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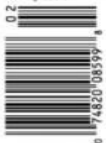
ELLERY QUEEN[®]

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY 2011

**"What One Man
Can Invent
Another Can
Discover..."**

\$4.99



**Lawrence Block
Amy Myers, Michael Z. Lewin**

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Fiction

Tuesday, February 1, 2011

KELLER IN DALLAS

by Lawrence Block

One of the hobbies of Lawrence Block's series character Keller is stamp collecting, which explains why this story first appeared in a philatelic magazine. We thought there were unlikely to be many EQMM readers who'd seen it there, and that the story should be brought to a mystery audience. A couple...

DEAR MURDERER

by Susan Breen

Susan Breen's debut novel, *The Fiction Class*, published by Plume/Penguin in 2008, was praised by Booklist as a "poignant yet amusing tale of family relationships." A writing instructor who lives in upstate New York, the author has also had short stories published in a number of literary magazines....



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by Amy Myers

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by Shane Nelson

Shane Nelson's last short story for EQMM, "That One Small Thing" (February 2009) was selected as a Distinguished Story of 2009 by Best American Mystery Stories 2010. Since then, the Canadian author...

A STUDY IN SCARLATTI

by Donald A. Yates

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DOG ON A COW

by Gina Paoli

Pseudonymous author Gina Paoli has appeared in EQMM before, but under a different name. The Colorado writer worked for many years as a technical writer for high-tech industries, "explaining the..."



SAFE AND SOUND

by Edward Marston

Author of five established series of historical mysteries, ranging from the Middle Ages to the Victorian era, Edward Marston begins a

sixth line of historicals, this time set not in his native U.K....

POWDER GOES HUNTING

by Michael Z. Lewin

“This satisfying, intelligent private eye novel unfolds with expert timing,” Publishers Weekly said of Michael Z. Lewin’s first novel in the Albert Samson series, *Ask the Right Question*, which first saw print forty years ago. Now it’s back in print in paperback, available at backinprint.com and...

Top of Fiction

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

KELLER IN DALLAS

by Lawrence Block

One of the hobbies of Lawrence Block's series character Keller is stamp collecting, which explains why this story first appeared in a philatelic magazine. We thought there were unlikely to be many *EQMM* readers who'd seen it there, and that the story should be brought to a mystery audience. A couple of years ago, Mr. Block was the keynote speaker at a dinner of the American Philatelic Society, which commemorated the event by issuing a souvenir sheet of four stamps mentioned in Keller stories. (See them at www.lawrenceblock.com).

The young man, who would have looked owlish even without the round eyeglasses, unfolded a piece of paper and laid it on the counter in front of Keller. "The certificate of expertization for Obock J1," he said. "Signed by Bloch and Mueller."

He might have been a Red Sox fan invoking Ted Williams, and Keller could understand why. Herbert Bloch and Edwin

Mueller were legendary philatelists, and their assertion that this particular stamp was indeed a genuine copy of Obock's first postage-due stamp, designated J1 in the Scott catalog, was enough to allay all doubt.

Keller examined the stamp, first with his unaided eye, then through the magnifier he took from his breast pocket. There was a photograph of the stamp on the certificate, and he studied that as well, with and without magnification. Bloch and Mueller had sworn to its legitimacy in 1960, so the certificate itself was almost half a century old, and might well be collectible in and of itself.

Still, even experts were sometimes careless, and occasionally mistaken. And now and then someone switched in a ringer for an expertized stamp. So Keller reached for another tool, this one in the inside pocket of his jacket. It was a flat metal oblong, designed to enable the user to compute the number of perforations per inch on the top or side of a stamp. Obock J1 was imperforate, which rendered the question moot, but the perforation gauge doubled as a mini-ruler, marked out in inches along one edge and millimeters along the other, and Keller used it to check the size of the stamp's overprint.

That overprint, hand-stamped on a postage-due stamp initially issued for the French colonies as a whole, had the

name of the place—Obock—in black capitals. On the original stamp, the overprint measured 12 1/2 mm by 3 3/4 mm. On the reprint, a copy of which reposed in Keller's own collection, each dimension of the overprint was half a millimeter smaller.

And so Keller measured the overprint on this stamp, and found himself in agreement with Mr. Bloch and Mr. Mueller. This was the straight goods, the genuine article. All he had to do to go home with it was outbid any other interested collectors. And he could do that, too, and without straining his budget or dipping into his capital.

But first he'd have to kill somebody.

The Dallas-based firm of Whistler & Welles conducted auctions of collectibles throughout the year. At various times they sold coins, books, autographs, and sports memorabilia, but the partners had started out as stamp dealers, and philatelic holdings remained the largest component of their business. Their annual Spring Equinox sale, held each year in the Hotel Lombardy on the third weekend in March, was one Keller had wanted to attend for years. Something had always prevented him from attending. He'd marked up copies of their catalogs over the years, sent in unsuccessful mail bids on a few occasions, and one year had a hotel room reserved and a flight booked before something or other

came up and forced him to cancel.

He'd lived in New York when Whistler & Welles put him on their mailing list. Nowadays he lived in New Orleans, and the name on their mailing list was one he'd borrowed from a local tombstone. He was Nicholas Edwards now, and that was the name on his passport, and on all the cards in his wallet. He lived in a big old house in the Lower Garden District, and he had a wife and a baby daughter, and he was a partner in a construction firm specializing in purchasing and rehabilitating distressed properties.

A year earlier, he'd looked with longing at the Whistler & Welles catalog. Dallas was a lot closer to New Orleans than to New York, but he and Donny Wallings were putting in twelve-hour days and seven-day weeks, just trying to keep up with everything they had going on.

But that was a year ago, before the collapse of the subprime mortgage market and everything that followed on its heels. Credit dried up, houses stopped selling, and they'd gone from more business than they could handle to no business to speak of.

So he could afford the time. A couple of days in Dallas? Sure, why not? He could even take his time and drive to Dallas and back.

And there were plenty of stamps on offer that he'd be eager to add to his collection, with Obock J1 at the very top of his wish list.

Now, though, he couldn't afford it.

The Lombardy, an independent, locally owned older hotel trying to survive in a world of modern chains, was starting to show its age. The carpet in Keller's room, while not yet threadbare, was due for replacement. A sofa in the lobby was worn on the arms, and the wood paneling in one of the elevators needed touching up. None of this bothered Keller, who found the hotel's faded glory somehow reassuring. What better venue for men of a certain age to compete for little pieces of paper that had done their duty carrying the mail long before any of them were born?

Whistler & Welles had booked a large conference room on the mezzanine for their three-day sale, which would begin promptly at nine Friday morning. New Orleans and Dallas were a little over five hundred miles apart, and Keller drove most of the way Wednesday, stopping for the night at a Red Roof Inn at a handy exit from the interstate. He checked into his room at the Lombardy a little after noon, and by one o'clock he was signing *Nicholas Edwards* on the bidder register and walking over to the long table where they were

showing the auction lots.

By two-thirty he'd had a look at all the lots that interested him, and had made cryptic notes in his auction catalog. Every sales lot was illustrated with a color photograph, so he didn't absolutely have to see them up close and personal, but sometimes you got something that way that you couldn't get from a photo in a catalog. Some stamps reached out to you while others put you off, and it probably didn't make any real sense, but the whole hobby was wacky enough to begin with. I mean, spending a fortune on little pieces of colored paper? Picking them up with tongs, putting them in plastic mounts, and securing them in albums? Why, for heaven's sake?

Keller had long since come to terms with the essential absurdity of the pastime, and didn't let it bother him. He was a stamp collector, he derived enormous satisfaction from the pursuit, and that was all he needed to know. If you thought about it, just about everything human beings did was pointless and ridiculous. Golf? Skiing? Sex?

Upstairs in his room, Keller reviewed the notes he'd made. There were stamps he'd initially considered and now decided to pass on, others he might buy if the price was right, and a few where he'd be bidding competitively. And there was Obock J1. It was rare, it didn't come up that often, and this particular specimen was a nice one, with four full

margins. Imperforate stamps had to be cut apart, and sometimes a careless clerk snipped off a bit of the stamp in the process. That didn't keep a letter from reaching its designated recipient, but it made the stamp considerably less desirable to a collector.

According to the Scott catalog, Obock J1 was worth seven thousand dollars. In their catalog, Whistler & Welles had estimated the lot conservatively at \$6,500. The actual price, Keller knew, would depend on the bidders, those in the room and those participating by mail or phone, or via the Internet, and the hammer price wouldn't tell the whole story; to that you'd have to add a fifteen percent bidder's premium and whatever sales tax the state of Texas saw fit to pile on. Keller, who wanted the stamp more than ever now that he'd had a look at it, figured he might have to bid twelve thousand to get it, and the check he'd write out would be uncomfortably close to fifteen thousand.

Would he go that high?

Well, that's why they had auctions, and why bidders showed up in person. You sat in your chair, and you'd decided in advance just how high you'd go and when you'd drop out, and then they got to the lot you were waiting for and you discovered how you really felt. Maybe you did exactly what you planned on doing, but maybe not. Maybe you found out

your enthusiasm wasn't as great as you'd thought, and wound up dropping out of the bidding early on. Or maybe you found yourself hanging in far beyond your predetermined limit, spending considerably more than your maximum.

No way to guess how it would be this time. It was Thursday, and tomorrow's morning and afternoon sessions would both be devoted to U.S. issues, and thus of no interest to Keller. He wouldn't need to be in the auction room until Saturday morning, and the French Colonial issues, including Obock J1, wouldn't come up until early Saturday afternoon.

He went downstairs, walked outside. It was cool, but not unpleasantly so. Football weather, you'd call it, if the calendar didn't insist that it was March. Cool, crisp—a perfect October day.

He walked a couple of blocks to another hotel, where there was a queue of waiting cabs. He went to the first one in line, settled into the backseat, and told the driver to take him to the airport.

He'd been working on his stamps when the phone rang. He was alone in the house, Julia had left to pick up Jenny at day care, and he almost let the machine answer it because calls were almost invariably for Julia. But there was always a chance it was Donny, so he went and picked it up half a ring

ahead of the machine, and it turned out to be Dot.

Not that she bothered to identify herself. Without preamble she said, "Remember that cell phone you had?" And she broke the connection before he could respond.

He remembered the phone, an untraceable prepaid one, and even remembered where he'd left it, in his sock drawer. The battery had long since run down, and while it was charging Julia and Jenny came home, so it was a good half-hour before he was back in his den with the phone.

For years he'd lived in New York, a few blocks from the United Nations, and Dot had lived north of the city in White Plains, in a big old house with a wraparound porch. That house was gone now, burned to the ground, and the same wind that had blown him to New Orleans had picked up Dot and deposited her in Sedona, Arizona. Her name was Wilma Corder now, even as his was Nicholas Edwards, and she had a new life of her own. Back in the day, she had arranged the contract killings he had performed, but that was then and this was now.

Even so, he closed the door before he made the call.

"I'll just plunge right in," she said. "I'm back in business."

“And the business is—”

“Holding its own. Not booming, but a long way from flatlining, which seems to be what everybody else’s business is doing.”

“What I meant—”

“I know what you meant. You want to know what business I’m in, but do you have to ask? Same old.”

“Oh.”

“You’re surprised? You’re not the only one. See, there’s this thing I joined, Athena International.”

“It sounds like an insurance company.”

“It does? It’s what they call a service club, like Rotary or Kiwanis. Except it’s exclusively for women.”

“Can’t women join Rotary?”

“Of course, because it would be sexist to keep them out. But men can’t join Athena.”

“That doesn’t seem fair.”

“Keller, if it bothers you, you can put on a dress and a wig

and I'll drag you along to a meeting. If you're still awake at the end of it, I'll buy you a pair of high heels."

"But you enjoy it."

"The hell I do. I must have been brain-dead when I joined. We do things like pick up trash once a month around Bell Rock, and I approve of that, since I've got a view of the damned thing from my bedroom window and it looks better without the beer bottles and gum wrappers. I'm not crazy about walking around in the hot sun hunting for other people's garbage, but I go once in a while. And we raise money to give some deserving girl a scholarship to college, and if I'm not out there running a table at the bake sale, or, God forbid, baking something, at least I'll write out a check. But I mostly pass on the monthly meetings. I've never been a meeting person. Endless talking, and then the damn song."

"What song?"

"The Athenian song, and no, I'm not about to sing it for you. But that's how we close the meeting. We all stand in a circle and cross our arms over our chests and clasp hands and sing this Mickey Mouse song."

"Minnie Mouse," he suggested.

"I stand corrected. The thing is, most of the members have careers of one sort or another, and we don't just pick up garbage. We network, which means we take in each other's laundry."

"Huh?"

"Beth's a travel agent, Alison's a Realtor, Lindsay does Tupperware parties."

"So you've been buying Tupperware," he suggested. "And houses."

"No houses. But when I went to Hawaii for a week I let Beth make the booking," she said, "and one of our members is a lawyer, and when I need a lawyer she's the one I go to. And of course I bought the Tupperware. You go to the party, you buy the Tupperware."

"And drink the Kool-Aid. I'm sorry, go on."

"Anyway," she said, "there they all were with their careers, and there I was, with all the money I needed, and it couldn't help me from feeling time was passing me by."

"That's what time does."

"I know. But I couldn't shake the feeling that I ought to be

doing something. But what? Volunteer at a hospital? Help out at a soup kitchen?"

"Doesn't sound like you."

"So I picked up the phone," she said, "and made a few calls."

"How'd that go? I mean, officially, aren't you dead?"

"As a doornail," she agreed. "Shot in the head and burned up in a fire. You Google Dorothea Harbison and that's what you'll find out. But the people who would call me to arrange a booking, they never heard of Dorothea Harbison. A few of them knew me as Dot, but most of them didn't even have that much. I was a phone number, and a voice on the phone, and a mail drop where they sent payments. And that was as much as anybody needed to know."

"And how much did you know about them?"

"My customers? Next to nothing. But I did have a couple of phone numbers."

And one day she drove to Flagstaff and rented a private mailbox at a franchise operation on South Milton Road, a block from the Embassy Suites hotel. On her way home she picked up a prepaid and presumably untraceable phone, and over the next few days she made a couple of calls. "I

wondered what happened to you,” the first man said. “I tried your number, but it was disconnected.”

“I got married,” she told him, “and don’t bother congratulating me, because it didn’t work out.”

“That was quick.”

“For you, maybe. You weren’t there. Long and short, I’m here for you when you need me. Let me give you the number.”

She had other numbers, too, of men who’d done what Keller used to do. Not all of those numbers worked anymore, but she was able to reestablish a contact or two, and one fellow said he could really use the work. Then she sat back and waited for something to happen, not entirely sure she wanted her new phone to ring, but it did, and within the week.

“And here’s something interesting, Keller. The call was from someone I hadn’t called myself, someone I hadn’t even worked with before. One of my old clients passed the word, and here was this guy calling me out of the blue, with a piece of work to be done in the great state of Georgia. So I called the guy who’d told me how he needed work, and he couldn’t believe I was getting back to him so quick. And I sat back and got paid.”

Like old times, Keller suggested, and she agreed. "I'm still me," she said. "I'm a rich lady, and I look better than I used to. I moved to Sedona and the pounds started to drop off right away. The place is crawling with energy vortexes, except I think the plural is vortices."

"What are they?"

"Beats me, Keller. I think it's something like an intersection, except the streets are imaginary. Anyway, some of the women I know are fat as pigs, and they've got the same vortices I do. I belong to a gym, can you believe it?"

"You told me."

"And I've got a personal trainer. Did I tell you that, too? His name is Scott, and I sometimes get the feeling he'd like to get a little more personal, but I'm probably wrong about that. It's not as though I turned into whistle bait, and what would he want with a woman old enough to use a term like that? Whistle bait, for God's sake."

"I guess people don't say that anymore."

"They don't whistle much, either. Look, this is a mistake, isn't it? I shouldn't have called."

"Well."

“For God’s sake, you’ve got your life to live. You’ve got a beautiful wife and an amazing daughter and you’re the Rehab King of New Orleans real estate. So why don’t you just wish me luck in my new venture and hang up, and I’ll leave you alone.”

Keller limited himself to monosyllables en route to the airport, and gave the driver a tip neither large nor small enough to be memorable. He walked through the door for departing flights, took an escalator one flight down, and a bubbly girl at the Hertz counter found his reservation right away. He showed her a driver’s license and a credit card, both in the same name, and one that was neither J. P. Keller nor Nicholas Edwards. They were good enough to get him the keys to a green Subaru hatchback, and in due course he was behind the wheel and on his way.

The house he was looking for was on Caruth Boulevard, in the University Park section. He’d located it online and printed out a map, and he found it now with no trouble, one of a whole block of upscale Spanish-style homes on substantial landscaped lots not far from the Southern Methodist campus. Sculpted stucco walls, a red tile roof, an attached three-car garage. You’d think a family could be very happy in a house like that, Keller thought, but in the present instance you’d be wrong, because the place was home to Charles and Portia

Walmsley, and neither of them could be happy until the other was dead.

Keller slowed down as he passed the house, then circled the block for another look at it. Was anyone at home? As far as he could see, there was no way to tell. Charles Walmsley had moved out a few weeks earlier, and Portia shared the house with the Salvadoran housekeeper. Keller hadn't learned the housekeeper's name, or that of the man who was a frequent overnight guest of Mrs. Walmsley, but he'd been told that the man drove a Lexus SUV. Keller didn't see it in the driveway, but he couldn't be sure it wasn't in the garage.

"The man drives an SUV," Dot had said, "and he once played football for TCU. I know what an SUV is, but—"

"Texas Christian University," Keller supplied. "In Fort Worth."

"I thought that might be it. Do they have something to do with horny frogs?"

"Horned frogs. That's their football team, the horned frogs. They're archrivals of SMU."

"That would be Southern Methodist."

"Right. They're the Mustangs."

"Frogs and Mustangs. How do you know all this crap, Keller? Don't tell me it's on a stamp. Never mind, it's not important. What's important is that something permanent happens to Mrs. Walmsley. And it would be good if something happened to the boyfriend, too."

"It would?"

"He'll pay a bonus."

"A bonus? What kind of a bonus?"

"Unspecified, which makes it tricky to know what to expect, let alone collect it. And he'll double the bonus if they nail the boyfriend for the wife's murder, but when you double an unspecified number, what have you got? Two times what?"

Keller drove past the Walmsley house a second time, and didn't learn anything new in the process. He consulted his map, figured out his route, and left the Subaru in a parking garage three blocks from the Lombardy.

In his room, he picked up the phone to call Julia, then remembered what hotels charged you for phone calls. Charles Walmsley was paying top dollar, bonus or no, but making a call from a hotel room was like burning the money in the street. He used his cell phone instead, first making

sure that it was the iPhone Julia had given him for his birthday and not the prepaid one he used only for calls to Dot.

The hotel room was okay, he told her. And he'd had a good look at the stamps he was interested in, and that was always helpful. And she put Jenny on, and he cooed to his daughter and she babbled at him. He told her he loved her, and when Julia came back on the phone he told her the same.

Portia Walmsley didn't have any children. Her husband did, from a previous marriage, but they lived with their mother across the Red River in Oklahoma. So there wouldn't be any kids to worry about in the house on Caruth Boulevard.

As far as the Salvadoran maid was concerned, Dot had told him the client didn't care one way or the other. He wasn't paying a bonus for her, that was for sure. He'd pointed out that she was an illegal immigrant, and Keller wondered what that had to do with anything.

That first night, he hadn't called Dot back right away. First he and Julia had tucked Jenny in for the night—or for as much of it as the child would sleep through. Then the two of them sat over coffee in the kitchen, and he mentioned that Donny had called earlier, not because some work had come in but on the chance that he might want to go fishing.

“But you didn’t want to go?”

He shook his head. “Neither did Donny, not really. He just wanted to pick up the phone.”

“It’s hard for him, isn’t it?”

“He’s not used to sitting around.”

“Neither are you, these days. But I guess it must be like old times for you. You know, with lots of time off between jobs.”

“Stamp collecting helped take up the slack.”

“And I guess it still does,” she said. “And that way there’s no fish to clean.”

He went upstairs and sat down with his stamps for a few minutes, then made the call. “So you’re back in business,” he said. “And you didn’t call me, and then you did.”

“And I guess it was a mistake,” she said, “and I apologize. But how could I be in the business and not let you know about it? That didn’t seem right.”

“No.”

“And it’s not like you’re a recovering alcoholic and I’m

opening wine bottles in front of you. You're a grownup. If you're not interested you'll tell me so and that's the end of it. Keller? You still there?"

"I'm here."

"So you are," she said. "And yet you haven't told me you're not interested."

One of his stamp albums was open on the table in front of him, and he looked at a page of Italian stamps overprinted for use in the Aegean Islands. There were a few stamps missing, and while they weren't at all expensive, they'd proved difficult to find.

"Keller?"

"Business dried up," he said. "There's no financing. We can't buy houses and we can't sell them, and nobody's hiring us to repair them, either, because there's no money around."

"Well, I'm not surprised. It's the same everywhere. Still, you've got enough money to see you through, haven't you?"

"We're all right," he said. "But I've gotten used to living on what I earn, and now I'm dipping into capital. I'm not about to run through it, there's no danger of that, but still . . ."

"I know what you mean. Keller, I've got something if you want it. I had a guy lined up for it and I just learned he's in the hospital, he flipped his car and they had to yank him out of there with the Jaws of Death."

"Isn't it the Jaws of Life?"

"Whatever. His own jaw is about the only part of him that didn't get broken. I guess he'll live, and he may even walk again, but there's no way he can get it all together by the end of the month and spare my client the agony of divorce."

"And the heartbreak of community property."

"Something like that. It has to happen before the first of April, and either I find somebody who can take care of it or I have to send back the money. You probably remember how much I like doing that."

"Vividly."

"Once I have it in hand," she said, "I think of it as my money, and I hate like the devil to part with it. So what do you think? Can you get away for a few days in the next couple of weeks?"

"My calendar's wide open," he said. "All I've got is a stamp auction I was thinking about going to. That's the weekend

after next, if I go at all."

"Where is it?"

"Dallas."

There was a thoughtful silence. "Keller," she said at length, "call me crazy, but I see the hand of Providence at work here."

The Lombardy had a buffet breakfast they were proud of, and in the morning Keller went down to give it a try. The problem with buffets, he'd found, was that you wanted to get your money's worth, and wound up eating too much. He resolved not to do that, and helped himself to a moderate amount of bacon and eggs and a toasted bran muffin. When he was through, he sipped his coffee and thought about the other items he'd noticed, and how good they'd looked. He sighed and went back for more.

And took another plate, as the sign advised him to. "I don't get it," he said to a fellow diner, a heavyset man with an oversize moustache. "Why does the state of Texas forbid me to pile new food onto an old plate?"

"Health regulation, isn't it?"

"I guess, but why? I mean, what am I going to do, pass germs to myself?"

"Good point."

"And this way, they've got an extra plate to wash."

