Are you telling me that all of these people are really blood relatives of Uncle Hector?”

Olivia sighed and smiled faintly. “Well, to tell the truth, none of us really is. But we like to think of ourselves as cousins because it’s warmer.”

We went downstairs this time.

“Uncle Custis is our houseguest about once every six months or so,” Olivia said. “He came here after supper tonight and Uncle Hector insisted that none of us breathe a word about the murder attempt on his life. He doesn’t want Uncle Custis to worry. So I’ll just tell Uncle Custis that you are also a houseguest.”

We found Uncles Hector and Custis at a pool table in the game room.

Uncle Hector, a short man with soft white hair, had good nature stamped into his face.

Uncle Custis, on the other hand, was tall and gimlet-eyed. He regarded me sourly. “A houseguest? Or are you another one

of those damn cousins Hector digs up now and then?"

"How much has Uncle Custis won from you so far this evening?" Olivia asked.

Uncle Hector shrugged. "Fifteen dollars."

"Uncle Custis is quite a pool player," Olivia said. "Eight ball is his favorite game."

"Eight ball?" I said. "Is that anything like billiards? I remember in my student years at the university I played the game a number of times."

Uncle Custis eyed me pityingly for a moment. Then he allowed himself an economical smile and explained to me the simple rules of eight ball. "Would you care to try your hand at it? I like to make things a little more interesting. How does five dollars a game strike you?"

I lost the first game, and the second.

Uncle Custis checked his watch. "I'm just about ready for bed. What do you say about a final game? Let's make it for fifty dollars?"

I agreed and then proceeded to win that game with the utmost skill and dispatch.

Uncle Custis watched as I bank shot the eight ball into the side pocket and then glared. "I've been hustled. I *know* when I've been hustled." He flung five tens onto the table and stormed out of the room."

Uncle Hector regarded me with approval. "Damn, I've been wanting to do that for years."

I turned to business. "Sir, if you don't mind my saying so, wouldn't it have been wiser to change your will secretly and *then* inform your household that it had been disinherited? Do you realize how many people who boldly and blatantly announce that they are going to change their wills the first thing in the morning never get to see the sun rise?" I winced slightly at the last two words.

"Nonsense," Uncle Hector said. "Ninety-nine percent of will changers survive to see their lawyers the next morning. The one percent who are murdered get all of the publicity and give the entire process a bad name." He glanced at the wall clock. "Well, I suppose it's bedtime for all of us too. I understand that you are going to keep watch outside of my bedroom door tonight?"

"No," I said firmly. "I will be inside your bedroom. I do not intend to allow you out of my sight for one moment."

We said goodnight to Olivia and went upstairs.

Hector's bedroom was quite as large as my entire apartment and contained a huge canopy bed and a capacious fireplace.

While Hector changed into pajamas, I searched the room thoroughly. I then went to the windows and checked to make certain that they were all securely locked. I drew the drapes and sat down.

I frowned. There was something wrong here. Something I should have seen, but didn't. My eyes went over the room again, but I simply couldn't put my finger on it.

Hector sat on the bed and took off his slippers. "There's really no need for you to stay up all night. Why not lie down on that couch? I could get you a pillow and some blankets."

"No, thank you," I said. I went to the bookshelves, found a volume on hematology, and sat down.

Hector climbed into bed and closed his eyes. After five minutes he turned restlessly. He repeated the turnings at fairly regular intervals. Finally he sighed and sat up. "I simply can't go to sleep without my regular warm glass of milk and tonight I completely forgot about it. You wouldn't care to slip

down to the kitchen and see if Maggie is still up? If she isn't, could you put a glass of milk into a saucepan and heat it slowly? Short of boiling, you know. And then add a teaspoon of sugar and a few dashes of cinnamon."

"I'm sorry," I said. "But I am not leaving this room."

He thought it over. "Then I think I'll just hop down there myself."

"Very well," I said, "but I will accompany you. And we will make certain that the milk is taken from a fresh sealed bottle."

Harold scratched the back of his neck. "Forget it. It's too far to the kitchen anyway." He brightened. "There's a liquor cabinet over there. Why don't you help yourself to something? There's nothing like a good snort or two for relaxation."