"Even more," the man said, "if you make enough return trips, and that smoked salmon is worth a try, believe me. They feed you a hell of a breakfast here at the Venetia. But maybe there's another reason for fresh plates. Maybe it's like putting new wine in old bottles."

"Well, that's something else I've wondered about," Keller said. "I know it's a metaphor, but what are you supposed to do with old bottles, just throw them in a landfill?"

He went back to his table and ate everything on his plate, but didn't even consider going back for thirds. Instead he let the waitress pour him more coffee, signed his check, and carried the coffee over to the table where the moustachioed gentleman was working on his smoked salmon.

Keller put a hand on an unoccupied chair, and the man nodded, and Keller sat down. "You're here for the auction," he said.

"I have that look, do I?"

He shook his head. "The hotel," he said. "You called it the Venetia."

"I did? Well, that's a giveaway, isn't it? A very philatelic slip of the tongue. Or should that be a slip of the tongs?"

Because he collected stamps, Keller knew that in the mid nineteenth century, Lombardy-Venetia had been a kingdom in the north of Italy forming part of the Austrian empire. Starting in 1850, Austria produced stamps for Lombardy-Venetia, essentially identical to regular Austrian issues but denominated in centesimi and lire and, after 1858, in soldi and florins. Then, in 1859, Lombardy was annexed to Sardinia, and seven years later Venetia became a part of the kingdom of Italy.

"But for philately," the fellow said, "I might never have heard of Lombardy or Venetia, let alone know to link the two of them with a hyphen."

"I haven't done much with Lombardy-Venetia," Keller admitted. "All those reprints, and so much counterfeiting. It's confusing, so I always find it easier to buy something else."

"Your Lombardy-Venetia's probably well ahead of mine, considering that I don't own a single stamp from the

benighted place. Nothing but U.S. for me, I'm afraid."

"And that's the one thing I don't collect," Keller said. "I'm worldwide, to nineteen forty."

"That way there's always something for you to buy. Which is a blessing or a curse, depending how you look at it. I don't even collect all of my own country. I did, but then I sold everything after nineteen hundred, and then I narrowed that down to the eighteen sixty-nine issue. I don't know if you know the stamps—"

Keller knew them well enough to hold up his end of the conversation. By the time they left the table, they were Nicholas and Michael, sharing the comfortable camaraderie of fellow hobbyists who wouldn't be competing with one another in the auction room. In fact, they wouldn't even be occupying the room at the same time, with U.S. on the block today and the rest of the world waiting its turn.

"Stamps in the morning, covers in the afternoon," Michael said. "There's a block of Scott 119, the 15% type 2, that I wouldn't mind having. And this afternoon, well, this wouldn't mean much to a nonspecialist, but . . ."

Keller heard him out, wished him luck.

“Ah, but what’s luck, Nick? I’m too old to chase ’em nowadays, but when I used to go out looking to pick up a woman, I’d tell myself maybe I’d get lucky. But you reach a point where getting lucky means going home alone. You know, you ought to drop by when the eighteen sixty-nine lots come up. Share in the drama without having a stake in the outcome. All the excitement and none of the risk—like watching a murder mystery on television.”

Keller slipped into the auction room a half-hour after the start of the morning session. The first several dozen lots were nothing too exciting, job lots and accumulations, and then the first of the Postmasters’ Provisionals came up and the proceedings got more interesting. Sort of like watching a mystery on television, come to think of it.

He stayed longer than he’d planned, waiting for the large block of #119 to be offered, and watched as his new friend hung in gamely while bidding climbed to four times the estimated value. Then he dropped out, and the block was knocked down to a telephone bidder.

Not quite like a murder mystery on television, because it didn’t end the way you wanted it to.

Keller slipped out of the auction room, left the hotel, and picked up his rental car. He’d brought his map along, but

never took it out of his breast pocket. He had no trouble remembering the route to the house on Caruth Boulevard.

He drove past the house, taking a quick look at it, and all he really managed to establish was that it was still there. He couldn't stake the place out and watch the comings and goings, not in this neighborhood, where a man lurking in a parked car would be reported to the police in no time at all. Nor could he park a few blocks away and approach on foot, because if there was a single pedestrian over the age of six anywhere in the area, he'd managed to keep out of Keller's field of vision.

The right way he thought, was to take a week or two, but the hell with that. This wasn't some well-guarded mafioso in a walled castle, with a moat full of bent-nosed alligators. This was a woman who had no idea just how much her husband wanted to be rid of her, and no reason to fear a stranger at her door.

Keller went back to a strip mall he'd passed earlier, with a Walgreens at one end and an Office Depot at the other. Park near one and walk to the other? No, he told himself, Why bother? Nobody was going to look at his license plate, and what difference did it make if they did?

He parked in front of the Office Depot and was in and out of it

in ten minutes, paying cash for the clipboard and the pad of yellow paper. Duct tape? No, not necessary. He was going to buy a pen, then remembered that he already had one of his own.

What else? A box cutter, a letter opener, something sharp and pointed? No. He had his hands, and there would be knives in the kitchen if he felt the need.

He drove back to the Walmsley house and parked in the driveway, where anyone walking by could see his car and take note of the license plate. Fat chance, he thought, and walked up to the door and rang the bell.

Nothing.

Maid's day off, he thought. Getting lucky, he told himself, was when you rang a doorbell and nobody answered. That was even better than going home alone, and—

Footsteps, approaching the door. He waited for it to open, and when it didn't he poked the bell again, and this time the door opened immediately, and he found himself looking at his own reflection in the mirror that faced the door. Just for an instant, albeit a disconcerting one; then he lowered his eyes and looked down at the Salvadoran maid.

“Ah, good morning,” he said. “Mrs. Walmsley?”

“No,” the maid said, in Spanish or English, it was impossible to tell. “Her no *aquí*,” she said, in a combination of the two.

“And Mr. Walmsley?”

“Him not *vive aquí*.” A shake of the head, good enough in either language.

“Is anyone else at home?”

Another head shake. The simple thing to do, Keller realized, would be to kill the woman, stuff her in a closet—or a laundry hamper, or a big hatbox. She was innocent, but then so was Portia Walmsley, for all he knew.

But Jesus, she was so tiny.

The client, he recalled, didn’t care one way or the other about the woman. He wasn’t paying a bonus for some illegal immigrant, and—

Bingo.

He brandished the clipboard, gave her a look at it. He hadn’t thought to write anything on the top sheet of paper, but it didn’t matter.

“INS,” he said.

Her face remained expressionless, but eloquently so.

“Green card,” he said.

“No hablo inglés.”

“Carta verde,” Keller said, straining his command of the language to the limit. *“¿Tienes un carta verde?”*

“*Una*, he thought. Not *un*, for God’s sake. *Una*. An INS man would know that, right? Jesus, you couldn’t live in New York without knowing that much, let alone Texas, and—

Un, *una*, what difference could it possibly make? Her shoulders slumped, and she managed somehow to become even smaller. Keller felt horrible.

“I will be back,” he said. “I’ll go away now to have my lunch, and when I come back you can show me your green card. Your *carta verde*, *comprenez-vous?*”

Comprenez-vous? That was French, for God’s sake, yet another language he was unable to speak. But it was clear that she *comprende*zed just fine.

“You come back?”

“In an hour,” he said, and turned away, unable to bear the sight of her expressionless face.

He drove to the strip mall, parking this time near the Walgreens, and tossed the clipboard into a trash bin alongside the entrance. He wasn't hungry and he couldn't think of anything to buy, so he returned to his car and sat behind the wheel. Nothing to read, nothing to do really but let time pass. He fiddled with the radio, but couldn't figure out how to get it to play without running the engine. There'd be a way to do it, there always was, but every car maker felt compelled to work out its own way of doing things, and when you rented cars you could never figure out how to adjust the seats or play the radio or work the air conditioning or dim the lights, and when you went to signal a left turn you generally wound up switching on the windshield wipers. The steering was always more or less the same, and so were the brakes, and it was a good thing or everybody would crash into everybody else.

They'd have newspapers in the drugstore. Magazines, maybe even paperback books.

No, the hell with it.

He gave her an hour and a half, then returned to the Walmsley house and parked once again in the driveway. He walked up to the door and rang the bell, and wondered if he might have been a shade precipitous in ditching the clipboard, because what if she opened the door with Portia Walmsley on her left and some slick immigration lawyer on her right? *Hang on*, he'd say. *Be right back, soon as I get my clipboard*—No one came to the door. He rang the bell again, and listened carefully, and heard no footsteps. The car, the rented Subaru, had now become a problem, and he wished he'd left it at the strip mall and approached on foot. But that was a long way to walk in a neighborhood where everybody drove.

He couldn't leave the thing in the driveway. There was probably room for it in the three-car garage, since her estranged husband wouldn't have left on foot, but Portia Walmsley would almost certainly notice his car when she parked her own beside it, and—

He backed out of the driveway, drove fifty yards down the street, parked and walked back. Rang the bell, listened for footsteps, knocked, listened again. He tried the doorknob, because you never know, but it was locked.

No problem.

Keller had never been a thief, let alone a burglar. In his youth, he'd been one of several young men who'd hung around the Old Man's place in Yonkers. The Old Man was Joseph Raggone, dear to the hearts of tabloid journalists, who wrote about him as Joey Rags. Keller had never called him that, or anything like it. In direct conversation, if he called the man anything it was *Sir*. To others, he'd refer to him as Mr. R. In his own mind, though, his boss was the Old Man.

And Keller liked hanging around. The Old Man would give him errands to run, packages to pick up and deliver, messages to pass along. Eventually he sent Keller along when disciplinary actions were called for, and something he saw led him to devise assignments that, in retrospect, Keller was able to recognize as little tests. Keller, unaware he was being tested, passed with flying colors. What the Old Man managed to establish was that Keller didn't flinch when called upon to pull the trigger. The Old Man had suspected as much, that was why he'd devised the tests, but it was all news to Keller.

So Keller went from being an errand boy to taking people out, and at first the people he took out were men who had somehow managed to get on the Old Man's hit list, and then the Old Man realized what a fine, dependable asset he had, and began renting Keller out to interested parties. Not many people knew Keller's name, the Old Man saw to that, but an

increasing number of people knew he was out there somewhere, at the beck and call of Joey Rags, and that he did good work. So from that point on, that was the only kind of work he was called upon to perform. There were no more packages or messages to deliver, no more errands to run.

A more conventional apprenticeship would have seen Keller grow into a jack-of-all-criminal-trades, with a working knowledge of various felonious enterprises. Keller, forced to improvise, had picked up what he needed to know. Without ever becoming a disciplined student of the martial arts, he'd read books and rented videos, taken the odd class here and there, and was as proficient as he had to be with the usual run of weapons, and with his bare hands. Similarly, he'd become reasonably good at breaking and entering, and it didn't take him long to get into the Walmsley house.

It was the sort of house that would have a burglar alarm installed, and there was a decal to that effect, along with metallic tape on the ground-floor windows. But the alarm had not been engaged when the maid opened the door to him, and he didn't believe for a moment she'd have taken the time to set it before fleeing a house she'd never be likely to see again. If the Walmsleys had ever taken the trouble to teach her how to use it in the first place.

No alarm, then. The front door was locked, probably because

it locked of its own accord when you pulled it shut. Keller could have forced it but didn't, nor did he force the door leading to the garage. He went around to the rear of the house, took one of the windows off its track, and let himself in.

The maid wouldn't be coming back. The house was a large one, and Keller went through it room by room, and it was easy to tell the maid's room, because it was the smallest room in the house, tucked in under the back stairs and alongside the kitchen. There was a wooden crucifix hanging from a nail on one wall, and there was a week-old copy of *El Di rio*, and that was pretty much all there was aside from the bed and dresser. She'd thrown everything else in a suitcase and now she was gone, and she wouldn't be coming back.

The crucifix, he decided, had been a parting gift from her mother in El Salvador. That was the name of the country, while the capital city was San Salvador, but she probably came from somewhere else. Cutuco, he decided. Puerto Cutuco was the only other city he knew in El Salvador, and he knew it because one of the stamps of the 1935 series pictured the wharf at Cutuco. Another stamp in the same series showed a volcano, and he knew its name, but couldn't remember it.

As if it mattered. Her mother in Cutuco had given her the

crucifix, he continued, telling her to keep it with her forever and it would always protect her, and she'd dutifully mounted it on the wall, and in her haste she'd forgotten it. Terrified of the faceless Immigration and Naturalization Service (except it wasn't so faceless now, it had Keller's face on it) she'd abandoned the one thing she owned that tied her to her home and family. She wouldn't come back for it, she didn't dare, but its loss would always bother her, and—

Jesus, get over it, he told himself. She could let go of the crucifix a lot easier than he could relinquish the fantasy he was spinning, complete with a hometown from a stamp in his collection.

It bothered him, though. That he'd scared her the way he did. Still, what else was he supposed to do? He couldn't snap her neck just because she was in the way. She was tiny, she'd have to stand on a box to be five feet tall. It would be like killing a little kid, and that was something Keller had never done. Once or twice someone had offered a contract on a child, and he and Dot had been entirely in accord on the subject. You had to draw a line, and that was where you had to draw it.

But that was a matter of age, not size. The woman—and he found himself wishing he knew her name, now that he'd played such a role in her life—was certainly over twenty-one.

Old enough to vote, old enough to drink . . . and old enough to kill? Was he being politically incorrect by giving her a pass on the basis of her height? Was he being . . . well, he wasn't sure the word existed, but was he being a sizeist? A heightist? Was he altitudinally prejudiced?

What he was being, he told himself, was severely neurotic, and that was the occasional consequence of breaking into an empty house with nothing to do but wait for someone to appear. He'd done this sort of thing before, but that was in an earlier life. Now he had a wife and a daughter, now he lived in a big old house in New Orleans and had a business repairing and renovating other people's houses, and the new life suited him, and what was he doing here, anyway?

He looked at his watch, and every ten minutes or so he looked at it again.

Keller had read somewhere that all of man's difficulties stemmed from his inability to sit alone in a room. The line stayed with him, and awhile ago he'd Googled his way to its source. Someone named Pascal had made the observation, Blaise Pascal, and it turned out he'd said a lot of other interesting things as well, but all but the first one had slipped Keller's mind. He thought of it now as he forced himself to sit alone in the maid's room, waiting for Portia Walmsley to come home.

And pictured the woman. When he was living in New York, he'd have taken the train to White Plains, where Dot would have given him the woman's photograph, which someone would have sent to her by FedEx, in the same package with the first installment of his fee. Instead, he'd booted up his computer, clicked on Google Images, typed in Portia Walmsley, and clicked again, whereupon Google served up a banquet of pictures of the oh-so-social Mrs. Walmsley, sometimes alone, sometimes with others, but all of them showing a big-haired, full-figured blonde with what Keller had once heard called a Pepsodent smile. Or was it an Ipana smile? Keller couldn't remember, and decided he didn't care.

Sitting alone in a room, with only one's own mind and an abandoned crucifix for company, wasn't the most fun Keller had ever had in his life. There was nothing in the room to read, in Spanish or in English, and nothing to look at but suffering Jesus, and that was the last place Keller wanted to aim his eyes.

Which, no matter where he pointed them, he was finding it increasingly difficult to keep open. They kept closing of their own accord. He kicked off his shoes and stretched out on the bed, just for comfort, not because he intended to sleep, and

And the next thing he knew he was in an auction room, with one lot after another hammered down before he could get his hand in the air to bid. And a man and a woman were sitting on either side of him, talking furiously in a language he couldn't understand, and making it impossible for him to focus on the auction. And—

"Where is that damn girl? For what I pay her you'd think she could do what she's supposed to. Margarita!"

"Maybe she's in her room."

"At this hour?"

His eyes snapped open. A man and a woman, but now they were speaking English, and he could hear them on the stairs. He sprang from the bed, crossed to the door, worked the bolt. No sooner had it slid home than they had reached the door, and the woman was calling the maid's name—Margarita, evidently—at the top of a brassy voice.

"Give it up," the man said. "Ain't nobody home."

A hand took hold of the doorknob, turned, pushed. The bolt held.

"She's in there. The lazy bitch is sleeping."

“Oh, come on, Portsie.” Portsie? “Couldn’t nobody sleep through the racket you’re making.”

“Then why’s the door locked?”

“Maybe she don’t want you rummaging through her underwear.”

“As if,” Portia said, and rattled the doorknob. “This is something new, locking the door. I don’t think you *can* lock it, except from inside. You slide a bolt and it goes through a little loop, but how can you do that from outside?”

“Maybe she’s in there with a boyfriend.”

“My God, maybe she is. Margarita! God damn you, open the door or I’ll call the INS on you.” There was a pause, and then Keller heard them moving around, and some heavy breathing.

“Hey,” the woman said. “And what do you think you’re doing, sport?”

“Rummaging through your underwear, Portsie.”

“It’s distracting me.”

“That’s the general idea.”

"If she's in there doing it with some pint-sized *cholo*—"

"She's not. She was in there, all by herself, and she locked the door."

"So where is she now?"

"Out."

"Out? How'd she get out?"

"Through the keyhole."

"You're terrible, baby."

"C'mon," he said. "I need a drink, and so do you. And that's not all we need."

And Keller stood there while their footsteps receded.

Once he'd had time to think about it, Keller realized he'd missed an opportunity. There they were, the target and the bonus, all ready to walk right into the room where he was waiting for them. And what had he done? He'd locked the door, as if he were not a hired assassin but the timid little chambermaid who'd been the room's rightful, if unlawful, occupant.

He was half asleep, and unprepared, and that's why he'd been so quick to lock the door. Alert and prepared, he'd have flung it open and yanked them inside, and in no time at all he'd have been around the block and out of the neighborhood, and they'd be working their way toward room temperature.

Now, because he hadn't been clever enough to let them burst in on him, he'd have to do the bursting.

It wasn't hard to find them. From the hallway outside Margarita's room, he could hear them—laughing, grunting, sounding for all the world like a pair of drunken lovers. He made his way to the door of the master bedroom, which they had not troubled to close, and there they were, doing the dirty deed. One glance established as much for Keller, and he quickly averted his eyes.

The woman was Portia Walmsley, Keller had glimpsed more than enough of her to match her with her pictures. Not that he'd been in much doubt, with her companion calling her Portsie. And he looked vaguely familiar as well, though Keller couldn't think why. Had he seen him in the auction room? Jesus, was the sonofabitch a stamp collector?

He could take another look, but he didn't really want to. Keller had never regarded lovemaking as a spectator sport. When

he was in high school a classmate had brought some dirty pictures to class, and Keller had looked at them, and found them erotic enough. But he wasn't in high school anymore.

Even without watching them, he could tell they were pretty well wrapped up in each other, and unlikely to offer much resistance if he went in there and did what he was supposed to do. He rehearsed it in his mind, visualized himself moving purposefully into the room, taking the lover out of play with a judo chop to the side of the neck, grabbing the woman and breaking her neck, then doing the same for the immobilized man. It would all be over before they knew it, almost before *he* knew it.

Go on, he thought. Don't just stand there. You know what you're supposed to do. So why aren't you doing it?

Maybe there was a better way.

If he just went in there and got the job done, he'd have earned his fee—plus a bonus for the boyfriend. But he'd also be leaving the kind of mess that would make headlines, and the cops would be all over their client. It was his responsibility to make sure he had an alibi, and he'd probably provide himself with a good one, but would he have the sense to lawyer up right away and keep his mouth shut? Or would he fall apart when it became clear that he was the sole suspect?

Not Keller's worry. Walmsley could hang himself by talking, but he didn't know enough to hang anybody else.

Still, what if Keller left the Dallas cops a case they could close as soon as they opened it? He could see a way to do it, and earn a double bonus in the process.

It would take time, though. So he went back to Margarita's room to wait.

Was it the same crucifix? He could swear it was larger than he remembered.

He left the door open. He didn't really want to hear the two of them—though that wasn't nearly as bad as seeing them. But he wanted to know when they fell silent.

And, while he waited, he ran an amended scenario through his mind. He liked it, he thought it would work, but there was still one question he couldn't answer.

Could he do it?

For a couple of years now he'd been leading a very different life, and it struck him as possible he'd become a different person in the process. He had a wife, he had a daughter, he had a house, he had a business. He might cross the street

against the light, and he and Donny managed to keep their cash receipts a secret from the tax man, but all in all he was a law-abiding individual, a reasonably solid citizen. He'd always had a potential for civic responsibility; he'd served on a jury when called, and volunteered at Ground Zero in the aftermath of 9/11. But all along he'd had this dark side, this other life, and he'd left that part of himself behind when he settled in New Orleans.

So maybe that was what had led him to throw the bolt and lock himself in the maid's room. And maybe he wasn't waiting now for a better opportunity. Maybe he was stalling, and waiting for a chance to pull the plug on the whole operation.

He mulled it over, running various possibilities through his mind. And then it struck him that he couldn't hear them anymore, and in fact hadn't heard them for a while now.

How long? Could they have put their clothes on and gone out? If so, he decided, then he was going to say the hell with it. He'd climb out the window and drive away, and leave Portia Walmsley to work out for herself what had happened to her maid and her window, one having jumped the track and the other having disappeared altogether. But she'd get to stay alive, at least until her husband hired somebody else, and she'd never know what a close call she'd had.

Scratch that, he told himself. Because there she was in the bedroom, lying on her back with her mouth open, snoring away in a very unappealing fashion. And lying beside her and snoring twice as loud was the oaf she'd picked to be her boyfriend. He still looked familiar, and Keller figured out why. It was the moustache, identical in shape to that of Michael, his companion at breakfast.

Keller found his way to the kitchen, and came back with a knife.

"Oh, it was a lazy day," he said. "I got to talking with a U.S. collector over breakfast, and wound up hanging out in the auction room to see how he did when his lots came up. I meant to call earlier so I could talk to Jenny before her bedtime, but I guess it's too late now."

His first call, when he got back to his hotel room, was on his other cell phone, the one he used only for calls to Dot. When there was no answer he put that phone away, got out the other one, and called Julia, and when he heard her voice he felt a great sense of relief.

After the phone call, after she'd told him about her day and he'd made up a day for himself, he tried to figure out what that sense of relief was all about. He hadn't been aware of

any anxiety until the sound of her voice dispelled it.

It took him a few minutes to sort it out, but what he decided was that he'd been afraid his whole new life was gone, that he'd somehow thrown it away in the Spanish-style house on Caruth Boulevard. Then he'd heard her voice and been reassured.

Now, though, he wasn't sure how he felt.

He tried Dot again, watched a half-hour of television, tried Dot one more time, and tried to decide if he felt like getting something to eat. He hadn't eaten since breakfast, so he ought to be hungry, but didn't have much of an appetite. He checked the room-service menu and decided he could eat a sandwich, but when the waiter brought it he knew it was a mistake. There was coffee, and he drank that, but he left the sandwich untouched.

Years ago he'd learned how to clear his mind after a job. Very deliberately he let himself picture the master bedroom on Caruth Boulevard as he had last seen it: Portia Walmsley lay on her back, stabbed through the heart. Beside her was her unnamed lover, comatose with drink, his fingers clenched around the hilt of the murder weapon. It was the sort of image you'd want to blink away, especially if you'd had something to do with it, but Keller fixed it in his mind and brought it into

focus, saw it in full color and sharp relief.

And then, as he'd learned to do, he willed the image to grow smaller and less distinct. He shrank it, as if viewing it through the wrong end of a telescope, and he washed out the bright colors, dimming the image to black and white, then fading it to gray. The details blurred, the faces became unrecognizable, and as the image disappeared, the incident itself lost its emotional charge. It had happened, there was no getting around it, but it was as if it had happened years and years ago, and to somebody else.

Keller, in line for the breakfast buffet, knew he was going to get his money's worth. He'd put the room-service tray outside his door without taking the first bite of the sandwich, and went to bed uncertain if he'd be able to sleep on an empty stomach. The next thing he knew it was morning, and one of the first things that came to mind was an expression his mother had used now and then: *My stomach thinks my throat's been cut*. Keller was shaving when the line came to him, which might have given him a turn, but he used a twin-bladed safety razor, hardly something you'd use to cut a throat, your own or anybody else's.

He piled his plate high and looked around for an empty table, and there was his friend of yesterday morning, moustachioed Michael, wielding a fork with one hand and beckoning to

Keller with the other. Keller, glad for the company, went over and joined him.

"Saw you yesterday morning," Michael said. "If I remember correctly, you were in the room when that big block got away from me."

"Quite a price it brought."

"Way more than my maximum, so I wisely sat back and let it go. And guess what?"

"You've been kicking yourself ever since."

"Around the block and back again. Oh, I know I was right to let it go, but when am I gonna get a shot at a piece like that again? Not until they auction off the collection of the sonofabitch who bought it, and by then it'll probably go for three times what it brought yesterday. Nick, I've bought some things I shouldn't have over the years, and I've paid too much for some of them, but that sort of thing never bothers me for more than a minute or two. It's the ones that get away that drive you crazy."

Obock J1, Keller thought.

He worked on his breakfast while Michael told him about the afternoon session, where he'd made up for the loss of the

block by picking up all the covers he'd had his eye on, most of them at good prices. "But I wanted that block," he told Keller, "and I still want it. How about yourself? What are you looking to buy today?"

Keller had a seat in the auction room and was studying his catalog when he realized he'd forgotten to call Dot. He hadn't called Julia, either, to wish her a good morning. Should he duck out and make the calls? He thought about it, and then they started the sale and called the first lot, and he decided to stay where he was.

By the time they got to France and French Colonies, Keller had bid on ten lots and acquired six of them, letting the others go when the bidding climbed out of his range. As Michael had observed, a general collector always had plenty of things to buy, and Keller spent a few dollars and added a few stamps to his collection, issues from Albania and the Dominican Republic and Eastern Rumelia and Ecuador, none of them bringing more than a few hundred dollars. Then they got to the French section, where Keller's collection was strongest and where the lots he needed were higher in price, and harder to find. He sat calmly in his chair, but he felt anticipation and excitement coursing through him like an electric current.

The Obock stamp was valued at \$7,500 in Keller's Scott

catalog, while his Yvert & Tellier specialized catalog of France and its colonies listed the stamp at €12,000, or more than double the price in Scott.

Both Scott and Y&T mentioned the reprint, Scott pegging it at \$200, Y&T at €350. Keller couldn't remember what he'd paid, but thought it was around \$150. Now he'd have the chance to bid on the original, and had a feeling it was going to bring a high price.

Back in New Orleans, before Dot's phone call, Keller had already had his eye on the stamp. At the time he'd decided the stamp was worth ten thousand dollars to him, but wasn't sure he could rationalize spending that much money. Now, with his business on Caruth Boulevard successfully concluded, the money was there to be spent. He picked up a couple of lots—an early stamp from Diego Suarez, an inverted overprint from Martinique—and when Obock J1 came up, he was ready. Moments later, the stamp was his.

There were other lots that he'd marked in his catalog, but he was no longer interested in bidding on them. He felt as though he'd just fought a prizefight, or run a marathon, and all he'd done was raise a forefinger and keep it raised until he was the only bidder left.

\$16,500 was the hammer price, and he'd have to pay a

fifteen percent bidder's premium on top of that, plus whatever sales tax the state of Texas felt it deserved. Close to twenty thousand dollars for a homely little square of paper, but it was his to have and to hold, his to protect in a black-backed plastic mount, his to place in his album alongside the \$200 reprint to which it looked essentially identical.

In the elevator he felt a twinge of buyer's remorse, but by the time he was in his room it had dissipated, leaving him with a warm glow of accomplishment. He'd had to hang in there, had to keep his finger in the air while other bidders in the room gave up and dropped out, then had to hold on until the phone bidder finally gave up and let go. It was a rare stamp, and other people wanted it, but the whole point of an auction was to see who wanted something the most, and this time around it was Keller.

He called Julia from his room. "I got the stamp I wanted, and it's a beauty. But I had to spend more than I expected, so I'm going to skip the afternoon session and hit the road early. I'll break the trip somewhere, and I should be home sometime tomorrow afternoon."

She told him the latest cute thing Jenny had said, and a little gossip about the young couple who'd moved into the old Beaulieu house, and when the conversation ended he switched phones and called Dot, and this time she

answered. "I tried you yesterday," he said, "and then I was going to call first thing this morning but it slipped my mind, and I was all caught up in the drama of a stamp auction."

"With all the pulse-pounding excitement thereof."

"What I wanted to tell you," he said, "is it's all taken care of, and it couldn't have gone better."

"Is that so."

"Double bonus," he said.

"Oh?"

They were using a pair of untraceable phones, but even so he felt it best to be cryptic. "The primary is down," he said, "and the secondary objective is fully implicated."

"Do tell."

He frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"From a dollars and cents standpoint," she said, "I'd have to say there is. There's not going to be a bonus, let alone a double bonus."

"But—"

“As a matter of fact, we can forget about the second half of the basic fee. You know, the portion due upon completion of the assignment?”

“But the assignment was completed.”

“I’ll say.”

“Dot, what’s the matter?”

“You got up this morning, had a cup of coffee—right so far?”

“I had breakfast,” he said, mystified. “And then I went to the auction room.”

“Read the paper while you ate your breakfast?”

“No, I joined this fellow and we got to talking.”

“About stamps, I’ll bet. Good breakfast?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, but—”

“And then you went to the auction room.”

“Right.”

“And bought some stamps, I suppose.”

“Well, yes. But—”

“The Dallas morning newspaper,” she said, “is called the *Dallas Morning News*, and don’t ask me how they came up with a name like that. You can’t beat Texans for imagination. Go buy the paper, Keller. You’ll find what you’re looking for right there on the front page.”

He picked up the lots he’d won, paid for them, and packed them along with his other belongings in his small suitcase. He checked out of the Lombardy and drove off with his suitcase next to him on the front seat. Traffic was light, and he didn’t have any trouble finding his way to the interstate. He headed for New Orleans, and found a country music station, but turned it off after half an hour.

He broke the trip at the same Red Roof Inn, used the same credit card. In his room he wondered if that was a good idea. But the trip was a matter of record, and one he had never attempted to conceal. Portions of it, of course, were off the record—the car rental, the visit to Caruth Boulevard—but he had no reason to hide the fact that he’d been to Dallas, and had the stamps to prove it.

He ate next-door at a Bob’s Big Boy, and it seemed to him that half the men in the room had moustaches. Like his

philatelic friend Michael, and like the man whose fingers he'd curled around the hilt of Portia Walmsley's kitchen knife.

They'd found him like that, Keller had learned on page one of the *Dallas Morning News*. Still in a drunken stupor, still holding the knife, and still sprawled out next to the dead body of a woman.

Reading the paper, Keller had learned why the sonofabitch looked familiar. Keller had seen him before, and not in the auction room, or around the Lombardy. He hadn't seen the man himself, not really. He'd seen the guy's picture—online, in some of the photos that popped up when he asked Google Images for a peek at Portia. And it was entirely natural that he be photographed at her side. After all, he was her husband.

Charles Walmsley. The client.

A reconciliation, Dot had explained. Charles Walmsley had gone over to his wife's house, perhaps in the hope of one last look at her before he got to see her in her coffin. And evidently the old magic was still there, and, well, one thing led to another. And somewhere along the way, he remembered that he'd better call off the hit.

So he made a phone call and figured that was that. A single

phone call had put the operation in motion, so wouldn't a second phone call nip it in the bud?

Absolutely. But the person Walmsley called had to make a call of his own, and the person *he* called had to call Dot, and the new directive took its time working its way through the system. By the time Dot got the word, it was already too late.

Back home, Keller held his daughter high in the air. "Tummy!" she demanded, and he put his lips to her stomach and blew, making an indelicate sound. Jenny laughed with delight and insisted he do it again.

It was good to be home.

Later that evening, Keller went upstairs and settled in with his stamps. After he'd mounted the Obock J1, he called Julia in and showed it to her, and she admired it extravagantly.

"It's like when somebody shows you their new baby," Keller said. "You have to say it's beautiful, because what else are you going to say?"

"All babies are beautiful."

"And all stamps, I suppose. That's the original on the right and the reprint next to it. They look the same, don't they?"

"I bet their mother could tell the difference," she said.

Two days later, Keller bought a new phone and called Dot. "Take down this number," he said, and read it off to her. She read it back and asked what was wrong with the old number. "It's no good anymore," he said, "because I smashed the phone and threw the pieces down a storm drain."

"I smashed a pay phone once," she said, "when it flat-out refused to give me my quarter back. What did this phone do to piss you off?"

"I figured it would be safer to get a new phone."

"And I figure you're probably right. You okay, Keller? Last time we talked you were a little shaky."

"I'm all right."

"Because you didn't do anything wrong."

"Our client fell in love with his wife all over again," he said, "and I killed her and framed him for it. If I'd known what was going on, you can bet I'd have handled it differently."

"Keller, if you'd known, you wouldn't have handled it at all. You'd have bought some stamps and come home."

"Well, that's true," he allowed. "Obviously. But I still wish I hadn't made the phone call."

"To me?"

"To the cops, after I got out of there. I wanted to make sure they showed up before he could come to his senses and head for the hills."

"They'd be hard to find," she said, "in that part of the country. Look, don't worry about it. You had no way of knowing he was the client, or that he'd canceled the contract. One way to look at it, he's a lucky man."

"Lucky?"

"You wanted the double bonus, right? That's why you left him with the knife in his hand."

"So?"

"So otherwise you'd have killed them both. This way at least he's alive."

"What a lucky guy."

"Well, yes and no. See, he's consumed with guilt."

“Because he didn’t call it off soon enough?”

“Because he got drunk and killed his wife. He doesn’t actually remember doing it, but then he can’t remember much of anything after the third drink, and what’s a man supposed to think when he comes out of a blackout with a knife in his hand and a dead woman next to him? He figures he must have done it, and he’ll plead guilty, and that’s the end of it. ”

“And now he’s got to live with the guilt.”

“Keller,” she said, “everybody’s got to live with something.”

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DEAR MURDERER

by Susan Breen

Susan Breen's debut novel, *The Fiction Class*, published by Plume/ Penguin in 2008, was praised by *Booklist* as a "poignant yet amusing tale of family relationships." A writing instructor who lives in upstate New York, the author has also had short stories published in a number of literary magazines. One of her stories made the 2009 volume of *The Best American Nonrequired Reading* (Houghton-Mifflin). This is her first mystery story, and, we hope, not her last.

We called my brother Sunny because when he smiled the sun came out. Big grin, curly blond hair, every girl's dream. But he was kind, too. His kindness was what made him special. One day, toward the end of tenth grade, Jared Reiss was having trouble with his gym lock and my brother helped him twist it open. At the time, of course, there was no hint that Jared Reiss would torture and murder fifteen women. At the time, all you could say of him was that he was a strange kid, picked on by bullies, an average student, and no one spoke to him. Except for my brother.

"What they did to him wasn't right," my brother said the night Reiss was finally sentenced. Or maybe it was the night he was charged. We were still young then, each of us newly married, my brother trying to make a go of it in business, me pregnant with my first child. We were having dinner at my brother's house and my sister-in-law, Wendy, was serving chicken stuffed with spinach and cheddar cheese. Wendy loved strange combinations. She couldn't serve meat without adding something to it: chicken stuffed with cheese, hamburger stuffed with mushrooms, steak stuffed with spinach. Everything with Wendy needed to be supplemented.

"That's ridiculous," Wendy said. "Reiss would have been a monster whether he'd been bullied or not."

My sister-in-law was always looking for a fight. Even when she and my brother were first married. No matter what he said, she said otherwise, though he never got mad about it. Liked her fire, he'd say. I didn't. I tried, because I loved my brother so much, but Wendy wore me down. She was beautiful, but in the way an ice sculpture is: cold, hard, and finely drawn.

"Who's to say," my brother responded. "Maybe the evil would have stayed dormant in Reiss if those kids hadn't pushed him so hard."

"Not for nothing," my sister-in-law snapped. "Don't you think it's strange every kid in the high school picked on him? Don't you think Reiss might have had something to do with it? Maybe they recognized something evil in him. Maybe it wasn't so much taunting as self-preservation."

"I remember one time Ezra Watts crammed raw chicken down Reiss's throat," I said. Involuntarily I looked down at the chicken on the plate in front of me, pink verging on raw, bits of unmelted yellow cheese clotting on the plate.

"They picked on your sister," Wendy said, "and she didn't become a serial killer."

Sunny's face turned red. Their dining room chairs were black, the carpet white, silver mirrors reflected your every sin. Black and white and red all over. "No one picked on my sister," Sunny said. He swelled up like one of those exotic lizards. He was my protector, always had been. Even after I became the mother of four strong boys my brother always worried about me. Picking on me was the only thing Wendy could ever do to annoy him.

When my boys and Sunny's daughter were in elementary school, my husband had to stop working. He got sick. It was a hard time for us. Although we had health insurance, money was tight. So I went to work at one of my brother's gas

stations. He owned five by then. He was successful for the same reason he'd been popular in high school: because people liked and trusted him.

On my first day on the job, Sunny showed me around the candy counter, which was the part of the gas station I'd be manning. There were all sorts of tricks to the trade: The key to the cash register needed to be inserted in a particular way, the combination to the refrigerators had the numbers of my birthday. There was a place for receipts, envelopes set aside for special people who came by, refill boxes of candy tucked in a dark closet. Sunny kept his arm around me while he showed me the ropes. By then he was closing in on thirty, but he still had that golden aura. He was tall, fair-haired, balding just a little bit, which he hid by cutting his hair real close. He wore a Yankees hat all the time, and a slippery leather jacket.

When he told me my salary, I jumped. "That's crazy," I said.

"You take it, Big Sis," he said. "Set some aside for a rainy day."

I thought of what all that money would mean.

"Don't tell Stew," he whispered to me. "Just keep it for yourself."

"I can't do that," I said. "For better or worse. You know. But I will take the money. It will help."

He teared up then. He was a sentimental man. Once I came across him crying over the beauty of a sunset.

"You okay?" he asked, meaning was it all right that my husband was sick, that my boys were crazy, that we were not able to move to a big house like he had. That I was working at a gas station, selling candy bars. That my life was turning out harder than expected.

"You know what," I said, "it is okay." I still had a lot, more than I'd ever expected, really. What Wendy'd said so many years ago was true. Kids had teased me in high school; just like Jared Reiss, I'd been the butt of jokes. They told me I was slow, a screw-up, ugly, and sometimes when I looked at my four handsome wild boys and my devoted husband, I swelled with joy. Fact was, I'd never expected my life to be easy.

Sunny cleared his throat then, wiped his eyes. "You're the only good person I know," he said, which seemed funny to me. I wasn't good. I was just content.

The gas station at which I worked was located on Hempstead Turnpike at the intersection of the high school, the penitentiary, and the hospital, so an assortment of

interesting people came by to buy gas and candy. Students, criminals, teachers, doctors, nurses. I loved trying to guess what type of candy people would buy, because unlike every other choice you make in life, a decision about candy is based only on pleasure. The young went for Skittles, the older ones for rich chocolate. People agonized over Dots because they knew they could suck out a filling, and yet they always gave in. The temptation of something so soft and sweet was hard to turn away. Some people threw their money at me. Others looked at me steadily when they ordered. Raisinets were unpopular, and I told Sunny to stop stocking them. I kept a list of those candies that were selling well.

"Why don't you alphabetize the candy bars," my sister-in-law said one warm September afternoon when she dropped by to see me. By that point, I'd been working at the gas station for two years and this was the second time she'd visited. I suspected trouble and fought down the tightness in my back. She must've just been to a conference, because she was wearing a suit. Pink, trim, feminine, high heels. She sold cosmetics.

"You should put the Snickers next to the Take Fives," she said, pointing. "And move the Chunkies next to the Charleston Chews. Wouldn't that be faster?"

"I don't want to go fast," I replied. "I like spending time with

people.”

Time had been hard on Wendy. She was as beautiful as she'd always been, but her mouth had acquired a pinch. She and her daughter didn't get along well, and Sunny liked to come over to my house, small though it was, and play baseball with my boys. Whenever it was his turn to bat, he hit a home run and the boys would have to go scattering far and wide to field it. The neighborhood kids liked to join in the games, the ice cream truck came by. The mothers sat on lawn chairs and my husband, who could barely walk by then, would maneuver himself onto the stoop and clap.

“Don't you want to do something with your life?” Wendy said.

“I have four sons. I think that's quite a bit of an achievement,” I answered, though I felt bad as soon as I spoke, because she and my brother had only been blessed with one child, a little girl who twitched when you touched her and had none of my brother's largeness of spirit.

“How do you think it makes Sunny feel, seeing you work here?” she whispered.

That shut me up. I'd never thought about that. She was right. My brother was proud, although he'd never acknowledge it. He talked often about his wife's beauty. I knew he felt I'd

married beneath myself and he had offered to send my boys to private schools. I'd said no, not because of my pride but because I knew it would ruin my relationship with my brother, and that was more important to me than anything.

Next time he came into the gas station I asked him about it. Did it upset him that I worked there?

"Wendy bothering you?"

"I don't want to be an embarrassment."

He hugged me then, and as he enveloped me I smelled his aftershave. I also smelled summer, youth, and hope, fresh grass and baseball and beer. What a gift, I thought, to have someone like him by my side my whole life.

"Don't you worry about Wendy," he said. "I'll take care of her."

Not long after that, Jared Reiss's mother came to the gas station. One of the strangest things about the whole case was that after her son had been convicted of murdering all those women, his mother stayed in the family house. Not only didn't she move away, she continued with her life in much the same way as she had before, gardening, going to the library, going to church. She lived in a house not far from my own, a maroon split-level with sheared-off hedges. She looked like a

teacher, head bent forward to make a point. She may well have been a teacher: I remembered she'd been pursuing some occupation that required her to be out of her house at regular hours, which was why Jared had the house to himself so much. I recognized her immediately.

The candy shop was empty when she came in, which was unusual. So I felt nervous when she walked up to the cash register, though I knew I was being unfair. *She* hadn't done anything. She hadn't murdered those women, and yet I felt angry toward her. Her inattention had brought something evil into my town. Then I thought of my brother befriending Reiss. How he'd spoken to him when nobody else had. That kindness had mattered to Reiss, but to my brother, too. That one kindness was something he came back to over and over again over the years, talking about it more frequently than his business successes, I'd noticed, as though Sunny realized that in that moment of reaching out to Reiss he'd achieved a height he'd never reach again. Could I do less? I wondered, I, who had benefited in so many ways from my brother's kindnesses. I was still puzzling it all out when I noticed Mrs. Reiss stealing a Snickers bar.

"Hey!" I cried out. I couldn't believe it. Her son was in prison for murder and she was stealing candy from a gas station. Not to say kids from the high school didn't try to steal from me, because they did, and usually I let them. Once. It was

almost like they had to get it out of their system. But this was a woman in her fifties. She was dressed formally: gray suit, silk blouse with ties at the neck that twisted around into a bow. It was only afterwards that I realized she was dressed to see her son. She must have been to the jail, then walked over to get a snack.

“Can you pay for it?” I asked.

She shook her head. The bell over the door chimed. New customer.

“Pay for it next time,” I said. How poor could she be? I wondered. She still owned her house. Maybe the trial fees?

The next Thursday she came and paid for the new candy bar, but not for the old one. I considered making a point of it, but one of the young mothers was standing by the counter with her baby all dewy and clean. She'd run out of gas, worried her husband would be mad at her. It wasn't the time.

Mrs. Reiss came every Thursday after that, bought her Snickers bar, and hovered. Never spoke, but seemed to enjoy listening to me chat with the various patrons. Sometimes she leafed through an almanac, sometimes she walked up and down the aisles, looking at snacks. I noticed she never picked up the newspapers. On Christmas, I wished

her a happy holiday. On Halloween, I offered her free candy corns from a bowl shaped like a witch's claw. One time my brother came by and smiled at her, but I'm not sure he knew who she was.

Wendy didn't come in often to see me. She was busy with her job, and she took no pride in her husband owning a gas station. She didn't come to our Sunday dinners anymore, so I was surprised to see her one hot August afternoon when she walked through the door. She was pale, her dark hair hung limp. Immediately she sniffed the air. She hated the smell of gasoline. Then she noticed Mrs. Reiss and did an exaggerated double-take.

"Do you know who she is?" she whispered.

"Yes."

"You let her come in here?"

I shrugged. "*She* didn't commit a crime."

Wendy walked right up to Mrs. Reiss, who was, as always, dressed formally, this time in a pants suit and polka dot blouse.

"Don't you have somewhere else to be?"

Mrs. Reiss didn't argue with Wendy any more than she'd argued with me over the candy bar. She set the almanac back on the stand and looked at me for just a moment. For the one and only time in the several years now that she'd been coming to the station, I met her eyes. Really met them, and for just a moment, the two of us connected. For a second, we were not a middle-aged woman with troubles and the mother of a murderer. For just a moment we were two women united by dislike of my sister-in-law.

"You make me tired," I said to Wendy when she came back to the counter.

She shrugged.

"I'm planning a party for your brother's fortieth birthday," she said. "It's going to be spectacular. Make sure you keep the day free."

Sunny's fortieth birthday. What could I possibly get him for a present? What do you give to a man who's given you so much? Who's rescued you from poverty, looked after you for years, played baseball with your boys, and been like a second father to them. Nothing seemed right. Clothes, books, jewelry. I'd have mortgaged my house to buy him something special, but I knew he wouldn't want me to spend a lot of money. I needed a present that was singular.

Something as special as he was.

For weeks I agonized over it.

Then, one warm Thursday afternoon, the answer appeared out of nowhere. It was September. The air smelled clean, the trees in the parking lot turned red and gold. I was straightening out some candy when Mrs. Reiss came in. The moment I saw her, I knew. What was the one thing my brother talked about more and more frequently, the one thing he felt made him remarkable? His kindness to Jared Reiss. I believed he'd come to think of that as the finest moment in his life.