"I do not intend to relax," I said. "And besides, I do not drink. At least not liquor."

Hector sank back into his pillow and closed his eyes.

The hours passed. It was somewhat after five in the morning when I suddenly realized what it was that I should have seen earlier, but didn't.

I looked in Hector's direction. Was he really sleeping or was he faking it?

I allowed five minutes to pass, then yawned and let my eyelids droop and finally close, except for a calculated millimeter or two. I began breathing heavily and allowed the book to slip from my hands to the carpeted floor.

Uncle Hector's eyes opened and he watched me intently for perhaps three minutes. Then he slipped quietly out of bed and tiptoed over to a bureau. He opened a drawer and removed a Finnish-style hunting knife.

I tensed a bit, but he crept past me to the door and disappeared into the hall.

I rose and followed him.

As he threaded through the halls, he looked back frequently, but I kept myself confined to the darkness of the high ceiling.

He paused before a door, slowly turned the knob, and crept inside. I silently swooped into the room myself.

The room was very much like the one he had left. It too was graced by a canopy bed and upon it lay Uncle Custis, gently snoring.

Hector approached the bed and raised the dagger high into the air.

I quickly sprang forward, grasped his wrist, and removed the knife from his grip. He was startled at my appearance and action, but he made no exclamation. He merely closed his eyes for a moment.

On the bed, Uncle Custis continued his snoring without interruption.

I moved to one of the windows and pushed aside the drape for a moment. It was still raining heavily and the lightning periodically fractured the dark sky. Exhilarating.

I let the drapes fall back into position, motioned to Hector, and we went back into the hall.

On our way back to his room, Uncle Hector glanced at the ceiling now and then. "You know, I could have sworn I caught just a glimpse of something flying up there a little while ago."

Once inside his room, I said, "Aha, the old bedroom-switch ploy."

He portrayed innocence. "What old bedroom-switch ploy?"

"When I first came into this room and searched it, I should

have seen something, but it was not there. If it *had* been there, I would certainly have noticed it immediately. It took me a bit of time to realize it was not there, but once I did, I suspected that there was mischief afoot and that you were probably at the root of it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Olivia came to me because someone took a shot at you through your bedroom window.” I pointed in the direction of the windows. “Neither one of those has a bullet hole in it.”

He thought fiercely and then smiled. “I forgot to mention that the window was open at the time.”

“Good try,” I acknowledged. “But then how do you explain the fact that one of the windows in the room Custis now occupies *does* have a bullet hole in it?”

He resumed thinking, but I cut the effort short. “You faked that attempt on your life and this evening you probably told Custis that his regular guest room was being painted, or something of the sort, and he should take your bedroom instead.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because you intended to murder Custis and make it appear

as though the crime had occurred by *accident*. Someone in the house, thinking that you still occupied your bed, sneaked into the room, and in the darkness mistook Uncle Custis for you, and stabbed him to death.”

Hector evaded my eyes and said nothing.

“Why?” I asked. “Why were you trying to murder Custis?”

He finally sighed. “Money, of course.”

“But you’ve got millions.”

“I *had* millions. Good solid investments in Angola, Lebanon, Bangladesh . . .” he shrugged. “Today I am almost dead broke.”

Now his eyes met mine. “You have seen and talked to the people who inhabit this house?”

I nodded.

“Then you know that they have all been severely wounded by the world we live in. If they had to return to it, they would break completely. And I really couldn’t allow that to happen. So I decided that the only way I could get enough money to keep this household going was to kill Custis. Basically he’s a mean bastard anyway and wouldn’t be missed by anyone. And we

really *are* cousins, you know. Custis has no visible heirs other than me, so if he should die, I would certainly get first crack at his estate. You don't suppose you could let me have the knife again so I could finish . . ."

"No," I said firmly.

And yet I could sympathize with Uncle Hector. He had a duty and a responsibility to the members of the household.

Hector needed and deserved help. I sighed. All right. I would do the job for him. Not tonight or in this house, of course. But some evening a week or two from now when Custis walked a city street I would leap upon him, snap his neck, and remove his wallet. The crime would be put down in the police records as a fatal mugging.