"I need to ask you something," I said.

She looked at me warily and I knew she was thinking of the same thing I was, that unpaid candy bar from so many years ago. She owed me. We'd both known at some point I'd ask her to pay up.

"Would you ask your son to write my brother a letter? Wishing my brother a happy birthday."

Still she didn't speak. Probably what I was asking for was worth a lot of money; there were nuts out there who bought Reiss's artwork. A man like that, a serial killer, would have

his followers. For a moment I considered taking back my words. But then I thought of Sunny's face, how much he would treasure this note. There wasn't much time. Sunny's party was next weekend.

Mrs. Reiss came the next Thursday with the letter. She strode to the front counter, set the envelope down. Then she turned around and left. I knew I'd never see her again. The thought warmed me. I realized that the woman had been haunting me. She was like a blot on my conscience, punishment for a crime I hadn't committed. She was like every second thought you ever had, every bad break. A reminder of all that might go wrong in life. When she'd left and the store was quiet, I opened up the letter. The name of the prison was engraved on top. Reiss's handwriting was large and sloped to the left.

"Dear Sunny," it read. "Happy Birthday. I've never forgotten you. You were the only person in that school who was kind to me. Thank you. Jared."

I stared at the letter, amazed. I'd done it. The fact was, I'd come to think of myself as a screw-up. But for once, for perhaps the only time in my life, I'd done something right. I was so happy I opened up a Snickers bar and ate the whole thing, which normally I wouldn't do, because I was always struggling over those last five pounds.

The next day, Jared Reiss escaped from jail. The first successful break-out in the jail's history. Banner headline across the top of the newspaper. I can't explain the feeling that flooded me except that it was like labor. It was as though my body was in the grips of something larger than me. The letter from Reiss was still in my pocketbook. I pulled it out and clutched it to my breast. For more than twenty years we'd had no contact with Reiss and now, the day before he escaped, I'd sent his mother to talk to him about my brother. What if he went to look for Sunny? What if he thought of him as a friend? Something moved in the store and I screamed, though it was just a bunch of high school kids looking to buy soda. I urged them out of there, locked up the store. Through the window I could see an ambulance go by, screaming its way into the hospital.

I ripped up the letter. I couldn't tell my brother what I'd done. How could I disappoint him like that? Wendy would be livid. I pictured her beautiful face twisted in contempt, and this time she'd be right. What had I been thinking? The only thing to do was go see Mrs. Reiss. Perhaps she could call off her son. I drove over to the house, which was so near my own. I walked up to the front door, rang the bell. This was where it had all taken place, I thought, as I waited for her to answer. There was the garage in which Reiss had murdered all those women. Once, when my brother was little, he accidentally ran himself over because he'd been playing in the car and

released the emergency brake. His ear came off and I remembered the drive to the hospital, his head on my lap, the smell of blood. Sweet, sticky. She had to have known what was going on.

Mrs. Reiss opened the door. I didn't recognize her for a moment, because she was wearing a track suit.

"You have to make sure he doesn't go to my brother," I said.

She didn't speak and I realized I'd never heard her speak. All those years and I'd seen her shake her head, seen her eyes look at me. But never heard her voice. Suddenly that frightened me, someone who had so much silence inside of her, who'd raised a son who was a serial killer.

"He's my brother and he's dearer to me than anyone in this world," I said.

I touched her hand. She flinched, and I knew then she'd do nothing. She was a woman who could not, would not, speak. This was her curse. She turned for an instant toward the garage. I pictured her son's face, so pale and twisted in fury. There was no time to waste. Sunny had to be warned. My own foolish pride didn't matter. I raced to his house, ran up his front steps, and found the front door unlatched.

I went inside, already starting to cry, wondering if I'd find his body on the floor. "Sunny," I yelled, running into the living room. The white furniture was as clean as always, except for a glass of white wine knocked over onto the carpet. The spill resounded in my mind like a scream.

"Sunny," I called out. I ran into the kitchen, where there was a door that led down the basement. A long time ago, my niece had fallen down those very steps. She'd been bouncing in a walker and pushed past the protective fence. I ran down the steps, the sound of her crashing walker echoing in my heart.

My brother was sitting on one of the bar stools, neat scotch in front of him. Pale, tired. But alive. "Thank God you're all right," I said, throwing myself into his warmth, though it was obvious he wasn't all right.

"What happened?"

"Wendy's left me," he said. "She disappeared. We were supposed to meet for lunch today. She didn't come to the restaurant. I can't find her anywhere. She left me."

Instantly I saw what had happened: Wendy coming home, Reiss waiting for my brother, finding his wife instead.

"No," I whispered. "No." Poor unloved Wendy. I thought of

what I'd read about what Reiss had done to those women. Body parts found in the river, hands still clenched to ward off the terror.

"She didn't leave you," I sobbed. "This is my fault."

"It's not your fault, Big Sis," he said, his pale face reddening. "You know what she was like. I've been expecting her to leave me for years. Wendy was never happy with me."

I put my hand on his hand, breathed in the clean smell of soap. "I have to tell you something, Sunny, and you're not going to believe it. I'm so stupid." I explained the whole thing. About how I'd been so desperate to get him a birthday present, how I'd come to know Reiss's mother, how I'd just gone and tried to get her to call off her son, but the damage was done.

"He escaped from jail," I finished up. "Reiss must have come looking for you and found Wendy instead. We'll have to call the police. We'll do it now. I'm so sorry." I buried my head against his shoulder. I could feel the twitch of his heart underneath me.

"You didn't do anything wrong, Big Sis." He breathed in deeply. "It was me. I killed her."

He shook his head slightly, in a move I'd seen countless TV actors do. His face looked different, less genial than it had always been. How well did I know him? I loved him, but how well did I know him? I thought of my sister-in-law, always anxious and angry, always unhappy, always threatening to leave. "We had a fight.

"I didn't mean to do it, Big Sis. But what if . . ." He paused. "In a way this is like a gift, isn't it? The police will assume Reiss killed her."

Off in the distance, fire alarms sounded. Danger. The trinity of the hospital, school, and jail. I thought of what Wendy said all those years ago. That the bullies had recognized something in Jared Reiss. That they had picked on him for a reason. Her words had disturbed me then and stayed with me. Now I knew why. Because my brother should have recognized something was wrong with Jared too. He should have stayed away from him. It was empathy, not kindness, that caused him to befriend Reiss. He recognized another. But what could I do? I loved him. "Yes, Sunny," I answered.

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SEEING RED

by Amy Myers



Jack Colby, classic-car detective, is the latest addition to Amy Myers's impressive range of sleuths, who include chimney sweep Tom Wasp and chef Auguste Didier. Jack is the brainchild not only of Amy but her car buff American husband James, whose nose for a classic car is every bit as good as Jack's. The first Jack Colby novel, entitled *Classic in the Barn*, is due out from Severn House shortly after this issue goes on

sale. Also not to be missed: her new Marsh and daughter mystery, *Murder on the Old Road*.

I love cars. I love women. But just at that moment there was no contest. Believe it or not, I was staring at a Cord 812 Beverly. Nineteen thirty-seven, of course. *The year*. What a beauty. A convertible sedan. All those graceful curves, in and out in all the right places. Poetry? Maybe. But there was a problem. How could such a stunner come to be painted in different shades of clashing red? And *badly* painted at that. It looked as if a kid of five had set to with a paintbrush, dipping into three jam jars of garish paint as the fancy took him. The convertible top was cherry coloured, the body pillar-box scarlet, and the luscious curves of the wheel arches maroon. Every so often there was a patch of the original cream colour left where the brush had either missed it or decided to economise on paint.

Appalled, I peered in through the driver's window to see what havoc might have been wreaked on the upholstery. It was then the second problem hit me. There was a blanket over something heaped up in the backseat. At the very moment I took this in, the blanket slipped a little. The "something" was a woman, and from the look of the face that had been revealed, she was dead. Very dead. Even worse, if that were possible, I thought I'd seen her before.

“What’s up, Jack?” someone shouted at me.

Even as I punched in 999 for the police, the owners of the other dozen or so classic cars that had already arrived at the show were beginning to move in towards me, alerted by my yell of horror.

“Keep away,” I shouted back. “Crime scene.” And to make my point even clearer: “Murder.” That much was clear to me from those staring eyes, purple lips, and protruding tongue, even if the glimpse of a scarf taut around the neck hadn’t convinced me.

Only one of the onlookers refused to be daunted by my warning. Johnnie Darling, from Country Classic Car Events Ltd., who was organising this show, must have come rushing up from the main gates while I was feeding instructions over my mobile. He isn’t my favourite person, but he knows his stuff, so I told him to “Get back and stop any more cars coming in.”

“Right, Jack.” Johnnie promptly obeyed. He’d have to make hasty alternative arrangements for the other hundred or two classic cars on their merry way to what they thought would be a peaceful car show and a chat with fellow fans.

That left me to guard the scene, standing stock-still in order

not to muddy it up with more footprints and so forth. The other owners stared at me as though I were the wizard in the midst of a pentagon while they kept their safe distance.

“Anyone see this Cord arrive?” I called out.

There were earnest consultations—undesirable—but apart from the fact that it hadn’t been the first or second to arrive, no one could be sure. Nor could they be sure who was driving it, since everyone seemed to agree that the ghastly paint on the car was what had transfixed them. One eagle-eyed owner was sure it was a man, though, and someone else thought he looked tallish and thinnish. Well, that probably ruled out Danny DeVito. The trouble is that there is no prescribed etiquette for such situations, particularly at car shows being held on the grounds of stately homes like this one, Broadmead Castle in Kent. What usually happens is that one arrives, gets out and admires one’s own car, beats its bounds to draw attention to it, and then proceeds, with a happy nod, to study one’s neighbours’. So with a dozen or so cars all arriving one after another in the space of fifteen or twenty minutes, there wasn’t much chance of consensus.

As I defended the crime scene, I began to feel like that Roman chap Horatius, who held the bridge over the Tiber against the Tuscan hordes. I failed with only one eager intruder. Despite another cry to keep away, Major Sir Peter

Manning, whom I recognised as the owner of Broadmead Castle, informed me in no uncertain terms that crime scenes did not apply to him, and stalked straight over to me.

"This is my bloody car," he yelled. "I'm sure of it. Look what they've done to it."

He bent over to peer at the number plate, putting his hand out to support himself on the car.

"Crime scene," I barked at him, catching hold of his arm before he could do so.

He straightened up and stared at me. "What the hell do you think you're doing? I know it is. Some maniac's painted my car red."

"There's also a dead body inside." I was beginning to dislike this man. He wasn't even an old codger; probably in his late forties or early fifties, and with features as aquiline as Julius Caesar's, he was clearly accustomed to rule. Not me, he wouldn't.

He quietened down, though. "You mean they weren't joking?" He waved his hand at the watching group of thwarted classic car owners.

"The police are on their way," I said with gritted teeth. "That's

why I'm keeping this clear."

"And who the hell might you be?"

"Jack Colby, Frogs Hill Classic Car Restorations. I work with the police on car-crime cases."

"You didn't do much to get my car back when it was pinched two weeks ago. Look at it now. Flaming red. It was *cream* . . ."

I'd had enough of this. I spun him round and pointed at the rear seat. He took a quick look through the window and went very quiet.

"But it's my car. Who is she?"

I thought he was going to be sick. I felt like it myself. I knew very well who she was. It was Bonnie.

"We pay you to find *cars*, not bodies," Dave, or more formally Detective Chief Inspector David Jones, had grunted when I rang his hotline after my 999 call. The specialist crime unit of the Kent police is under his jurisdiction, and I was interested that he had come himself, even though there was a DI with him now hard at work organising the crime scene and SOCOs. The said DI, Denis Mulligan, was the senior

investigating officer and every so often he threw me a penetrating look in my role of person who had discovered the body. Dave's presence was not so much out of regard for my welfare as for the fact that this crime might be of particular interest to him.

Now that the action had been taken out of my hands, the shock was getting to me. I'd arrived early at the show, at about nine-fifteen, hence the small number of cars around when I had foolishly chosen to inspect the Cord. With the gates now firmly locked and the other cars rerouted to a neighbouring farm, Johnnie Darling came back to join me as a spectator.

We and the other car owners were in limbo now that the police were in charge; we were neither free to go nor able to contribute anything other than each his own story. The main refreshment tent had been commandeered by Mulligan as a temporary HQ, complete with tea and coffee conveniently set up in it, of course—and so the major and Johnnie had settled the rest of us in another tent which had originally been destined as the organisers' preserve, which meant we were somewhat herded together.

Snatches of conversation—or rather exchange of comments, as there was no real communication between us—became repetitive: “Who is it?” “Seen that red, have you?” “Who's this

Bonnie?" "Nicked, of course." "That paint job's a crime." Was the paint or Bonnie more important here? I wondered. Time to mourn the car once we were over the shock of her death.

I couldn't take it any longer, and went outside again to find Dave, who was busy filling out forms on a picnic chair tucked between an Austin-Healey and a Delahaye. "Has she been identified yet?" I asked him. "It was Bonnie, wasn't it?"

He nodded. "Looks like it. Her handbag was dumped on the floor. On our books as Eva Crowley, to be exact. Well and truly strangled with her own scarf."

I thought of the lively attractive girl with the eyes that would dance no more. She had enlivened the majority of car shows, both locally in Kent and elsewhere. Bonnie, as she was known to aficionados, was a car show groupie. She had no apparent car of her own, but she loved classics. She loved their owners, too—the rich ones, anyway. Wherever I turned up, she'd give me a wave to indicate that we might be mates, but not to bother applying for her favours. Just as well. What I earn wouldn't keep Bonnie in petrol perfume.

Why did we call her Bonnie? I'm not certain. She *was* bonny. She liked posing by car bonnets, and if she could charm the owners enough, *on* them, but the more likely reason was that she sometimes arrived at a show with a chap called Mick

Clyde, which made her nickname Bonnie a natural one, like the two American gangsters. And now it seemed from what Dave was suggesting, Bonnie and Clyde might have been just that. Their relationship? Mick might have been her brother, for all I knew. Certainly he didn't seem to object to her merrily making advances to any classic-car owner she fancied. Bonnie must have been in her late twenties; she was dark-haired, as slim and lithe as Raffles, and walked, with a swing, through life so happily that men jumped at the chance to walk at her side. Women seemed to like Bonnie too, because she was a pro. She never made the fatal error of addressing her charms only to the menfolk. She was delightful, and if the sun wasn't out when she arrived at a show, she worked a kind of magic that ensured everyone thought it was.

"Is Clyde on your books, too?" I asked.

"Yup. Probably working as a team. I was thinking of calling you in, but you've saved me the trouble."

"Or Mick did," I pointed out.

"No honour among thieves, you mean. Wrong. The body was cold, killed yesterday sometime, rigor still present, so probably afternoon or evening. Unlikely Clyde would have carefully driven her here if he'd had a hand in her death."

"Was the Cord actually registered for the show?" I'd seen the show badge on the Cord's windscreen but that might be a fake.

"Yup," Dave said again. "In the name of Philip Stein, registered yesterday. Must be a false name, of course. It's the major's car, reported stolen two weeks ago."

As the major had said. "Bonnie's handiwork?" I asked.

I must have leapt in too quickly, because Dave picked up my interest. "Fell for her, did you?"

"Couldn't afford her." If only.

I stood watching as the pathologist and photographers finished their jobs and departed; everything from old sweet wrappers to ants who'd chosen their paths badly was being packaged as evidence. The body was being removed and I contemplated the thin line between my happy images of the live Bonnie and the silent waste of her dead body. No jeans and T-shirt for Bonnie at such shows. She always came with the thousand-dollar Carla Bruni touch. High heels, slim-fitting dress, large hat. It took Bonnie to bring these ingredients to life. Had they also brought her to her death?

"What was she wearing?" I asked Dave abruptly.

“Skirt, bling, blouse—good stuff. She’d had sex not long before her death, no signs of force, though.”

I didn’t want to think about that. “Tell me about these thefts.”
Safer ground.

“Quite a lot of classic cars disappearing over the last year. You should know.”

“All from shows?”

“Wrong. Taken from hotel forecourts, car parks, all sorts of places.”

“What’s in common that makes you think it’s one gang’s work?”

“Too many of them in the last year. Not doing too well at the game if it’s a gang at work, though. Most of the cars have been found abandoned, unharmed, and returned to their owners.”

I frowned. “Odd. I wouldn’t have put Bonnie down as the joy-riding sort. Not worth her while. And yet, as you say, it doesn’t sound as though our Bonnie and Clyde made much money out of their illicit business if so many have proved so hot to handle they’ve had to be dumped.”

"Right. Smells a bit, I thought. The case of this Cord is out of line with the other thefts. It ~~was~~ returned to its owner, and it ~~was~~ harmed, if you count the bad paint job as harm."

"The body disposal was out of line, too."

"Car rage?" Dave asked hopefully. "Major so hopping mad over his car that he bumped Eva Crowley off?"

I looked at him kindly. "He doesn't look two cents short of a dollar to me. He could afford a repaint. Why risk killing her?"

Dave shrugged. "Just an idea. I've never charged a castle owner before." He looked rather wistfully at the majestic backdrop of Broadmead Castle. It's small and young as castles go, but nevertheless part of it is definitely a late medieval turreted fortress. The rest of it lies scattered around in ruins, and the major and his wife inhabit the bit that has been built on relatively recently, i.e., the late eighteenth century. "Risky of Bonnie and Clyde to plan to bring the car back here if they were responsible for the paint job."

"If it was them. If they're car thieves at all. Any proof of that?"

"No. Looks a valid line of enquiry to me, though."

"A weird one." There was no getting round the fact that

Bonnie had been killed yesterday, so indeed, why should the body have been brought here today? "Have you sorted out the order of the other dozen cars that came in with me?"

"A dozen different versions of it at the moment. The only thing that seems certain is that Johnnie Darling got here first in his Porsche. He'd have to be here first to man the gate. His number-two in the Austin-Healey was next. After that we're in the realm of endless permutations." Dave gave me a sardonic look. "When did you get here, Jack? Who did you see?"

I was caught. I'd got out of my beloved Gordon-Keeble, given it a loving pat or two, and then I'd spotted the Cord. "I didn't pay any attention to what was around me until after I'd called you. Got here nine-fifteenish, saw the red horror, and went straight over to it."

"Cuff him, Mulligan," Dave said amiably to the inspector, who had spotted me and was looking for easy prey. On this friendly note, Dave left me to my fate and disappeared back through the crime-scene entrance. I could see Mulligan's train of thought. First on the scene. Must be guilty. Luckily, several witnesses had seen me arrive in my Gordon-Keeble, and my yell of shock was only a few minutes after that. Even Mulligan gave up on me, temporarily at least. I could see him mentally concocting a revised scenario: killed her last night, drove

Cord in, dumped it, rushed to shin over the wall out of the grounds and pick up Gordon-Keeble parked round the corner. No, I reminded myself, silly scenarios were my territory. Police worked from evidence towards a theory—or so I hoped. Then I remembered my fingerprints were on that car. I'd supported myself with one hand to peer more closely at that blanket on the backseat. That was evidence of a sort.

I still couldn't quite take the whole gruesome business in. For me, Bonnie was the girl on the bonnet, not a corpse in the backseat. I now had to wrestle with the fact that she could be a thief. Not proven, but I had to admit it did add up. It didn't affect my image of her, however, as the joyous girl with the come-hither eyes.

When Mulligan reluctantly left me, a disappointed man, I couldn't bear the sight of the crime scene any longer and went back to the tent where the other interned witnesses were huddled together, either waiting their turn at the interrogation tent or relieved that it was over and filling in the time to their release date. Bonnie was known to at least half of those present, and the talk was more animated now that there seemed to be no doubt who the victim was or that the car was the major's. A series of rhetorical questions was still being repeated time and time again on the lines of:

“Who would dump a stolen car in the grounds of its owner,

anyway?"

"Who would want to kill Bonnie?"

And of course, "Who the hell painted that Cord in triple red?"

Unfortunately, no one provided any answers or even theories. A lot flew through my mind. Maybe Bonnie was having an affair with someone at the show, and Mick took exception to it? Problem: Why risk bringing her back here? Maybe Mick didn't know the Cord was stolen? Problem: He and Bonnie were close enough for him to have murdered her, so he must have known that. Maybe it wasn't Mick who drove it here but her murderer, who then made his escape on foot? Problem: Why bring it here when it could have been left anywhere? Conclusion: there was a connection with this show in particular. Which still didn't answer the final question: Why paint the car those disgusting shades of clashing red, which would devalue the car and make it stand out?

Possible answers to that? Firstly, to make the owner hopping mad—but why add that to the insult of having stolen it? Secondly, to disguise it for onward transmission to the Continent. Disfiguring, certainly, but anyone who would pay six figures to buy it could afford a repaint job. Thirdly, a falling out among thieves. Had Bonnie decided to annoy Mick, or vice versa? If Bonnie had an affection for the car, it could be

Mick wanting to ruin it for her. Or—a brainwave this—suppose Mick either wasn't her partner or not her only partner in crime. These thefts hadn't been *from* shows, but it was highly possible that they had all been *at* shows. Which meant Bonnie could have seen them. Which meant someone might have tipped her off in advance as to what to look for. Someone like Johnnie Darling. . . .

As in any emergency, everything was rapidly being organised to fit the new circumstances, and even given the grim situation, tea, coffee, and biscuits were proving popular. A smartly dressed middle-aged woman seemed to be in charge of transporting them from the main tent, now under police control, of course. First, I managed to insult this lady by assuming she owned the coffee stall now operating inside the police tent. She didn't. Nor was she the major's wife, my next try at being friendly. It transpired she was much more important than that. She was his secretary, and was only demeaning herself by serving refreshments as his wife was away. The lady's name was Hilda, and from the body language, Johnnie Darling was busy chatting her up. I've never quite got the hang of Johnnie, but seeing him in action gave me a whole new view of him. I could see him fancying his chances with Bonnie.

Once Hilda had returned to the main tent, it was time for my go. "Sitting in the hot seat?" I asked him.

I didn't warrant the same attention as Hilda. "What are you on about?"

"You were first in here this morning. You let the Cord in."

"So what? He had the registration badge on the screen, plus," he added meaningfully, "he had goggles, cap, and whatever on. It shot straight past and I never got a close look at him."

"Easy enough." It was with that car. He'd have been dazzled by the paint job.

"Yeah." He gave me an inimical glare. "So if you're asking me whether registrant number two-twenty-four had a corpse in the back, I didn't look. I'm not a bloody customs officer. He'd got the badge, he was in. Anyway, I was looking at the car. Not often you see a Cord, and especially not one painted like that."

"Too right," I agreed again, and he began to look more friendly. "How well did you know Bonnie?"

Friendliness vanished. "Not that way. I fancied her, but when she found out I'd no money, she dumped me and moved on."

No money? Pull the other one, I thought. Johnnie was

comfortably off, and he drove an impeccably restored Porsche 356 Cabriolet.

“Who did she fancy?”

A laugh. “Went home with a different chap each time. That brother of hers brought her to the events, but she left under somebody else’s steam. Bloody pimp, he was.”

Pimp left an unwelcome taste in my mouth. “Was Mick Clyde her brother?”

“No idea. Assumed so. If they were an item, he’d have kept her in check. And he’d have taken her home with him. No, she was on the make and so was he. Always asking me who was booked up for the shows. So I told her flat, I run a car-show company, not a knocking shop.”

“Be charitable,” I said, nettled. “Maybe it was the cars interested her.”

“Yeah. But rich owners are good, too.”

Bonnie’s ghost stirred indignantly inside my mind. Johnnie seemed at great pains to separate himself from her. And having Hilda as a friend at court could be useful for Johnnie too. The more one knows about the local bigwigs, the better,

especially the ones who own classics.

Which reminded me of the major, who I could see was still steaming, whether over his car or at the shock of finding Bonnie in it. He was stomping around the perimeter of the crime scene, talking to anyone inside it who came near him. I decided he could talk to me too, so I went over to him. He stopped stomping and took up a military “at ease” pose.

“Bad business,” I began casually.

He cast me a scathing look and didn’t bother to reply. “Why bring the poor girl’s body here?” I asked.

He did deign to reply to this. “Obvious, isn’t it?”

To me it wasn’t, so I just waited, guessing he’d be keen to tell me.

“That car’s rare. I’d reported the theft, so it would be recognised whatever colour some nincompoop had painted it. The VIN number would be checked right away. Whoever stole it couldn’t get rid of it and decided to dump it back here for me. Sheer spite.”

“And the body? Do you think Bonnie was the thief?”

“Can’t have been. She’s dead. Ghastly business.”

"That doesn't rule out her being the thief," I pressed on chattily. "They say her name's Eva Crowley. She was probably working with an accomplice."

"There you are, then. He dumped it back here, and her too."

It was possible. But who was it? Mick? Johnnie? Or the major himself, although I couldn't see his bad temper going as far as murder. As motives go, a desecrated car wouldn't be worth risking that, however mad he was. Once he'd seen the car at the show, he would simply have called the police and forked out for the repaint with a lot of teeth-gnashing.

When I got back to the tent again, a newcomer had joined the company—someone I recognised. It was Mick Clyde himself, straight from a grilling by Dave, from all accounts. It turned out he'd checked in at the new site half an hour ago and immediately been whisked off courtesy of Dave, first to suffer Mulligan's tender mercies, and then back to Dave's. He was a good-looking young man of about thirty, but he had a sullen look about him as though life hadn't been treating him fairly. It hadn't, given that Bonnie must have been close to him, whatever their relationship had been. The sullenness had more to do with temperament, I thought, than with the shock he must be going through. Unless, of course, he was Bonnie's killer.

“Bad time?” I asked sympathetically, as one interviewee to another. “That Mulligan makes you feel guilty even if you’re not.”

He looked at me suspiciously. “Johnnie Darling says you work with the cops.”

“I do, but that doesn’t make me a cop myself. Stolen cars are my line, not murder.”

He gave me a long hard look. “That why you’re here? Car stolen, was it?” He was making an effort to be casual.

“Yes. Certainly looks in need of restoration.” Mistake.

“So will you be if you don’t lay off me. Get it?”

I did, although this response seemed over the top. “Most amusing. Look, I’m really sorry about Bonnie.”

The sullenness lifted slightly. “Yeah. Only found out when I got here. The Old Bill pounced on me.”

“I’ve seen you arriving with Bonnie at shows.”

“If it’s anything to do with you, mate, which it isn’t, she was supposed to come with me today. Never turned up, so I

thought she'd changed the plan. Bloody mobile was on voicemail so I waited awhile and then came along. I don't trust her with that Johnnie Darling. Slimy bastard."

Was this a case of the pot calling the kettle black, as the saying goes? Interesting, given Mick's reactions to my fairly innocuous comments.

When we were finally released I drove home to Frogs Hill Farm in pensive mood. There's nothing like a Gordon-Keeble for gliding peacefully along the road letting one's blood pressure settle down. All sorts of ideas float through my mind, storing themselves up in a garage in my brain, until I'm ready to drive them out and examine them more closely. Today was no exception.

I live at Frogs Hill Farm on my own, but next morning the Frogs Hill Classic Car Restorations team would turn up for work. I wouldn't dare refer to them as staff. Zoë Grant and Len Vickers are far too superior for that. To them I'm merely the apprentice in the workshop. Len and Zoë make a good partnership. Len's been a car mechanic since the year dot and Zoë is a dedicated young worker bee. She has orange spiky hair, wears tattered old jeans and T-shirts, and thinks the inside of a car is paradise. She and Len operate with medical precision: Len the surgeon, Zoë his backup. Their diagnostic powers stretch to more than cars, as they are

pumped full of knowledge about the automobile world.

“Ever met Mick Clyde?”

“Yup,” was their joint answer.

“Know what he does for a living?”

“Nope.”

Now that was odd. If Mick was in the car business—and I regret to say that dealing in stolen cars comes under that category—they should know everything about him except maybe his bank balance.

“What about Bonnie—Eva Crowley?”

“Heard about her, not met her,” Zoë replied.

“You won’t now,” I said soberly. “Someone murdered her and stuffed her in the back of a Cord 812 yesterday morning.”

That stopped them both in their tracks. “Sorry to hear that,” Len said at last. “I met her, too. Nice girl.”

“Yes.” Zoë looked at me enquiringly. “One of your conquests, Jack?”

“Wrong way round. Bonnie had an eye for the crème de la crème, both in cars and their owners. And the gruesome detail is that the Cord had been badly painted in red, three shades of it.”

“Black would have been safer, if they were selling it on,” Zoë remarked after Len had nearly fainted on the spot at such horror. “Doesn’t sound much of a business to me.”

I was interrupted by a call from Dave, so I didn’t get back to Zoë on this, but for some reason her words stuck in my mind, I suppose because of my last conversation with Dave. If Mick and Bonnie’s job was dealing in classic stolen cars then they were making a poor fist of it. And Bonnie didn’t seem to me the kind of woman to make a poor fist of anything.

Dave had rung to tell me that they’d arrested Mick Clyde and brought him in for formal questioning. “That’s the good news,” he said.

“And the bad?”

“Probably have to let him go again uncharged. We’re holding him for twenty-four hours, because his tenprints are all over the car.”

“Then you’ll have him on a theft charge at least.”

“Maybe. But they’re inside the car, not outside. Hard to see how he could avoid touching the outside if he’d driven the car to the castle.”

“Does he admit to painting it?”

“No. Says he’s a craftsman, he’d never ruin a Cord like that.”

I liked Mick’s attitude. “Is that all Mulligan has on him?”

“More or less. Incidentally, he lives in a semidetached with his mum and dad, with a single garage and forecourt. Not much room to run a stolen-car racket. Mulligan’s team has been all over that semi—not a sign of anything save that he’s a car enthusiast. No false number plates, nothing.”

“Maybe he rents somewhere. Anyway, these days you don’t need premises—only a computer for stolen cars. What about Bonnie’s place?”

Dave sounded pleased. “Glad you asked that. She lived in a terrace house, but each one has its own garage round the back reached by a communal side alley. And guess what we found in hers?”

“Red paint in three colours and a kiddie’s paintbrush.”

“Right, except that there were more than enough

paintbrushes for two of them to work on it.”

“Without Mick touching it thereafter?”

“No through road there, Jack. The stolen-car charge isn’t going to stick. There just wasn’t enough stuff around in that garage for ongoing traffic—too much under the eye of neighbours. The occasional one, maybe, but not a whole string of them. I’m beginning to think there’s no connection between the cars that were later found abandoned and the cars that were pinched and have since vanished. Looks like more than one lot of villains at work. Mulligan will have to look elsewhere for his motives—and his evidence.”

Bonnie really did seem to be gazing at me reproachfully now. With those large pleading eyes on me, I felt as if I were letting her down. The reason for her death must surely have had some connection to the car thefts, for why else should she have been killed and left in the Cord? The answer had to be Mick Clyde, and the motive personal not professional.

Dave rang off and I turned my attention back to Zoë, Len, and the Triumph TR2 on which they were placidly working. Zoë’s orange spikes of hair were bobbing up and down with each movement. It was then that I remembered her “doesn’t sound much of a business to me.”

I didn't like Mick Clyde. Come to that, I didn't like Johnnie Darling, either. My brain had already clicked into gear over how they could have dumped the Cord at the show. There must indeed have been two arrivals, as I'd earlier fantasised. The Cord had been driven in, flaunting its registration badge and complete with poor Bonnie's body hidden under a blanket. The driver then vanished on foot to pick up another car and make a second entrance. The other cars present when I arrived had been ruled out by the police, I had gathered, and so only Johnnie Darling was left in the frame, unless he and Mick were in cahoots. Someone had said that the driver had been tallish and thinnish. So was Mick, so was the major, but I'd already ruled him out, so that brought me back to Johnnie again, also tallish and thinnish. He was best placed to arouse no interest at the gates, simply because he was the one who was in charge of them.

The problem was that I couldn't see just what deal he and Bonnie were running, with or without Mick Clyde, if the buying and selling of stolen classics was eliminated. And anyway, Bonnie seemed too classy a lady to fit into such a mundane business. She was born for the high life. I watched Zoë working away on the black Triumph—and then remembered what else she had said: "Black would have been safer."

Of course it would.

“Blackmail,” I yelled out. “That was the business. No cars have been harmed in the course of this operation.”

Highly annoyed by my shout, Zoë accidentally smeared grease on the polished bonnet. “What blackmail?” she asked, after cursing me for startling her. “What blackmail?”

“Mick ~~was~~ the pimp. Bonnie seduced the owners, stole the cars, and then ransomed them back to the poor chumps on pain of telling their sexual secrets to their spouses or partners.”

Zoë looked interested, as though this could be a line for her to take up. No way, I thought. “How would she steal the cars if she was bouncing around in bed?”

“Pinched the keys?”

“And the owners didn’t notice when she said thank you very much for the sex, now I’ll pop down and drive myself home in your car—which, incidentally, I won’t be returning?”

She’d thrown me, but only for an instant. “That was Mick’s role—or Johnnie’s. Mick’s probably. She’d text him when the fun began, so that he could be sure the victim would be otherwise engaged. It would probably be in a hotel some way away, and maybe Mick tailed them there. Mick would nip

over and pinch the car, then Bonnie would do her stuff in demanding cash in return for silence, her taxi fare home, and the safe return of the car.”

Zoë looked dubious. “Word would spread.”

“Come off it. How many victims are going to confess they were duped to their mates?”

“None,” she agreed.

“So all those who paid up received their cars back, after they’d been found abandoned unharmed—” I was back to base again. I saw the flaw in this argument.

So did Zoë. “But the Cord was.”

“And the owner saw red.” And then, as they say, *I* saw the vital clue.

Major Sir Peter Manning was duly arrested. Mulligan’s team found his fingerprints on the red paint—I hadn’t let him near the car, so there was no way he could have touched it before the crime scene was set up, and more conclusively, there was his DNA on, or rather in, the body. Bonnie must have given him one last treat before letting him see the travesty of his beloved Cord. He said later that when she’d called a

week earlier to play the blackmail card his answer had first been on the lines of “publish and be damned” and then he’d offered her half of what she’d asked for. But the paint had been the last straw. She’d accepted the ransom offer, but then she had gone home and painted the car herself.

Bonnie had brought the Cord back on the afternoon before the show, collected her money, had a last sexual romp, and left. Unfortunately, recovering from the afterglow the major had followed her to ensure his car was safe. That did it.

His story was that he hadn’t meant to kill her, he’d just been overcome with fury at her “damned cheek,” as he put it. Faced with the consequences of his rage, he had registered the car for the show in a false name, left the car hidden in the grounds until the next morning, taken it out through the rear exit to the grounds, and driven it through the main gates as soon as he saw other cars arriving. He’d had to do that, because if he’d left it in place already inside the grounds, he would immediately have been in the frame.

I’d been wrong about the major earlier, and should have guessed the truth. Only a furious owner would register the car for the show under the name of Phil Stein. Only a philistine could treat a Cord that way.

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BEER MONEY

by Shane Nelson



Shane Nelson's last short story for *EQMM*, "That One Small Thing" (February 2009) was selected as a Distinguished Story of 2009 by *Best American Mystery Stories 2010*. Since then, the Canadian author and sometime teacher has had several more stories published, including one given an honorable mention in *Best Horror of the Year*, Volume 2, edited by Ellen Datlow. He is currently managing to find time to write while also working as a stay-at-home dad of twins, "the

hardest job I've ever had," he says!

I was leaning against the counter in Frank Gosselin's store, talking to Frank about the weather, when Edwin Rhodes came inside. A snowy gust of wind followed him, rustling the papers tacked to the corkboard by the door. He heaved the door closed and the papers on the corkboard fell still again. Edwin began knocking snow off his boots with his cane and pulling snow from the old metal leg braces he wore.

I was new to town and had only met a handful of people, but I'd seen Edwin before. He was at least seventy, as old as Frank, and had a shock of white hair that he kept tucked under a grey toque most of the year. Stoop-shouldered, he wore a seemingly permanent scowl on his craggy face. The most noticeable thing about him, however, was his old-fashioned metal leg braces. I wondered why, in this day and age, he wore braces that looked as if they belonged on the country's first polio victim.

"Morning, Ed," Frank said from his perch on a stool behind the counter. "Mighty ugly out there."

"It's been nicer," Edwin agreed.

I felt like I should say something. The best I could come up with was, "Morning." Edwin glowered and made his way

down the first aisle, his oversized peacoat shedding clumps of half-melted snow.

“Don’t mind Ed,” Frank said. “It takes him about twenty years to warm up to folks.”

I smiled. “Have you known him that long?”

“My whole life,” Frank said. That surprised me, as Edwin didn’t seem all that fond of Frank.

“Anyhow,” Frank continued, pushing back the sleeves of his cableknit sweater, exposing hairy forearms. “You think your Internet weather forecast is more accurate than my almanac?”

Frank had a copy of the *Old Farmer’s Almanac* hanging behind his desk. It was dog-eared, stained, and worn. For Frank, it was a weather bible.

“I put more faith in technology than I do a book.”

“In my day,” Frank said, “we got smarter as we got older.”

I was about to say something in response to Frank’s barb when the telephone in the back room started to jangle. Like the almanac, Frank’s telephone was also a relic. I wondered if the phone company knew that he had a rotary-dial wall

phone hanging back there.

“Back in a sec,” Frank said. He clumped into the back room and grabbed the phone mid ring. I heard him say, “H’lo?” and then I tuned him out, putting my back to the counter and playing my eyes around the store.

While most businesses boasted electronic cash registers and plastic shelves, Frank’s store was a throwback to simpler times. His shelves were handmade, his floor hardwood. There was a working woodstove in the back corner—simmering orange today. The only things that looked out of place were the shelves of liquor at the back of the store and the beer cooler.

Edwin was near the cooler. He moved with slow, heavy steps, burdened by the cane and the braces. As I watched, he opened the beer cooler and removed a six-pack of Newcastle Brown Ale. Then, without so much as a backward glance, he tucked it under his peacoat.

Edwin thumped his way back up the aisle between the shelves. He looked ridiculous with the six-pack under his jacket, but he didn’t seem to give a damn. He went straight past me, one hand on his cane and the other holding the six-pack in place. His eyes caught mine and he hooked his lip into a smile. He was daring me to say something. I didn’t.

He opened the door and the wind rushed inside, bringing swirling ghosts of snow. The papers on the corkboard did their noisy dance. Edwin looked at me. The sky behind him was grey and muted, stormy light the consistency of old milk. Still, I could see the red veins in his eyes and the grey stubble on his cheeks. In the back, Frank was still yammering on the telephone.

Edwin grinned. It seemed to say: *Now we're in this together.* Then he stepped outside, head bent against the howling wind. The door banged closed, and he was gone.

I listened to the hiss of the woodstove in the corner and watched the second hand on the old John Deere clock on the wall. Was it my place to tell Frank about Ed's theft? I was trying to decide when Frank hung up the phone and returned to his stool.

"Edwin gone?"

I nodded. "Yep."

Frank removed a half-smoked cigar from behind the counter and tucked it into the corner of his mouth. Hooking an eyebrow, he asked, "Your lungs give a damn?"

Personally, I thought smoking in public was a nuisance, but

this was Frank's place and if he wanted to break the law I'd look the other way. Frank lit his cigar and puffed at it contentedly. Outside, the wind whooped. After a few moments he said, "You seem glum all of a sudden."

"Not glum," I said. "Just thinking."

" 'Bout?"

"Edwin," I said. "You two are good friends?"

Frank chewed on the cigar and it bobbed in the corner of his mouth. "I think so," he told me. "Least we used to be. Edwin's a tough one to figure."

"But you like him? You get along?"

"Sure," Frank said. "He's a great guy."

That settled it. I couldn't tell Frank on the off chance that it would put paid to whatever friendship these two old men shared.

"There are a lot of great folks in town," Frank said. "You need to get out and meet them."

"I know," I said, though my voice mustn't have sounded too convincing because Frank came back at me right away.

"Small towns are funny places, Sean," he explained. "You're a stranger until you've lived here half your life. But if you knock elbows and spend less time jawing with coots like me, well, who knows."

I laughed. "You saying you don't like my company?"

"Your company's fine. I'm just saying that in small towns you have to push yourself. Once you do that, you'll find there's a lot of loyalty. Secrets, too."

Loyalty and secrets. I'd seen both in action today.

"Maybe I'll head out, then," I said, pulling my gloves from my pockets. "Knock elbows."

Frank puffed his cigar. "Come back tomorrow, we'll play chess."

"I don't play chess."

"Christ on a crutch," Frank said. "What's this world coming to?"

A week later, a blizzard socked in and I began doubting the veracity of the online forecast. Perhaps there was more knowledge in the *Farmer's Almanac* than I was ready to

admit.

I trudged to the end of Grand Avenue, snow swirling around me. It was bitter snow, like grains of sand. By the time I got to Gosselin's, my hair and shoulders were covered. I caught a glimpse of myself in one of the front windows. I looked like I had been rolled in confectioner's sugar.

The front door swung open and a man's broad back filled the doorway. He grunted and strained as he backed through the door carrying one end of Frank's woodstove. On the other side of the stove was Frank, red-faced and scowling.

"Frank, what's up?"

"I'm . . . reading the . . . paper," he strained. "What . . . does it look . . . like? Goddamn . . . stove has to go." The muscles on his forearms bulged as he stepped through the doorway.

"Can I help?"

Frank jerked his head over his right shoulder. "Man the ship."

"Okay," I replied, slipping inside.

Through the door's snow-frosted glass, I watched as Frank and the other man struggled the stove across the parking lot toward a white moving truck. It was tough slogging through

the drifts, but they seemed to have a handle on it. I turned my attention to the store.

The back corner where the woodstove had sat looked empty and dirty. The floor's big bare patch was emphasized by the discolored hardwood and the massive dust bunnies crouched in the corner. There were still lengths of duct and pipe on the floor and I half considered lugging them out to the truck. The high keening of the wind, however, convinced me that my place was behind the counter.

I'd been back there less than two minutes when Edwin came inside. When he saw me he paused. Then, without another glance, he pulled the door closed, banged snow off his cane, and thumped down the aisle toward the beer cooler.

He knew I was watching but he didn't even pause. He opened the beer cooler and reached inside for a six-pack. Then he took one step to the side and the shelves blocked him from my sight. When he came back into view, cane bumping the floor, I could see the bulge under his peacoat.

This old sonofabitch was pushing me and we both knew it. I had to say *something*, and I wanted it to be angry and indignant. When I opened my mouth, however, all I managed was, "Can I help you?"

"I doubt it," Edwin said. "You don't work here."

"No, I'm just helping Frank."

"Real man would help Frank by toting that goddamn stove, not by standing at the counter, catching flies," Edwin said.

"Maybe there's something you want to pay for," I said.

He looked at me. "I don't know who you are," he said, "but mind your own business."

"I'm doing what Frank asked."

Edwin went out the door. I grabbed my jacket, meaning to follow him outside. I was just coming around the counter when Frank stepped inside. He was covered in snow and soot, his face red from cold and exertion.

"Where you running off to?"

"Um, Edwin, he . . ." I trailed off.

Frank had a curious look on his face, as if he knew damn well what was bothering me. "What about Edwin?"

"I thought . . ."

Frank gave me time. “Yeah?”

“I thought he might have . . . taken something without paying for it.”

After brushing as much of the snow and soot from himself as he could, Frank went behind the counter. Hanging his coat on a wall hook, he said, “You mean to say Edwin *stole* something?” He looked amused.

“More like he just forgot to pay,” I said.

Frank shook his head. “Not Edwin. He never forgets anything. Trust me.”

“But Frank—”

Frank raised a hand. “Edwin didn’t steal anything, Sean. It might have looked that way, but I’m sure you’re mistaken.”

I sighed inwardly. There was nothing I could do and, to be fair, it wasn’t my responsibility. Whatever friendship Frank and Edwin had, it didn’t involve me.

“What happened to the stove?” I asked, wanting to get as far away from my accusation of Edwin as I could.

“Damn thing’s had it,” Frank said. “Getting old, just like me.

Sooner or later things get old and you have to let 'em go. It won't be the same without that old bitch, though." He sighed. "Let me wash up and get out the chessboard."

"You're determined to teach me that game, aren't you?"

Frank nodded. "I'll make you a smart man yet."

Frank was good to his word and by the first week of December he'd taught me the basics of chess. I didn't play very well, but Frank went easy on me. Still, he kept tormenting me about the weather. I'd claimed we were in for a mild winter but Mother Nature—and Frank's *Farmer's Almanac*—had put egg on my face. We'd had nothing but snow for five days straight.

I had my fingers poised over one of my pieces. Frank said, "You sure you wanna do that?"

In the middle of my contemplation—I did a lot of it during chess, and Frank usually muttered about how long it took—Edwin came into the store. His toque was pulled low over his brow. Hectic red patches stood out on his cheeks.

"Howdy, Ed," Frank said.

Edwin's reply was a muffled grunt. I was sitting on a stool

opposite Frank and I swiveled around so I could see Edwin. He caught my eye and glared. Then he made his way to the beer cooler.

“Sean?” Frank said. “You gonna make your move?”

Frank had that curious look in his eyes. I said, “In a second.” Edwin was at the beer cooler, the door open. The cooler’s refrigeration unit hummed and steamy air breathed out around Edwin in a sigh.

“Sean?”

“Just hold your water,” I said, using one of Frank’s favorite phrases. He raised an eyebrow as if to say, *Oh, really? Is that how it is?*

At the back of the store, Edwin removed a six-pack and tucked it under his jacket. The cooler door thumped closed and Edwin came up the aisle, passed the front counter, and went out the door without a backward glance. I turned to Frank.