I put my hand on Hector's shoulder. "I absolutely insist that you put the idea of murdering Custis completely out of your mind. I have the strongest premonition that your fortune will change dramatically within a week or two."

Hector seemed ready to wait. "To tell you the truth, I'm a little relieved that I didn't go through with it tonight."

I glanced at my watch. It was that time again.

I went to the window and pulled aside the drapes. Still raining. A bad night for fliers. I turned to Hector. "You don't suppose that Janos could drive me back to the city?"

"Of course. His room is on the third floor, right next to the bust of Edgar Allan Poe."

I went up to the floor and woke Janos with my request.

He yawned and consulted his alarm clock. "I'm sorry, your highness, but in wet weather like this, water condenses in the distributor of our Volkswagen. By the time I got everything apart and wiped dry and put together and the engine perhaps started, we would never be able to make it to the city in time. And the minibus is the only vehicle we have."

Damn, I thought, that leaves me no alternative but getting wet. If I leave right now I might have time for a hot footbath when I get to my apartment.

"Why don't you stay here?" Janos said. "There's a nice roomy place in the cellar. I could fix up an army cot. I am certain that nobody would disturb you down there."

We carried what we needed downstairs to a large chamber in the cellar. Janos unfolded the cot and put a mattress on top of it. "Your tobacco pouch, sir?"

I handed it to him. "It isn't necessary to sprinkle the stuff all over the mattress anymore, Janos. I discovered that simply putting the full pouch under the pillow will suffice. I suppose it is the spirit of the thing rather than the letter that counts."

Janos finished putting on the sheets, the pillowcases, and the blankets. "Have a nice sleep, sir."

When he was gone, I slipped into the pajamas and lay down. Really a most spacious chamber. Beautiful vaulting at the doorway. The aroma of damp, stagnant air. I could almost imagine what the place would look like if I brought in a few choice items of furnishings from my apartment.

I sighed. But it was not to be. This was a strange household, but it was really expecting too much of its occupants to accept me.

I thought I heard a noise in the passageway outside.

I put on my slippers and hid in the shadows near the archway.

Olivia passed by outside. She wore a dressing gown, slippers, and from the turbanlike creation on her head, I guessed that she had her hair in curlers.

She opened a door at the end of a passageway.

I saw a room elegant with draped antique spiderwebs and in the center of it, on a marble pedestal, stood a magnificent, comfortable-looking sarcoph—

Olivia entered the room and closed the door behind her. After a few moments, I distinctly heard the creak of a lid rising. And then lowering.

I smiled and went back to my cot.

I don't care what tradition demands, I always sleep on my left side.

Previous Article

DEPARTMENT

DEPARTMENT

The Lineup

JOHN C. BOLAND's short stories have been collected in 30 Years in the Pulp (Perfect Crime Books, 2009). BLAKE CROUCH is the author of Snowbound (St. Martin's Press). His short fiction has also appeared in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Thriller 2, and other anthologies. Booked & Printed columnist...

BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

INFORMATION

The Lineup

JOHN C. BOLAND's short stories have been collected in *30 Years in the Pulp*s (Perfect Crime Books, 2009).

BLAKE CROUCH is the author of *Snowbound* (St. Martin's Press). His short fiction has also appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Thriller 2*, and other anthologies.

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

This issue marks **R. T. LAWTON**'s Holiday Burglars' fourth appearance in AHMM—and the author's twenty-second story for the magazine.

STEVE LINDLEY has completed a second Kubiak novel, after 2006's *Kubiak's Daughter*, and is seeking a publisher.

JACK RITCHIE had published more than a hundred stories in AHMM beginning with magazine's very first issues, until his death in 1983; a number of his AHMM stories have been adapted for television and film.

Wisconsinite **STEVE RITCHIE** writes short stories infrequently, but has recently discovered a knack for writing radio scripts.

“Catchphrase” is **NEIL SCHOFIELD**’s thirteenth story for AHMM. He lives in France.

ANN WOODWARD is the author of *The Exile Way*, a mystery novel set in ancient Japan and featuring Lady Aoi.

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BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

Despite the fall of the Iron Curtain, espionage novelists still find fertile material in the tensions between Russia and the West, with Middle Eastern conflicts providing new vistas. Old pros like John le Carré, who's been setting the standard for fifty years, and Brian Freemantle, now in his fourteenth outing, are still producing quality, exciting reads. But there is more than enough material for newcomers to the genre, and in this vein, relative newcomer Jon Stock makes an impressive American debut.

John le Carré introduced one of the fictional icons of espionage, George Smiley, in his 1961 debut *Call for the Dead*. The Mystery Writers of America named him a Grand Master in 1984, and he is still producing work of the highest quality.

In *OUR KIND OF TRAITOR* (Viking, \$27.95) Peregrine "Perry" Makepiece, a rising but unsatisfied young academic teaching at Oxford University, and Gail Perkins, his barrister girlfriend, are on vacation in Antigua when a club tennis pro introduces them to "Dima," a large Russian man who challenges Perry to a tennis match after watching him play.

Within ten days they are back in England, where they find themselves “invited” to sign a declaration under the Official Secrets Act and being debriefed by a couple introduced as Luke and Yvonne about the strange tennis match between Dima and Perry, which was watched by an audience made up of Dima’s family and bodyguards. Further contacts with Dima and family follow; Gail and Perry are even invited to Three Chimneys, the property Dima has acquired in Antigua. There, in a scene choreographed in secrecy, Dima’s wife, Tamara, gives the couple a note in which Dima seeks asylum for his entire family in exchange for information “very urgent, very critical” for Great Britain that is to be negotiated with Perry and Gail acting as intermediaries.

Le Carré masterfully weaves the many strands of his story tighter and tighter until all the participants seem caught in the same net. Perry and Gail are alternately eager to play the unusual roles assigned to them and fearful and reluctant to continue. Dima, or Dmitri Vladimirovich Krasnov, is a key figure in laundering Russian crime funds, yet he’s been marked for replacement and elimination. Hector Meredith of the British Secret Service, boss of Luke and Yvonne and the man responsible for preserving secrecy until arrangements can be made to evaluate Dima’s critical information and to devise a plan to move them to England, has to deal with contrary elements inside his own agency as well as security.

The information Dima possesses is indeed critical, and the staggering sums of money and the links forged by it mean that virtually no one can be trusted and no one is really safe. Even so, Meredith, with the help his small staff and amateurs Perry and Gail, tries to pull off a miracle.

Charlie Muffin, the veteran MI5 agent who first appeared in Brian Freemantle 1977's *Charlie Muffin*, has earned quite a reputation within and without his own organization. Even his boss, Director Aubrey Smith, tells him: "I've read your file, know your history: Charlie Muffin, the maverick loner bucking all authority and opinions other than his own." But that doesn't keep Smith from dispatching Charlie to Moscow when a one-armed murdered man is left inside the grounds of the British Embassy, the setup for Freemantle's novel, *RED STAR RISING* (St. Martin's/Thomas Dunne, \$25.99).

Charlie's specific mission is to make sure that the discovery doesn't somehow turn into an embarrassing or difficult situation. Given that Charlie speaks Russian and has previously been stationed in Moscow, it is a logical assignment. But Charlie finds the embassy staff eager to leave the investigation up to the Russians and the Russians eager to dismiss the killing as a simple gangland execution.

Identifying the victim, a man left virtually faceless and with the fingers of his one hand destroyed by acid, seems nearly

impossible without help from a witness or informer. Russian pathologist Sergei Pavel maintains that the victim was murdered elsewhere and dumped afterward on embassy ground, making it a Russian investigation. Charlie suggests that the victim was killed on embassy grounds (i.e. British soil), making it a British investigation and suggesting that until a definitive ruling is made it should be a joint investigation.

Thus begins a labyrinthine journey that will test all of Charlie's tradecraft and may provide an ignominious end to his long career. In addition to the poor Embassy security, there are also leaks that make it impossible for Charlie to trust anyone—including the Moscow-based MI5 or MI6 personnel. In addition, interdepartmental rivalry between Aubrey Smith and deputy director Jeffery Smale make the risks of his investigation almost overwhelming. All the offers of help Charlie gets come with strings attached, whether it's from MI6 resident David Halliday or the embassy's Paula-Jane Venables, or the CIA's Bill Bundy or even the FSB's Mikhail Guзов and in every case the only one looking out for Charlie is Charlie.