“Well?” I said.

“Well what?”

I pointed at the door. “Edwin just walked out of here with a

six-pack.”

Frank’s eyes never left mine. “I didn’t see anything.”

“He pulled out the beer and put it under—”

Stepping into my words as neat as you please, Frank nodded at the chessboard and said, “Are you going to move?”

I couldn’t believe it. Here we sat, two adults, and Frank was going to pretend he hadn’t just seen Edwin lifting a six-pack. I opened my mouth, then closed it again. Then, finally, I plucked up my piece and moved it.

“It’s funny,” Frank said, eyeing up the chessboard with calm precision. “Sometimes what you see isn’t really what you saw. Leastways, not the way you *think* you saw it.”

I let Frank continue.

“Ed and I grew up together. Trusted each other. Of course, like I said, sometimes things aren’t what they seem.”

His fingers touched a knight. Paused. He chewed his lower lip, concentrating. I felt as if he was on the cusp of revealing something—one of those “small-town secrets” he was prone to remark about, the ones that made you an insider.

“What happened was stupid. There was no reason for it. It was Saturday and we were doing what we always did. Only difference is that it was raining and Nicole was there. She was Ed’s girl at the time.” His eyes came up, caught mine, then went back to the chessboard. “We were hanging out at Ed’s house, drinking beer and watching the storm. We ran out of beer and had to get some more. We flipped for it and Ed lost.”

Frank closed his fingers over the knight but didn’t lift it from the board.

“He didn’t *really* lose, though. I had this two-headed buffalo nickel, some gag thing, and I used it. I tell myself I didn’t know, that I just had it in my pocket, but I knew. I liked Nicole and she liked me just enough to make me flip that coin.” Frank looked embarrassed. “So, I flipped the coin and sent Ed out in the rain to get the beer. He’d barely pulled out of the driveway when Nicole and I were all over each other.”

He put the knight down. He was frowning and his face had gone two shades of dark.

“We got carried away and the next thing I knew we were halfways undressed and on the bed. But then I heard something bang downstairs—the bedroom was on the

second floor—and it put a block of ice in my stomach. I ran downstairs, pulling my shirt closed. The front door was open, banging in the wind. I found a case of beer sitting on the porch, but no Ed. I was fit to be tied. So was Nicole. We both had that dizzy feeling, like we just missed getting run down in the street or something.”

Frank looked at me. Looked *through* me. “We waited around for Ed for an hour before we finally went out looking for him. We met the police on the other side of town and I knew right off something was wrong. Turns out that Ed had been roaring down the highway when he lost control. He was in the hospital for a month. Mangled himself something bad and for a while they thought he’d lose his legs. That’s why he has those braces. He spent a few more months with Nicole—she barely left his bedside while he was in the hospital—and then they broke up. We stayed friends but something was always different.”

At last Frank looked back at the chessboard. He made his move, giving a determined nod. “Check.”

“Did he know?”

“He told me he got back and came inside when he realized he’d forgotten his wallet at the store. Set the beer on the porch and headed back out. Never made mention of

anything.”

“Do you believe him?”

“Makes no difference,” Frank said. “It doesn’t matter what Ed saw, what matters is what he *admits* to seeing. Do you understand?”

“Not really.”

“He saw,” Frank told me. “Saw and took off out of there. I don’t know why he didn’t beat me senseless. Instead, he ended up crashing his car. Crippled himself for life.”

“Do you think it was your fault?”

Frank gave me a wry smile. “Yeah,” he said. “Leastways a little. I flipped a crooked nickel and jumped all over his girl.” He nodded at the board. “I’ve got you on the ropes.”

I examined the board, taking my time, letting my thoughts simmer. Finally I made my move, slipping out of Frank’s clutches.

“Do you still have the nickel?” I asked.

“Nah,” Frank said. “Lost it years ago.” He countered and leaned back from the board.

"Still," I said. "Edwin comes in here every week and steals your beer. You *know* that. I don't get it."

"Sure you do," Frank said. "You just ain't seeing it yet."

"Then just tell me."

"Maybe Edwin does it because he likes to think he's slipping one over on me," Frank said. "But I doubt that. He does it because he likes Newcastle Brown, and he does it because I let him do it."

"But why do you let him?" I asked.

"Forty years ago I did a real stupid thing," Frank said. "I cheated my friend and sent him out to get beer. Then I cheated with his girl and sent him off to a car accident that almost killed him. So I've been buying his beer for him ever since. I owe him that much."

Frank smiled. I didn't know if he was serious or not.

I picked up my chess piece. "That's it?"

"That's it."

"Do you think he'll ever admit to what he saw? That he'll

forgive you?”

Frank took a deep breath. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe. Maybe when I’ve bought him enough beer.”

I looked at him for a few moments more, then set my piece on the board. “Checkmate,” I told Frank.

He blinked down at the board, then scratched the side of his neck. “Well I’ll be goddamned.”

“Another?” I asked.

“ ‘Course.”

He cleared the board and put the pieces back in place. Outside, the wind blew against the windows and the snow came down. I’d just taken Frank in chess, but when it came to the weather, Frank—and his *Old Farmer’s Almanac*—had me beat.

At least it looked that way. For now.

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A STUDY IN SCARLATTI

by Donald A. Yates

Holmes fandom began for Donald Yates in 1944, when his mother gave him a copy of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*; in 1960, he revived the Sherlockian society at Michigan State; then, in 1972, he was invested in the Baker Street Irregulars, the world's largest Sherlockian organization (which *EQMM* honors with each February issue). Here's a fanciful recreation of a BSI get-together. It's dedicated to Rodolfo Jorge Walsh.

The tables were being cleared after the traditional goose dinner had been dispatched by the two dozen Sherlock Holmes devotees gathered at a St. Helena restaurant on the second morning after Christmas. This was the date of the events of "The Blue Carbuncle," and the Napa Valley group of Baker Street fans commemorated that Holmes tale of a lost hat and a lost goose with a midday meal each December 27th.

The group's leader, Fred Cambridge, a retired professor of English, rose to call the meeting to order.

"I am pleased to have the honor of introducing our speaker on this special occasion," he began. "He's our Chief of Police, Ollie Branson. Chief Branson has some thirty years' experience in investigating crime and will no doubt have countless insights to offer us. When I first asked him if he would speak today, I noticed a certain sparkle in his eyes." Cambridge looked down at Branson, seated next to him. "I'm not sure why he was so accommodating, but I suspect that he may not be entirely unaware of the exploits of our admired Sherlock Holmes."

Branson smiled and nodded. "I have a very well-read copy of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* at home," he said. "I know the stories well."

"Well, then, you're among friends," Cambridge replied. "The floor is yours."

Branson stood up and moved around in back of his chair. He was tall and lean, with a tonsure-like ring of white hair circling his head and a closely trimmed white beard.

"Thank you, Fred. If I could ask everyone's patience for a short time, I'd like to tell you about a certain Napa Valley crime and see what you can make of the facts."

The diners seated at the long table nodded approvingly,

eager to accept the challenge.

“This case concerns a man named Frank Scarlatti. He was a New Yorker who came to Napa Valley to negotiate the purchase of the Chateau Rachel winery from its owner, Dennis Tucker. Tucker, who had lived and worked for many years in the valley, had suffered a series of terrible financial setbacks—bad investments, losses caused by the weather—and saw no solution to his problems short of selling the winery that he had founded.

“Tucker and Scarlatti had met several years earlier at a graduation ceremony at Yale University, where both had sons receiving undergraduate degrees. Tragedy befell Tucker soon afterwards when the graduate careers of his two sons were cut short by a very serious hit-and-run car accident in which the driver was never identified. In the accident, Dave Tucker lost the use of both legs and his brother Larry was blinded.

“A couple of years later, when financial pressures convinced Tucker that he would have to sell his winery, he remembered Scarlatti, who was a wealthy stockbroker in the East. Scarlatti was interested, but his negotiations with Tucker were harsh and uncompromising. He was determined to acquire Chateau Rachel for a rock-bottom, distress-sale price.

“Eventually, sensing that Tucker was on the verge of accepting his terms, Scarlatti flew out to the West Coast with two of his aides and drove to Napa Valley. On the evening of the day they arrived, Dennis and Rachel Tucker hosted a dinner at their home, on the grounds of the winery. After dinner, the family and all of the guests except Scarlatti retired to their rooms in the spacious Tucker home. Scarlatti went to occupy the guest house situated some fifty yards from the main house.”

Branson paused and looked over his audience. “There you have the setting for the crime. Now this is what happened. The next morning, Scarlatti was found stabbed to death in his bed in the cottage with a knife that had been taken from the Tuckers’ kitchen.

“What you need to know first of all is who among the previous evening’s dinner guests was unable to provide an alibi for the late evening and early morning hours.”

Branson picked up a pile of printed sheets and passed them out to his left and right. “This is a list of the five people who were without an alibi. If you wish, this is your chance to try solving the case.”

Branson’s list read as follows:

Bonnie Ventura—Scarlatti's slim, attractive secretary

Gino Franchi—Scarlatti's stocky, nervous, fast-talking assistant and bodyguard

Dave Tucker—Tucker's handicapped son; 24 years old, of medium build

Larry Tucker—Tucker's blinded son; 23 years old, muscular, but also of medium build

Caspar Griswold—heavyset retired banker from San Francisco and a friend of the Tucker family

"I'll give you some additional evidence that was gathered on the morning of the discovery of the crime." Branson said. "A light rain had fallen after everyone had retired that night, and a set of deep footprints was discovered leading to the guest house and then back to the main house. On the porch, there was a pair of muddy shoes that belonged to Gino Franchi. From the Tuckers, we learned that Scarlatti and his two assistants drank an abundant amount of wine at dinner. Scarlatti ended up making sarcastic comments about how much his secretary, Bonnie Ventura, was drinking. She took offense and got up and went to her bedroom. Not long after the meal was cleared and the party had moved to the living room, the Tuckers and their friend Griswold also retired, and

Scarlatti left for the guest cottage. Only Dave and Larry Tucker and Gino Franchi stayed on, talking and opening up more wine. "That's all I'll give you now," Branson added. "But you are all free to ask questions or offer your solution to the murder."

At this point, Cassie Sawyer, a real estate agent, spoke up. "I think Bonnie Ventura would have reason to go after Scarlatti, especially if she were a little tipsy. You know, a woman scorned . . ."

"True enough. But she had a slender build and could not have made those deep shoe impressions in the wet earth."

"Yes, of course. I should have seen that."

Erik Stanton, a columnist for the local newspaper, raised his hand. "All right, you indicated here that Caspar Griswold was a sizeable person. That would fit with the depth of the footprints. And since he was a good friend of the Tuckers, he could well have become angry over Scarlatti's heavy-handed tactics in acquiring the winery."

"A point well taken," Branson replied. "Unfortunately, it was determined that he could not possibly have gotten his feet into the muddy shoes. You're doing a good job, however, in narrowing down the suspects."

Fred Cambridge reached up and touched Branson's arm. "You can't be suggesting that Franchi was stupid or drunk enough to commit the crime—for Lord knowswhat reason—and then leave his own incriminating shoes on the front porch!"

"Well, Fred, stranger things have happened. But what else do you need to consider? Means and opportunity were available to all five suspects. Therefore, the motive is the missing factor. So go ahead and see what you can come up with." Branson's audience was properly stumped. No one responded.

"Take your time. You'll figure it out."

Branson smiled and waited. For a minute or two, the only sound was the low murmur of the diners, talking among themselves about the unlikely choice that they were left with. Finally, Cambridge spoke up and stated the obvious.

"You can't be suggesting that one of the brothers . . ."

"Motivation," Branson said. "You need a reason!"

The group fell silent.

"Okay," Cambridge said after a long pause. "Let's review

this. Franchi and the sons stayed up later than the rest, just talking—”

“And the next morning Scarlatti was found murdered,” Branson inserted.

“So what connection was there?” Cassie Sawyer asked. “They didn’t know each other before.”

“That is true,” Branson admitted.

“Franchi must have said something,” Erik Stanton ventured, without much confidence.

“Good,” said Branson. “Now you’re onto it.”

“Even if the brothers had some reason—” Cambridge began.

“That would explain it, wouldn’t it?” Branson prompted.

“Well, yes and no,” Cambridge said. “Suppose that Franchi, with his tongue loosened, had let something slip, it doesn’t— Wait! The hit-and-run accident at the university! He must have said something that revealed that Scarlatti’s car had somehow been involved. Maybe he helped Scarlatti cover it up.”

“Well, now,” Cassie Sawyer objected, “you’re not saying that

a blind person and someone who could not walk—”

“Of course!” exclaimed Cambridge suddenly. “I understand what they did.”

A score of puzzled heads turned his way.

“So you think you see how it was done?” Branson said.

“Yes. When they understood that it had been Scarlatti’s car that had run into them, probably while he was visiting his son at the university, they wanted at all costs to avenge what they had suffered. They came up with a way of doing it that would once and for all settle their account with him.”

“But how, Fred?” several in the group asked in unison.

“After picking up the knife in the kitchen, Larry *carried* Dave, piggy-back style, to the cottage, where Dave ended the life of the man who had ruthlessly disabled them both. One son’s legs and the other one’s eyes enabled them to take their revenge.”

Branson nodded. “Very good! And when they discovered Franchi’s shoes outside his room where he had improbably left them to be shined before he went to bed, they included them in their plan.”

A moan of disbelief echoed around the dinner table. When it subsided, Erik Stanton asked, his voice tense: "What happened to the brothers? Did they get away with it?"

"It would have been a shame, don't you think, for those two unfortunate souls to have been brought to justice for their crime?" Branson said. "Somehow it wouldn't have seemed fair."

"So how *did* the whole thing end up then?" Cambridge demanded.

"Very happily, I'm glad to say, for all concerned. As is the case with detective stories, the puzzle is the most delectable part of the tale. Step by step, we reach the solution and after that, we are not really interested in learning how the criminal is brought to justice. The mystery is truly all that counts. Don't you all agree?"

Branson glanced around at the upturned faces of his audience, which still reflected mystification. "I must now make a confession."

He paused for a brief moment and then said, "I hope you'll forgive me, but I devised this little puzzle for your entertainment, drawing on the traditional elements of the detective story. It is all, with your pardon, a fiction. So no one

needs to face prosecution for the crime.”

His admission was followed by a palpable sense of relieved tension, and then applause broke out, accompanied by several shouts of “Bravo!”

Chief Branson gratefully acknowledged the ovation and sat down. Cambridge rose and turned to the speaker with his own applause.

“Ollie, I think you caught us all off guard. But fiction, of course, has that capability. It strikes me as very fitting that you have let the Tucker brothers off without having to atone for their crime. That, you may know, is exactly what Sherlock Holmes does at the conclusion of ‘The Blue Carbuncle.’ He allows James Ryder, who masterminded the theft of the jewel, to go scot-free. He observes that, after all, he is not retained by the police to correct their deficiencies.”

Branson grinned. “I know the story very well.”

Cambridge offered him his hand. “I’m sure you do. I feel quite sincerely that you are one of us, Ollie. Will you join our little group?”

“I would be delighted, my friend. Just as long as you don’t forget who the police are around here!”

Fred Cambridge offered Bronson his hand. “All right, it’s a deal.” He turned to his audience. “Well, if you will now all stand and, as is our custom, join in the singing of ‘God Save the Queen,’ I believe we will conclude our gathering on a very satisfactory note.”

“Hear, hear!” was the unanimous response of the Napa Valley Sherlockians.

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DOG ON A COW

by Gina Paoli



Pseudonymous author Gina Paoli has appeared in *EQMM* before, but under a different name. The Colorado writer worked for many years as a technical writer for high-tech industries, “explaining the machinations of research physicists and engineers to the manufacturing and management side of business.” Love of the short-story form notwithstanding, this author’s latest work in progress is a historical mystery novel. Perhaps some historical short stories will follow.

Outside, the downpour continued unabated, each raindrop intensifying the stale, humid dreariness of the confining motel room. Trussed in the corner with a piece of cord from the cheap Venetian blinds, Dan rubbed the throbbing side of his head against the wall in the corner farthest from the door of the tiny room. It was sometime past two in the morning. The little one, Brucie, had just slugged him with his ring-encrusted fist: Dan's wedding ring was on that fist now; his money and credit card were in Brucie's pocket. Brucie reclined in the dingy stuffed chair beside the bed, digging at his fingernails with a flat, blunt carpenter's pencil.

The big one, Jane, rested on the sagging bed, back against the water-stained wooden headboard, her tremendous arms crossed over her equally massive chest. Her hair, red streaked with black, had been fashioned into an improbable pageboy cut, an unfortunate choice that further accentuated the fleshy features on her round face. Part of a tattoo on her right bicep peeked out below the sleeve of her faded yellow T-shirt. It looked like the forepaw of a dog, and for some reason Dan imagined the dog was a frisky, bright-eyed poodle. Tiny bottles of nail polish, cylinders of mascara and eye shadow, tubes of lipstick, and several compacts of face powder lay scattered on the bed before her. She slowly bent forward and wagged a stubby finger at the gaudy containers as if selecting the right one would solve an important

problem.

Dan's courage had weakened a little after that last punch from Brucie, but he still managed to convince himself that he could wait them out. He'd probably already suffered the worst of it. Hell, if he just got a chance, he could talk his way out of this. They only wanted a little traveling money, and since he had given them all he had, they'd soon grow bored with their little game and let him go. Still, he should try to do something. Maybe the story, maybe he could reduce the tension by telling them the story.

The story, which had come to him just a few hours before, had been forming in his mind even as he'd been sitting there tied up. It had an urgency of its own and despite the discomfort and pain from his numb hands and the scuffs on his face, its tenuous threads began to knit themselves into a ragged tapestry and suddenly he could see the outline of it and knew enough to begin the telling. He had nothing to lose, and maybe it would help somehow. So he worked up a few drops of saliva and prepared his swollen tongue to make words.

They'd been sitting in silence since Brucie pounded on the TV to remove some static from the sound, resulting in a blank screen and no sound at all. That had been an hour or more ago. He'd been told to be quiet and he knew that Brucie had

a short fuse, but Dan had faith in his own skills as a storyteller.

"It's raining like hell out there, like it's never going to stop," he said tentatively. There was no reaction to these first few words, so he continued. "It reminds me of a story I heard about a flood. It happened about twenty years ago, right here in eastern Colorado, though I'm not sure if it was up north on the South Platte or down on the Arkansas. Both rivers flood sometimes in the late spring when the snowmelt has already filled the river and a rainy spell sets in.

"So the rains came and swelled the river over its banks and into the pasture of this farm that was usually a half-mile from the river. The farmer had his cows penned up by his barn, but the river was rising steadily, so he let them out and herded them up onto the prairie sandhills above his farm. He struggled through the mucky soil, but he and his dog got them out and up into the hills with only one of the cows running off. When he was sure the others were safe, he and the dog took off to find the lone cow, a young milker who had always been a little skittish.

"Let me tell you about this dog. It wasn't the kind of dog the farmer would have picked for a work dog. It had come wandering into the farmyard a couple of years earlier and after a week of tossing rocks and shouting at it, the dog was

still skulking around. Against his better judgment, the farmer began to leave food scraps in an old Ford hubcap behind the barn, and soon, the dog began to follow him around as he did his chores. He soon found that the dog had a touchy and unpredictable nature. The farmer sometimes caught a gleam in the dog's eye that seemed like a challenge, as if it would as soon go for you as listen to what you had to say. But the dog learned to handle the cows so the farmer put up with it and let it live in the barn.

"The dog's mongrel collie coat hid the splashes of mud that stained it as he roamed about, searching for the cow. They worked well together, covering a lot of ground. The signs they found pointed to the brainless cow heading right down into the flooded cottonwoods that bordered the swollen river.

"When they came to the edge of the flood, the farmer waded into the slow-moving, muddy water. He looked back and saw that the dog had hesitated. He cursed it and commanded it to come, but it only paced at the water's edge. Finally he went back and picked up the unwilling animal and carried it with him. When he was fifty yards from the edge and still only up to his ankles, he dropped the dog. It looked back anxiously to the muddy land, but moved on as the farmer did, staying by his side.

"It was too close to dark for the farmer to search for very long,

as he didn't know when the flood crest would hit the area. For all he knew, it would reach clear to his farmhouse, but he was stubborn and single-minded and as the gray sky turned to black, he kept up his search, slogging along in his rubber work boots, already fighting his way through waves of uprooted plants and small trees and drowned varmints. He had no luck spotting the cow, and only turned back when it was dark enough that he needed the yard lights up by the house to guide him home.

"He didn't notice the loss of the dog until he waded onto the bog that had been his alfalfa field. The animal had been alternately swimming and scrambling onto branches and raised clumps of grass as they wended their way through the flooded cottonwood forest. The farmer remembered the dog being near him only ten or fifteen minutes before as he heard its whine when it traversed a long log and didn't want to jump into the water again, and he had cussed it and chided it along. He looked back at the huge dark expanse of the murmuring flood and whistled a couple of times and then trudged up to his house. What a mess the day had turned into. He told himself that if the cow and the dog survived until morning, he'd find them then."

"What the hell does this have to do with anything? Who gives a damn about a lost dog or cow?" Brucie said. He stood up and put the carpenter's pencil behind his left ear. He was

small and thin, maybe five-four and 140 pounds, and he wore dirty jeans with holes in the knees and a red flannel shirt over a black T-shirt. His hair was black and thick and he needed a shave. He had a mean kick and hard, fast fists.

"I think it's a good story," said the big woman, Jane. Dan had heard Brucie call her Jane several times, usually with a nasty descriptor in front of Jane, like Lard-Ass or Two-Ton. "You know I love dogs. I don't think I ever been closer to a cow than a hamburger or a glass of milk, though." She laughed heartily, shaking the whole bed so that the headboard banged against the wall.

"How do you know it's a good story? You ain't even heard the whole thing."

"Well, let him finish it, then."

"Nah. I'm tired of hearing him talk. Besides, if he has something to say, I want it to be that he remembers the number for the cash machine so we don't have to wait for the goddamn bank to open."

"He said he didn't remember. Even when you hit him," she said. Then she lowered her voice. "When are you going to learn that hitting never helps?"

Brucie didn't say anything for a minute, just cocked his ear toward her like he was waiting for another stupid remark. Then he slowly turned his head and looked across at her, his blue eyes turning to slits so all that showed was a venomous, milky grey. She tried to evade his stare, but wasn't able to: The smile behind that hearty laugh disappeared and her heavy shoulders descended lower and lower until she sagged into a sad, rounded lump.

Brucie had her intimidated all right. Dan had noticed how quiet she was in the car, but it hadn't meant much to him then. He generally never picked up hitchhikers, especially when he had a full slate of appointments and an order book with too many blank pages, but today he'd been bored and *out there*. *Out there*, where the wind and the rain put him. He could go for weeks without doing a stupid, crazy thing, and then along would come a blow and suddenly he would decide to take a two-hundred-mile detour to find some ribs cooked just the way he liked them, or that he needed a rest and he would end up spending three days in a motel room, drinking whiskey all night, crying to every sad song on the radio.