It is an intricate dance that Charlie performs but when he finally gets a clue to the victim's identity it leads to a discovery that will change international relations—if he can survive long enough to figure out what the ultimate game is

and *if* he can succeed in bringing the proof to London.

A foreign correspondent for the *London Daily Mail*, Freemantle has outdone himself in this brilliantly plotted thriller.

MI6 operative Daniel Marchant, the hero of Jon Stock's novel, *DEAD SPY RUNNING* (St. Martin's/Thomas Dunne, \$25.99), is a more action-oriented espionage agent than George Smiley or Charlie Muffin. As the son of the late, disgraced MI6 director Stephen Marchant, Daniel has been tainted by the association. When the novel opens he is currently suspended from his duties, and with his girlfriend Leila and thirty-five thousand others, he is running in the London Marathon.

In spite of all the security measures in force during the marathon, it is Marchant who spots the suicide bomber/runner and is able after a thrilling confrontation to prevent a bloody disaster and save the life U.S. Ambassador Turner Munroe. But instead of a medal after his heroics Marchant finds himself under suspicion for colluding with the terrorists.

To escape being interrogated by the CIA, Marchant travels through Europe to India, where he'd lived as a child when his father was stationed there; he's seeking suspected Indian

terrorist Salim Dhar, whom he believes holds the key to what his father was doing in India, and to his own troubles. But as he looks for Dhar, the American president is planning to visit India, and the CIA wants to remove Marchant as a potential threat.

Like *le Carré* and *Freemantle*, Stock's world of spy agencies is one filled with betrayals and double-dealings. Stock's world features "a new generation of spies, Arabists who had joined after the Cold War and grown up with al Qaeda. They had learnt their trade in Kandahar rather than Berlin, cutting their teeth in Pakistani training camps rather than Moscow parks, wearing turbans rather than trenchcoats."

Jon Stock is a journalist with the *London Daily Telegraph* who's served time as a correspondent in Delhi, so he knows his territory. *Dead Spy Running* not only inaugurates a new and exciting series, it will soon be made into a movie by Warner Bros.

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MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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When the Other Shoe Drops

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 "March 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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THE STORY THAT WON



© 2010, by Mark F. Russell

The September Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Cindy G. Brewer of Mt. Pleasant, Michigan.

Honorable mentions go to Patrick Ziegler of Phoenix, Arizona; Kent Ostby of Marietta, Georgia; Jo Ann Moore of Ojai, California; M. Donovan Arnold of Minneapolis, Minnesota; Rowland Harris of Greenville, North Carolina; Marie A. Heath of Westminister, Massachusetts; J. Leonard Martinez of Monterey Park, California; Michael Helm of El Paso, Texas; Tim Lee of Rockledge, Florida; and Noreen M.

Cedeño of Round Rock, Texas.

A BETTER FENCE

CINDY G. BREWER

Grandad owned some prime hunting land near town. The wooded area was home to countless white-tailed deer, rabbits, and wild turkeys, and he and his buddies would have hunting parties during many fall weekends. Based on what they brought back home at the end of those weekends—more empty Budweiser cans than prey—the weekends were more “party” than “hunting.”

As Granddad and his friends got older, the hunting parties tapered off and were eventually replaced by stay-at-home poker parties, complete with refrigerators stocked with Bud Light (they had to watch the calories as they aged). The property went unused. But despite offers to buy the land, Granddad refused to sell, perhaps keeping it as a reminder of his youth.

The property, with its many hills and sandy trails, became the playground of local boys who were soon riding their bicycles all over the place and, as Granddad complained, “scarin’ off all the critters.” The property was posted with NO TRESPASSING signs, and wire fence was placed around

the perimeter. But the boys still came with their bikes, cutting through the fencing and boldly making dirt racecourses on the property.

One day Granddad hired a man to take down the fences and signs. I thought he was giving up the fight; instead, near the entrance to the land, he had parked a large trailer full of junked bicycles. A sign on the trailer read:

“Dirt bike trails on property. See if your luck’s better than these guys.”

Bye bye, tresspassers.

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