He knew something was going to happen when he realized he had driven for two hours with his radio off, racing out of western Kansas and into Colorado in an eerie trance. He had his eyes hard to the road, following the flashes of lightning like the dazzle from a hypnotist's watch. The wind

carried the rain across the road, billowing it in waves that nearly flooded the highway before they gusted away. It was like driving along a stormy California beach.

Then he saw them, in a lightning flash, the little one huddled against the big one on a stretch of nowhere sixty miles into Colorado. So he pulled over and picked them up, thinking he was just being humane, but knowing it was really the wind and the rain and being *out there*. They didn't say much, only making small talk, revealing themselves in little ways, and after a hundred miles he thought that he was going to be all right, that just having the company was pulling him back, was calming him down. Then the seed of a story began to sprout, something about a flood, about a lost cow and a dog, lost to the storm and the flood.

The motel squatted in the far corner of a lonely crossroads on the two-lane, ten miles away from a stagnant and dying farm town of a few thousand people, and twenty miles from the interstate, where cars rocketed along oblivious to its existence. There was just the one motel and the filling station with the lunch counter across the highway. The cafe wouldn't even open until six A.M., when the farmers and truckers and other traveling souls might stop in for breakfast. He abruptly decided to pull in, because the story was coming too fast and he wanted to let it grow at its own pace. He would spend the night at the motel, and in the morning go across to the diner

and tell the story to the locals, judging its success by smiles and nodding heads and a coffee cup that was always full; or become embarrassed by turned backs and snickers and the loud clanking of silverware against thick ceramic plates.

The occasional praise from these small audiences made his long trips on the road bearable. He spent his days driving hundreds of mind-numbing miles back and forth across the prairie and fields of eastern Colorado, western Kansas, and Nebraska, pestering service-station owners into buying the latest equipment to service the latest, increasingly complicated cars. Or failing to convince them, as had been the recent trend. No, he didn't mind, because he still had adventures in his head, and he loved the chance to meet and entertain new people with his stories.

There was an overhanging awning and a bench in front of the diner and the big woman said they would be all right there until it opened, that they were dry now, thanks very much for the ride. He felt a little bad leaving them there, but at least he'd gotten them out of the rain.

Across the road, he had to wake up the motel clerk, who groggily fumbled with his pen when Dan checked in, and it seemed to take forever, but he was a nice enough fellow and Dan thought he might share the story with him tomorrow when it was polished and ready to tell. He had the trunk of his

Toyota open and he was fumbling around with his bag when the dim light from the buzzing motel sign suddenly became even dimmer. A shadow flashed across his hand on the bag and when he looked over his shoulder, the woman hovered over him. For a moment he imagined she might have a question to ask, or have come to ask for a little food money, but then he felt the jab in his back and he flexed upright, banging his head against the lid of the trunk. A blow behind the ear quickly followed.

“Don’t move like that again, buddy,” said the voice behind him, “or you’ll get more than a slap upside the head.” This time the jab was stronger and sharper, and he realized it was a knife at his back. He should have been surprised, but wasn’t, chastising himself that he hadn’t noticed that they were the kind of grungy hitchhikers who showed you a smile as you passed and then cursed you and gave you the finger if you passed them by. He hadn’t noticed, he’d been *out there*, and then the story had come and he’d become distracted and careless.

Now, Jane got up from cowering on the bed and went to the window. She pulled aside the curtain and looked out into the darkness. The side of her face, he could see, was illuminated by the pink neon from the motel sign, and there were shiny trails of tears running down from her eyes.

Brucie came over and squatted down on his haunches. He crossed his arms and looked at Dan. Dan guessed he was about twenty-five, but he could have been some perpetually adolescent forty-year-old. He smiled at Dan until Dan found himself smiling too, unable to say why, nodding at the silliness of it all, how it seemed more like some prank than a robbery. No one robbed you this way.

Brucie uncrossed his arms and his left shot out, the closed fist catching Dan on the side of the head. He had been turning away as he nodded and the blow glanced off, but was still hard enough to stun him. There was another fist to his face and he felt the tearing of the inside of his cheek between the bony knuckles and his teeth, leaving the sudden, grim taste of blood. Dan thought about the angelic look on Brucie's face, the mask that hid the nasty workings of a small, mean man who never had anything but small, mean thoughts. He took two or three more blows, not really able to keep track of the damage, they came so fast.

"You made this too hard, man," he heard Brucie say. Dan's ears rang and the man's voice sounded hollow and far away. "What kind of salesman don't carry his money in cash? Plastic ain't the way for a man to carry his money. It ought to be cash." Dan fell onto his side. Brucie was still squatting beside him. Dan had his eyes closed. He felt a hand on his hair as he was dragged up, back into a sitting position.

"I think you're lying about that damn number. I think you're wasting my time because you think you're going to get away with something. Let me tell you what," he said. Dan opened his eyes, squinting now through the pain. Brucie's face was only inches away. His breath reminded Dan of the wind from the beef packing plant back home, the odor of rotting meat so intense it weighed down the breeze that carried it.

"I don't want the number anymore. When that branch bank or whatever it is in that little town up the road opens, you're going to clean out your account and if you're lucky, we'll let you live. If you'd given us the number for that card, we'd already be gone. You just had to make it hard. Well, I can make it hard, too."

Then he stood, giving Dan's hair a hard yank and throwing his head back against the wall. He glanced at the woman, jangling the keys he had taken from Dan earlier. "I'm going out to check out that car again; I know he's got some more cash stashed somewhere. Make sure he don't move. And don't be talking to him." He slammed the door as he left.

Dan's head ached as the booming of the door shook the thin walls of the motel room. He sucked away the blood from the numerous cuts inside his mouth, wanting to spit it out, but feeling weak and impulsively swallowing. The echoing pain in

his head started to subside as the flow of blood decreased and what he swallowed began to taste less salty.

Jane continued to look out the window. He hadn't seen how she reacted to Brucie's blows. She had said she didn't like hitting. But she did not seem disturbed now; maybe she only meant she didn't like being hit herself. Dan was sure that it happened, that the little man beat up on the big woman. There were no bruises on her that he could see, but he knew that it happened.

She turned away from the window and walked back to the bed, sitting down to a groaning screech from the box springs. A sigh came out of her that seemed to go on and on.

"I liked that story you were telling," she said. "I wish he'd let me talk to you so's I could hear how it ended. He doesn't like it when I have fun over something he hasn't made up."

"I could tell you the rest of that story," he said slowly, trying to keep the edges of his teeth away from the cuts inside his mouth.

"Don't talk. He's mad enough already. He don't have good control when he gets this mad."

"I think you'd like the rest of the story," Dan said. "I can speak

quietly.”

She turned her head toward the door. He saw her chewing her lower lip. Then she sighed another windy sigh. “Talk real low,” she said. “I mean real low.”

The pain from his jaw kept his mouth from opening more than an inch or so. A loose flap of skin on the inside of his cheek caught on his back teeth when he spoke, but he had to finish the story. He could see that his only chance was the woman. He took a deep breath and tried to let the story come back. Of course, the story had changed now, and it came to him so fast he could barely keep the words from stumbling over each other as they came out of his mouth.

“The farmer lived alone and had a cold supper of baloney and pickled peppers, listening to the far-off crashing and grinding together of trees as they fell against each other and were lost to the current of the rising flood. He didn’t think the waters would reach the farmhouse or the barn, but if they did, he didn’t know what he’d do with those thirty head of cows when they needed to be milked in the morning.

“After he finished eating he lit his pipe and went out onto the front porch and looked out into the hazy night, the sky somehow lightened by the lowering rain clouds. It wasn’t long before he heard it, the piercing cry of a panicked animal,

sharp against the roar and murmur of the flood. He turned his head, using his good ear to focus on the point and gauge its location, several hundred yards downstream of the house.

“ ‘Serve the damn thing right if it drowned,’ he said and then put out his pipe and went back out to the barn and put on the chest waders he used when he went fishing for brook trout up in the mountains. He grabbed a halter for the cow and a flashlight and trudged away from the house and the barn, too quickly reaching the edge of the waters. He hesitated a moment, giving himself one last chance to turn back, and then began high-stepping his way through the flooded alfalfa field.

“Feeling the fool, he waded deeper and deeper, playing his flashlight over the dark water, which had become surprisingly smooth now except for the occasional wake of some branch or dead critter and the accompanying foamy moustache. ‘That damn cow is probably gone, and what do I care about the dog?’ he said aloud but continued on.

“The sound of barking led him further out into the flood than he had thought he could reach, out through the cottonwoods and closer to the deep channel of the river within this new river. He moved gingerly now, as the water had reached his thighs, telling himself, *Ten more steps, only ten more*, and then he would go ten more after that.

“When he first saw the dog, it was balanced on a log pressed against a tree by the current. It had stopped its barking and held its dark, shiny eyes against the flashlight. Relieved in a way he didn’t want to admit, he saw that he only had to take a few more steps and he would reach the dog and then he could carry it back to shallow water and begin to focus his worry on the real problems this flood had brought to him.” But he didn’t make even that next step as his foot caught on some submerged branch or root and he fell forward, the cold water flooding over the front of the waders, drenching his shirt and the top of his pants. He quickly regained his stance, cussing himself and cussing the dog. He tried to stand fully upright, but some instinct or maybe the thick, low clouds, heavy on his shoulders, kept him hunched over.

“He flashed the light toward the dog again and realized that it wasn’t standing on a log at all. The dog held its precarious perch on the cow, where it had become lodged against the cottonwood tree, the cow bowed in the middle, its head low in surrender to the current. Instead of feeling relief at finding both of the animals, the farmer sighed in resignation at the effort it would require to free them and get them back on dry land.

“Looking closer, he saw that the cow had a wound on its neck, a loose flap of skin that showed red even as the

lapping waters tried to wash away the blood. He checked the dog again and saw its lolling tongue and blood-stained muzzle, shocked but somehow not surprised.

“ ‘You,’ he shouted at the dog, never having given it a name, only ‘dog,’ only ‘you.’ He shouted the word, the name, in a stern voice, an accusing voice, that failed to stir the dog as it lowered its head and bared its teeth.

“The cow suddenly reared its head out of the water and appeared to recognize the farmer with wide, mad eyes. Abruptly closing those eyes, it tried to lunge toward the farmer, suddenly breaking loose from the grasp of the current and sliding away from the tree, the dog struggling to keep its balance.

“The farmer pulled out the halter, thanking his good luck that he didn’t have to pull the cow out from behind the tree himself, and as he held the halter out toward the head of the cow, the dog moved forward on the cow, balancing on the cow’s neck, and tore savagely at his hand. The teeth caught him in the web between his thumb and forefinger, leaving a deep gash and intense pain.

“Enraged, the farmer looked about him for a floating branch, anything that might be floating by with which he could beat the dog, beat it loose from the cow and let it fend for itself. It had

gone crazy and was worthless to him now, or at least for the time being.

"Finding nothing for a weapon, he swung at the dog with that painful, closed fist and caught it in the head. It didn't fall, but backed up enough that the farmer thought he could slide the halter over the cow's head.

" 'Come on, you young heifer,' he said, holding out the halter, waiting for the cow to recognize it, to settle its head into the familiar nylon head gear. The snout of the dog came out of nowhere again, the sharp teeth catching the outside of his already injured hand. He swiped at it but missed again.

" 'Damn it, you bitch, get your head in here,' he shouted at the cow, leaning back a little, thinking the dog might not be able to reach him.

"At last the cow did come forward, with a sudden bawl and a violent lifting of its head, catching the halter with its nose, but not square on enough for him to get it over the cow's ears. So he grabbed those ears and held on and tried to slide it up over one ear at a time.

"He'd forgotten the dog in that instant when he sensed success, when he thought the hardest part would be done. So when it came leaping out at him, grabbing hold of his own

ear and tearing it as it shot by, the farmer screamed in such rage and pain that he dropped the halter and started splashing about, swinging his arms, wanting only one solid punch, one painful crack on the dog's head. He had to get rid of the dog or it would kill him.

"The struggle had preoccupied him to the point where he'd lost any sense of his location. He had probably been slipping down the slope of the hole for a few seconds before he noticed that the water was pouring over the top of his waders, sloshing down all the way to the rubber boots, quickly filling them. He still had hold of the cow's ears, and he quickly realized that that cow had become his lifeline, his only hope. He needed to use the cow's buoyancy to keep him from going down and not coming up.

"The dog nipped at his ear again, but he didn't care. He had the cow's ears and thought that he should try to slide up and put his arms around its neck. He still had hope, a slim hope, that he would get out of this mess and the cow seemed to cooperate, staying still and floating along with the current until maybe they would settle into a shallow place.

"It became an intense struggle, as he tried to keep his head above water while his waders ballooned and became heavier and heavier, pulling harder and harder. He heard the dog splashing behind him, staying with them, but no longer

attacking him. The dog, that damn dog, would kill him one way or another.

“So when the cow suddenly rolled away from him and he lost his hold on the ears, and then rolled back and over him, forcing him down, he knew that he had only himself to blame. Not the cow, not even the dog. When he knew he wouldn’t come up again, when his last breath bubbled away and the cold water filled his lungs like it had filled his waders, his last thought was that the damn dog would survive him and probably the cow as well.”

The room was silent for a moment as Dan’s voice died out. He had begun to talk quietly, as he promised, but the volume of his voice had risen as the story reached its conclusion. He wondered what Jane thought about the story.

The woman sat on the edge of the bed with her knees drawn up, somehow looking smaller. Without saying anything about the story, she reached for her purse on the table beside the bed and got out a pack of cigarettes. She lit one with a tiny disposable lighter, inhaled deeply, and slowly blew out the smoke through her nostrils. She continued to smoke without saying anything, finishing half of the cigarette. Then the doorknob rattled.

Brucie burst into the room holding a magazine in one hand

and a pint bottle in the other. He slammed the door behind him, looked around the room as he unscrewed the cap on the bottle, tilted it back, and finished it in one long swig. Then he tossed the magazine toward Jane, who tried to move, but still got the flapping leaves of the magazine across her face. Brucie laughed and flipped the empty bottle toward Dan. Dan turned his head, the bottle glancing off the wall and hitting him in the shoulder.

It was a bottle of Old Grand-Dad that Dan always kept in the car in the event that he became stranded in a blizzard on the plains. It was in the emergency kit that had the space blanket, the little Sterno stove, the coffee, and the chocolate. He had never opened the bottle, so Brucie had to be drunk.

"At least I know you're a man, now," Brucie said. "You got a girlie magazine and whiskey in your car."

"It's just a *Playboy*," Dan said, foolishly embarrassed for some reason.

"Yeah, and I bet you don't look at the pitchers." Brucie started giggling as he said this, confirming his drunkenness. As soon as he stopped, he looked thoughtfully at Dan and smiled. His eyes had become dulled, but Dan knew this was deceptive. The fury inside the man was hotter than ever.

"I'm feeling like I don't want to wait another couple of hours for that bank to open. I'm feeling like I want to get on the road right now. This fifty dollars will put gas in that car of yours and get us a meal. Maybe I should just call it good and move on. Maybe that's what I should do. What do you think, pardner?"

He had walked over beside Dan. Tired and hungry and sore as he was, Dan knew what was going to happen next. Fear flushed up from deep inside and for a moment he felt himself swelling with adrenaline, wanting to break the ropes and rise up and at least defend himself. But it lasted only that moment and he felt himself slumping, felt despair replace the adrenaline. He looked down at the man's boots, pointy cowboy boots, and wondered if he was going to use them to kick him to death.

Dan looked over at the woman sitting on the bed. She had moved to the edge of the bed. She had the magazine, the *Playboy*, in her lap. She looked down at the magazine, and Dan had the idea that she was trying not to say anything. She knew what was going to happen. Dan knew she had seen it before.

"Don't, Brucie," she finally said in a tired voice. "Let's just go, like you said. Let's just go somewhere else."

"Oh, we'll go, all right. Just let me say goodbye to our buddy

Dan here. He's been so damned helpful." His eyes had brightened; the hateful heat inside was fueling his rage.

"Don't, Brucie. Please," she said. "I'll leave you if you do. I'll go, and you'll be on your own." She stood up and looked around and grabbed her purse from the nightstand by the bed. She glanced at the door and then back at Brucie.

Dan should have been watching the boots instead of the woman. One of them slashed at him and caught him in the side. He thought he heard a crack as the air whooshed out of him. He toppled over onto his side. He lay there, struggling to breathe, seeing the boots just inches from his eyes. When he was able to take a shallow breath, a sharp point of pain in his side blew all of the air out again.

"If you leave, I'll come find you. I'll find you and I'll talk to you just like I'm talking to Dan here. You'll come back."

Dan had his eyes on the boot this time and was able to turn to the side and absorb the kick with his shoulder. It hurt, but at least he could breathe. He wanted to ask for help from the woman, but he knew he was lost and even in his fear and pain, he knew that the woman should probably leave while she had the chance. Maybe Brucie wouldn't find her. Maybe she would call the police in time. He heard her heavy footsteps and hoped that she would escape. All he could do

was look at the boots and wonder how long he would last.

“Don’t be stupid,” he suddenly heard Brucie say.

The boots suddenly rotated, facing the other way now, and then slowly floated off the floor. Dan looked up and saw Brucie dangling in Jane’s arms. She held him in a bear hug as he squirmed and kicked his legs, trying to escape.

Dan gritted his teeth through the pain, managing to right himself, leaning back against the wall. Jane’s big arms completely encircled the little man, her hands clasped on opposite elbows. She turned with him as she squeezed, spinning around slowly like they were dancing. Brucie was kicking slower now, his pointy boots searching for the floor. His pale face had turned a bright red, his lips a strange pastel blue. Then the kicking stopped and she held him like some limp, life-sized doll. After he had been completely limp for several minutes, she laid him on the bed.

She stood over Brucie’s body, her face stony and unreadable. She watched him sprawled there on the bed and even leaned a little closer, turning her head as if searching for the whisper of his breathing. She might even have been waiting for him to wake up so she could apologize and do something nice for him, or ask what they could do for fun. Any fun thing he wanted to do. But Dan could tell with certainty

that Brucie would never wake up. Finally she sighed, her broad shoulders rising like the final swell of a volcano before it collapsed in on itself.

She turned and took heavy steps across the room and stood over Dan. He pushed himself away from the wall, trying to turn, thinking she would untie the ropes on his wrists. He could do the ones on his ankles on his own.

He felt her touch, but instead of loosening the ropes, her arms slid around him and then his feet were off the ground and their eyes were level. Dan was bigger than Bruce, but she held him with ease. Her brown eyes gleamed from the tears that filtered through her mascara and ran in dark trails down her cheeks.

"I ain't no cow. And Brucie wasn't no dog," she said, her breath soft with spearmint gum. "He was just a sad and angry little man. He used to be good to me, but lately he forgot how to do it. I kept thinking he would remember those good days when he wasn't so mean, but some things you can't change."

She squeezed him harder. "You got that straight? The next time you go talking about dogs and cows there won't be no mention of me or Brucie."

The incredible pain in his ribs made him suck at his lips, suck

for air like it was in the spit and drool, and then he felt like he was swallowing his tongue, he was so desperate for breath. He nodded his head feebly to show that he understood. Then she carried him over beside the bed.

"I want you to tell me that number. I didn't mind that you lied to Brucie, but don't try it with me." She sniffed and blinked at the tears in her mascara-laden lashes as she spoke.

Dan nodded his head again to show that he would do that very thing and anything else she wanted if she would only give him some room for a breath. She stared at him grimly, her puffy face only inches from his, finally putting him down on the bed beside Brucie. When he got some fraction of his breath back, he told her the number, repeated it three times to make sure.

She stooped over Brucie and got the credit card and cash he'd stolen from Dan out of Brucie's shirt pocket. Then she touched her fingers to her lips and touched Brucie's cheek. "He weren't a dog," she said softly, "and I ain't a cow." Then she put the cards and cash into her little purse and went to the door. She paused to pull a small handkerchief from her purse and dab her eyes. "Tell the police what you want, but I expect I'm pretty easy to forget. I'll leave your car someplace further down the road." And then she slid out the door.

Dan lay for a long time on the bed, snatching teeth-gritting breaths, more afraid of the woman now than he had been of Brucie. He waited until the pain had subsided, until daylight shone through the window, and then he called 911. The local sheriff's deputies were skeptical about his story and questioned him for hours about Brucie's body. In the end, they let Dan go after confirming his identity, assuring him that they would be talking with him again. Dan refused to go to a hospital, which didn't seem to bother the deputies.

He found a rental car in the nearby town and drove the two hundred miles to his home in Fort Collins. His wife nursed his wounds and taped his chest when he again refused to go to a doctor. He gave vague answers to her questions about what had happened, but she didn't press him. He would tell her all about it later, when he found the words. Or when the words found him.

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SAFE AND SOUND

by *Edward Marston*



Author of five established series of historical mysteries, ranging from the Middle Ages to the Victorian era, Edward Marston begins a sixth line of historicals, this time set not in his native U.K. but in New York, with this story starring private detective Jeb Lyman. Marston is, of course, the best-known pseudonym of writer Keith Miles, who has produced golfing mysteries and other works under his own name. At about the time this issue goes on sale, the latest Marston novel, *Under Siege*, will

be released.

New York City, 1868

The attack came when he least expected it. Henry Culver, a wealthy banker, was driven home in a cab through the gathering darkness of an April evening. He was in a contented mood. Having dined with some colleagues, he'd been able to mix business with pleasure and wash both of them agreeably down with the finest of wine. As the cab took him through a maze of streets, Culver dozed happily off. It was only when the horse clattered to a halt and the vehicle shuddered that he was jerked awake. He alighted, paid the driver, and moved unsteadily towards his house. Before the banker reached his front door, however, a burly figure stepped out of the shadows, knocked off his top hat, and cudgelled him to the ground.

Culver was a healthy man in his early fifties but he was no match for a seasoned ruffian. Exploiting the element of surprise, the attacker struck and kicked him unmercifully. All that the banker could do was to curl up and try to cover his head with his arms. The assault was over as suddenly as it had begun. After drawing blood and inflicting pain, the assailant turned on his heel and ran off to a waiting horse. Henry Culver was left groaning on the sidewalk.

In the years that he'd been working as a private detective in the city, Jeb Lyman had watched a great deal of fear, grief, and desperation walk through his office door, but he'd never seen them so starkly embodied in one person before. Maria Culver was in a terrible state. She was trembling with fear, ashen with grief, and gibbering with sheer desperation. Her once-handsome face was pockmarked with tragedy. Getting up quickly from behind his desk, Lyman helped her to a chair, poured a glass of water from a jug, then helped her to sip it. Gradually, his visitor started to calm down.

"Do please forgive me," she said, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. "I've been so *worried*."

"Perhaps you'd care to tell me why," he said, softly. "My name is Jeb Lyman, by the way. Whatever your problem, I'll do my utmost to help you get rid of it."

Maria took a deep breath and tried to compose herself. After giving her name, she told him what had happened to her husband the previous evening and how she'd found him, sprawled in a pool of blood, not five yards from his own doorstep. Listening patiently, Lyman deduced a great deal from her appearance, dress, and educated vowels. Clearly, she was a loyal, loving wife from a privileged world into which crime had never before intruded.

Lyman was a stocky man in his thirties with features that were inexcusably ugly. He had the face of a desperado; however, he was intensely law-abiding and had an unshakable belief in the concept of justice. The more he listened to her story, the more he wanted someone to pay for the vicious assault on Henry Culver. As soon as she'd finished, he picked on a salient point.

"You say that nothing was stolen, Mrs. Culver?"

"No," she replied, "that was the curious thing. My husband thought the man was after his billfold and his pocket watch but they were untouched."

"Robbery was clearly not the motive for the attack, then."

"I'm so frightened, Mr. Lyman. Henry might have been *killed*."

"I very much doubt that. Since he had Mr. Culver at his mercy, the assailant could easily have battered him to death, but he drew back. It sounds to me as if he was administering a warning."

"Why on earth should he do that?' she asked.

"That's what we must find out," said Lyman, pensively stroking his chin. "I take it that you've reported the crime to

the police.”

“They were summoned immediately.”

“So why have you turned to me?”

“That was my husband’s idea,” she explained. “Henry doesn’t have much faith in the police. He thinks they reserve their best efforts for more serious crimes—though nothing is more serious to me than this, Mr. Lyman. I can’t bear to see him in such a condition.”

“It must be very distressing for you.”

“He remembered your name being mentioned by a close friend of ours—Thomas Reinhold. I believe you recovered some stolen property for him.”

“I did rather more than that,” said Lyman, recalling that he had also solved a murder in the process. “I’m grateful to Mr. Reinhold for recommending me.”

“Is there any hope of catching this brute?”

“Oh, yes—there’s always hope, Mrs. Culver.”

“How will you go about it?”

“First of all, I’d like to speak to your husband. Is he in a fit state to answer questions?”

“Yes, Mr. Lyman.”

“Then let’s take a cab back to the house,” he suggested with a reassuring smile, “and I’ll begin my investigation at once.”

Propped up in bed on some pillows, Henry Culver was a sorry sight. His face was heavily bruised and two bloodshot eyes stared out from beneath the bandaging around his head. He had sustained cuts, abrasions, and a cracked rib. The fingers on his left hand had been broken by a blow from the cudgel. His lips were swollen, and some of his teeth had been dislodged. He was evidently in great pain, but had refused to go to the hospital.

Left alone with him, Lyman expressed his sympathy and asked him to recount what had happened. What he heard was substantially the version given to him by the wife but there were additional details. The banker remembered that his attacker had an Irish accent and had said, “That’ll teach you, Mr. Culver!” before he fled.

“It was no random assault, then,” noted Lyman. “He knew exactly who you were and when you were likely to return.”

Culver was alarmed. "Does that mean I was *watched*?" "It's more than likely, sir."

"Why?"

"Only you can answer that. Do you have many enemies?"

"None at all that I know of," said Culver, proudly. "Oh, I have business rivals, of course, and some of them stoop to disgraceful tactics from time to time, but they'd never be involved in anything like this. It's unthinkable."

"Could it be that you've upset someone recently?"

Culver's eyes flashed. "There's no question of that, Mr. Lyman," he snapped, "and I'll thank you not to make such suggestions. I'm a highly respected banker with years of service behind me. I didn't get to such an eminent position by upsetting people."

Lyman suspected that that was exactly what he'd done. Culver had the peremptory tone of a man who expects to be obeyed and who can't conceive that he's causing offense when he throws his weight around. The detective became less sympathetic towards him. On the other hand, Culver was retaining his services, so a degree of politeness was obligatory.

"From all that I've heard so far," said Lyman, "it sounds to me as if someone was issuing a warning. Who might that be, sir?"

"I've no idea."

"I believe that you do, Mr. Culver, and that you're deliberately holding something back."

"Damn your impertinence!"

"I'm only being practical," insisted Lyman. "Since I have so little to go on, I need every scrap of information I can gather. You, for whatever reason, are concealing something important. I can sense it. You obviously don't trust me, and I, as a consequence, have lost trust in you. Goodbye, Mr. Culver," he added, moving towards the door. "I think you need to find someone else to handle this case."

"Wait!"

It was a howl of pain. Lyman turned to look at him. Squirming in his bed, Culver wrestled with his thoughts for several minutes. When he eventually spoke, he lowered his voice to a whisper. "My wife must know nothing of this," he emphasized. "Maria is hurt enough as it is. I want her spared any more suffering."

"I understand, sir."

"There *is* something you should know. The reason I didn't tell you about it before is that I'm rather ashamed. It shows me in a foolish light."

"Go on," invited Lyman.

The banker sighed. "I received a letter," he admitted.

"A threatening letter, I daresay."

"It didn't seem so at the time, Mr. Lyman. That's why I didn't take it seriously. It simply informed me that I should be very careful from now on. That's all. I thought it was some silly joke designed to give me a scare, so I decided to ignore it—how stupid of me!"

"Did you keep the letter?"

"No, I tore it up and threw it away."

"That was unfortunate."

"I thought no more of it until this arrived today." Reaching under the pillow, he extracted an envelope and handed it over. "Like the other one, it's unsigned."

Lyman took out the letter and read it aloud. "*Does that change your mind, Mr. Culver?*" He looked up at the banker. "It couldn't be more explicit than that, sir. Was this written by the same hand as the first letter?"

"Yes, Mr. Lyman—I'm certain of it."

"Then I'll hang on to it, if I may."

"Please do. I'd hate my wife to find it." Culver shook his head. "I've never had trouble of this kind before. I know that the city is a dangerous place, but I keep well clear of bad neighborhoods. I've always felt perfectly safe walking down my own street at night. That's why I was completely off guard." He heaved another sigh. "I'm beginning to think that Hazelhurst may be right."

"Hazelhurst?"

"He's an acquaintance of mine—William Hazelhurst. When I met him recently, he told me that he employed a bodyguard to drive him home after dark and to keep an eye on the house."

"Where does this gentleman live?"

"Four blocks away from here, Mr. Lyman."

"I would've thought this was a relatively safe neighborhood."

"That's what I believed—until last night."

"I think I'd like to speak to Mr. Hazelhurst," Lyman decided.

"Then you'll have to go to his office on Fifth Avenue. He's a lawyer who deals with criminal cases all the time so he's well aware of what really goes on in this city."

"Did he mention that he'd had letters like yours?"

"No, Mr. Lyman. He simply said that he was taking wise precautions. I wish I'd done the same."

"Perhaps you'd be kind enough to give me his address," said Lyman, taking out a pencil and pad. "I'll call on Mr. Hazelhurst this very morning. Meanwhile, get as much rest as you can, sir, and tell your wife not to worry. I'm sure that this crime can be solved."

When Lyman arrived at the office, the lawyer was busy with a client, so the detective was forced to wait. It gave him the opportunity to talk to the secretary in the outer office and gather a lot of information about the firm of Hazelhurst and Orme. The premises were well appointed and there was an air of prosperity about the whole enterprise. Lyman watched

a number of clients come and go. He was eventually shown into a large office whose walls were lined with bookshelves filled with massive legal tomes. Behind the leather-topped oak desk sat William Hazelhurst. He rose to exchange a handshake with Lyman, then resumed his seat. The detective was waved to a chair opposite him.

Hazelhurst was a tall, thin, angular man in his forties with dark brown hair and muttonchop whiskers. Impeccably dressed, he peered over eyeglasses perched on the end of his nose. Lyman explained the purpose of his visit and the lawyer was appalled.

“Attacked outside his own home?” he said. “That’s dreadful.”

“I understand that you live nearby, Mr. Hazelhurst, and have thought it necessary to engage a bodyguard on occasion.”

“Only when I’m returning home late at night—one can never be too careful.”

“How long has this been going on, sir?”

“For a few months now,” replied Hazelhurst. “Early in January, I had the feeling that I was being followed and that my house was being kept under observation. I never actually saw anyone, mark you, but I was nevertheless unsettled.

Whenever she ventured out, my wife had the same sensation.”

“Did you get in touch with the police?”

“Yes—they agreed to increase patrols in the neighbourhood but saw nothing untoward. Our sense of unease continued. Then one of the servants *did* see someone—a brawny individual, watching the house one evening. When he realized he’d been spotted, he vanished into the shadows. That settled it,” said Hazelhurst. “I went in search of a bodyguard.”

“Where did you find one?” asked Lyman.

“There was an advertisement in the *New York Times* for a company that offers a discreet but efficient service. I took them on a month’s trial and was extremely satisfied. They’ve given me peace of mind, Mr. Lyman. My wife and I are no longer afraid to venture out after dark. We feel secure.”

“According to Mr. Culver, your bodyguard also keeps an eye on your home at night. Does that involve a full-time presence?”

“No—he or a colleague goes past at regular intervals.”

"That kind of protection must be rather expensive," said Lyman.

"I'd pay anything to ensure our safety. Yes," he went on, holding up a hand, "I know what you're thinking. You believe that the firm providing the bodyguard might have deliberately frightened me in order to get my business—that was *my* first thought as well. I'm a lawyer, remember. I check and double-check everything. I had one of my clerks look very closely at this firm and it turned out to be entirely trustworthy. It's run by a man of proven integrity. I can't speak more highly of him."

"In that case, perhaps I should recommend him to Mr. Culver."

"That's for you to decide. I'm not here to advertise the firm. All I know is that they've helped my wife and me to sleep more peacefully at night. Nobody can put a price on that."

"Do you have the address of this firm, Mr. Hazelhurst?"

"Yes," said the lawyer, opening a drawer to search inside it. "I have a business card somewhere. Ah—here we are," he went on, taking out a card and offering it. "The office is not in the most salubrious part of the city, but don't be put off by appearances."

"I never am," said Lyman, getting up to take the card from

him. "Thank you, Mr. Hazelhurst. You've been very helpful."

"Please give my warmest regards to Culver."

"I'll make a point of doing so, sir."

"How badly was he injured?"

"I think his pride was hurt as much as his body. It just never crossed his mind that such a thing could happen to him. However, he seems to be a resilient man. I fancy that he'll be back on his feet again before too long."

Matthew Steen was a muscular young man in his twenties with a shock of red hair and a tufted beard. His fondness for whiskey, allied to a short temper, had got him into many tavern brawls, and his broken nose was a vivid memento of one of them. Steen did a variety of jobs, but his main source of income was Jeb Lyman. While he knew the man's weaknesses, the detective also appreciated his many strengths. Steen was alert, tenacious, and fearless. More to the point, he was very reliable.

Lyman found him at his lodging, chopping wood in the garden. Having built up a rhythm, Steen was splitting the timber with power and accuracy. When he saw his friend, he broke off.

"You've got work for me, Mr. Lyman?" he asked, hopefully.

"Yes, Matt," said the other with a friendly smile. "It's rather more subtle than swinging an axe. I need you to apply for a job."

"But I'm already employed by you."

Taking out the business card given to him by Hazelhurst, the detective explained what he wanted. Steen liked what he heard. It was the sort of assignment that appealed to him. He did, however, foresee a potential problem.

"What if they offer me a job?" he said, worriedly. "I can hardly turn it down."

"They won't do that," Lyman promised. "Even if they considered taking you on, they'd want to make inquiries about you first and your criminal record would deter them."

"I'm not a *real* criminal, Mr. Lyman."

"I know, Matt, but the fact remains that you've seen the inside of the Tombs a number of times—mostly, I grant you, for being drunk and disorderly, but there was that sentence you served for wrecking all the furniture in a tavern."

“That was a mistake,” claimed Steen. “They arrested the wrong man. All I did was to break a few chairs over people’s heads.”

“Be that as it may,” said Lyman, “a firm like this one will think twice about employing someone with your history. If—that is—they’re as thorough and honest as I’m led to believe. That’s your first task. Sniff out the place. See if it really is a legitimate business. Even though it’s not the prettiest part of your anatomy, you have a nose for villainy. Use it.”

“What else must I do?”

“Get a sample of Barnett Lovell’s handwriting. According to that card, he runs the firm. If my guess is right, some of the people on his payroll can barely write their names. Their assets are more physical.”

“I’ll do what I can, Mr. Lyman.”

“Come to my office in two hours. I should be back by then.”

“Where are you going?”

“To the offices of the *New York Times*,” said Lyman. “I need to look at an advertisement.”

Matt Steen was punctual. He arrived on time at Lyman’s

office and wore a broad grin. Sensing that his friend had good news to report, the detective poured them both a shot of whiskey. Steen threw his down in one grateful gulp.

"I didn't need my famous nose," he said. "My eyes saw what kind of a business it was right away. As I walked towards the office, I saw someone leaving that I recognized."

"Who was it?"

"One of the guards from the Tombs—a vicious thug who liked to beat up prisoners for fun. I was always on the fourth tier where those of us charged with lesser offenses were kept. O'Gara made our lives a misery, I can tell you."

"O'Gara?" echoed Lyman. "He was *Irish*?"

"As Irish as they come," replied Steen, "but so was Mr. Lovell, though his accent was much slighter. I think he must have kissed the Blarney stone, because he had the gift of the gab, but O'Gara gave him away. If he's employing someone like that, then it's to do Lovell's dirty work. It's all that cruel Irish bastard is fit for."

"Did you get a specimen of Lovell's handwriting?"

"I did indeed. When I asked for a job, he turned me down,

saying that he already had enough men on his books. So I told him I was desperate for work of any kind and that I'd be grateful if he could suggest anywhere else I could try." Steen fished a piece of paper from his inside pocket. "He gave me an address of a warehouse on the Lower East Side. He said they might be able to use a pair of strong arms there." He passed the paper to Lyman. "This is what he wrote."

"Well done, Matt," said the detective, taking out the note that had been sent to Culver that morning. "I can now put a theory of mine to the test." Placing the two pieces of paper side by side, he beckoned Steen closer. "What do you think?"

"It looks like the same hand, Mr. Lyman."

"It *is* the same hand—I swear it!"

"What does that prove?"

"It proves that Barnett Lovell is just as big a liar as a lawyer called William Hazelhurst. That's exactly what I expected."

"Did you?"

"Yes, Matt, they're in this together. It's the reason I sent *you* to Lovell's office. I had a feeling that Hazelhurst would send someone on ahead of me to warn his partner that I was

coming. Lovell would've been on guard. He'd be less suspicious of you."

"What was that business about an advertisement?"

"I had a very productive visit to the newspaper offices. I not only found the advertisement for Lovell's firm in a back copy of the *Times*, I discovered the name of the person who's placed it there once a month since Christmas."

"Oh—and who was that, Mr. Lyman?"

"William Hazelhurst—clear proof they're in this together."

"I thought you said that this man was a lawyer."

"He's obviously found richer pickings on the other side of the law," said Lyman, thinking it through. "My guess is that he chooses the targets very carefully. They're wealthy men like Mr. Culver who are first given a warning, then a beating. Since they know that Hazelhurst hires a bodyguard, they're likely to turn to him for advice, and what does he do?"

"He recommends Lovell's firm."

"And the victims pay up without realizing that their money is going to the very people responsible for the attack on them. As for keeping an eye on their properties at night, Lovell

doesn't bother to do that. He withdraws the threat by standing one of his men—O'Gara, probably—down. It's easy money. I wonder how many frightened men are paying up."

"Are you going to report all of this to the police, Mr. Lyman?"

"No, Matt, we don't have enough evidence yet. Hazelhurst is a slippery customer and so is Lovell, by the sound of him. We need to catch them red-handed."

"How do we do that?"

"I think I know a way," said Lyman, thoughtfully. "We'll bide our time. We'll wait until they play right into our hands."

Steen beamed. "We'll do just that," he said, obediently, "but, while we're waiting, is there any chance I could have another shot of that whiskey?"

Henry Culver was not a man to hide his injuries. As soon as he felt well enough to get up again, he returned to work and braved both the physical discomfort and the horrified stares of his employees at the bank. In less than a fortnight after the attack, he was sufficiently recovered to accept an invitation to dine with some of the bank's directors. His wife, Maria, pleaded with him not to go, but Culver was not dissuaded by her tears. He insisted on joining the others at a leading

restaurant in the city.

"But the brute who attacked you might still be out there," said Maria with concern. "I'd hoped that Mr. Lyman would have caught him by now but he has no notion of who the man can be."

"Don't lose faith in Mr. Lyman, dear," cautioned her husband. "I have the greatest confidence in the fellow."

"Come home early," she begged, "and travel with someone else."

He gave her a farewell kiss. "Goodbye, Maria. There's no cause for alarm. I intend to return safe and sound."

It was an enjoyable meal. The food was delicious, the wine flowed freely, and Culver joined his companions in a cigar as they traded anecdotes about the financial world. When he left the convivial atmosphere of the restaurant, he was in a buoyant mood. He did not even see the horseman who was watching him from nearby and who waited until Culver had climbed into his cab before he kicked his mount into a canter.

Arriving in the street minutes before the cab, the man had time to tether his horse and take up his position. He pulled

his hat down low and tightened his grasp on the cudgel. He heard the approaching cab well before it came into sight as the horse's hooves echoed down the long, empty thoroughfare. The vehicle pulled up outside the Culver residence and the passenger got out, tottering slightly. He paid the driver and the cab pulled slowly away. It was the moment to strike. The man rushed out of the shadows with his weapon held high.

But the assault was anticipated. Swinging round to face his attacker, the intended victim threw off his top hat and raised his cane to defend himself. Even in the half-dark, O'Gara could see that the man was not Henry Culver.

"Who the devil are ye?" he demanded, closing in.

"I'm an old friend of yours, Mr. O'Gara," said Matthew Steen, slashing him across the face with the cane, then kicking him hard in the crotch. "Remember me?"

Doubling up in pain, O'Gara cursed aloud then found the strength to swing his cudgel with murderous force. Steen ducked quickly beneath it and, dropping his cane, used both fists to deliver a relay of punches to the head and body. Dazed and bloodied, O'Gara staggered backwards. He was grabbed firmly from behind by Jeb Lyman, who'd been posing as the cabman and had stopped his vehicle a short

distance away so that he could run back. In no time at all, the detective snapped a pair of handcuffs onto the Irishman's wrists, pinning his arms behind his back.

"I know ye," growled O'Gara, glaring at Steen.

"There's something else you'll know," retorted Steen with grim satisfaction. "You're going to know what it's like on the *other* side of the bars at the Tombs—because that's where you and your friends will end up."

By the time Culver returned, much later, in another cab, it was all over. Liam O'Gara was in police custody and warrants had been issued for the arrest of William Hazelhurst and Barnett Lovell. The banker lapsed into a rare moment of generosity, praising Lyman for his expertise and paying him twice the agreed fee. Because it was Steen who tackled the man responsible for Culver's beating, he was given a sizeable reward. A protection ring had been smashed, and the streets of the neighborhood were safe once more.

"I can't thank you enough, Mr. Lyman," said Culver, pumping his hand. "I'd recommend you to anybody."

"Thank you, sir," said the detective. "Matt and I are always ready to take on any assignment. Just remember that prevention is better than the cure."

The banker frowned. "I don't follow."

"You should've come to me when you received that first warning letter. Then we could've taken steps to ensure that you were never given that beating. It's always much more satisfying to nip a crime in the bud. That way," said Lyman, pointedly, "the only person who gets hurt is the villain."

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POWDER GOES HUNTING

by Michael Z. Lewin

"This satisfying, intelligent private eye novel unfolds with expert timing," Publishers Weekly said of Michael Z. Lewin's first novel in the Albert Samson series, *Ask the Right Question*, which first saw print forty years ago. Now it's back in print in paperback, available at backinprint.com and online bookshops. Another popular Lewin character, Indianapolis cop Lieutenant Leroy Powder, takes the lead in this new story, which compels our attention in the quiet way we've come to expect Powder tales to do.

Lieutenant Leroy Powder slowed his car as the house numbers got close to 1228. Although off-duty and dressed in civilian clothes, in truth he considered himself to be at least as *on* duty as when he was running roll call, no matter what his paymasters might say. He was hunting criminals. Tracking them. Getting evidence. Working out how to catch them.

It wasn't something he did much these days. Mostly he, and the officers who worked under him, just responded to evening

events on Indianapolis's North Area swing shift. Sure, sometimes there were things to be deduced or discovered, steps to be taken, conclusions to be drawn. But most of the time it was less heady. Securing crime scenes, finding witnesses, reassuring disturbed members of the public.

Such things were important. Of course they were. And there were also better and worse ways to do them. Here, however, Powder was being positive in his policing. He was being proactive. It was like being a detective again, but without reopening *that* whole can of worms.

The neighborhood Powder was cruising was not luxurious, but its eighties ranch houses had well-established yards. Maybe the houses were closer together than new-builds of the type these days, but the residents were also closer to the center of town than they would be in houses built now. The development's modest but comfortable properties were an easy commute to North Area. And at the same time, they were near to good roads that led into the countryside. They were a good fit for the kind of criminal Powder was stalking.

And, indeed, two of his criminals lived here. One at 1228 and the other only a few houses away and just around a corner.

Powder had five criminals on his list. Well, technically they were suspects, but nobody with half a brain could think of

them as anything but self-advantaging, selfish liars and defrauders of the public purse. Criminals.

When Powder spotted 1228, he pulled up across the road. He took an envelope and a clipboard from his passenger seat. He put on a Colts cap and a pair of sunglasses. Then he got out and went to the door and rang the bell.

It was answered by a woman in a bright red-and-white gingham pinafore. How many wives—even those without their own jobs—wore that sort of thing these days? It was sort of nice to see: rather reassuring and traditional. Powder hadn't often talked about personal things with Barry Haller, but even so he had the impression that Haller was a traditionalist where women were concerned. That they should be homemakers and child-raisers, cake-bakers and churchgoers, present-buyers and clothes-finders. PTA members and neighborhood morals-vigilantes? Lordy, it bored Powder just to think about it. He wondered if it bored Mrs. Haller too. Maybe she took regular drags on the cooking sherry.

Still, she opened the door to the stranger halfway, rather than peeping through a crack. That meant she was confident in her own house. And maybe trained in martial as well as marital arts? Or was it that she held a pistol behind the door in the hand Powder couldn't see?

"Hi, ma'am," he said. "I have a letter for Barry Haller that he needs to sign for." Powder held up the clipboard. The envelope was resting on it.

The woman tilted her head. She frowned, but just for a moment. "I'll sign for it," she said. "I'm Mrs. Haller."

"Oh, I do wish you could, ma'am. Unfortunately it needs to be signed for by Mr. Haller himself."

"Well, he's not here right now."

"Is he expected back soon?" Powder looked at his watch.

"I'm not real sure."

"I could wait. I mean, out there, o' course." Powder gestured to his car. "Or I could come back later on."

"It may be a long time."

Powder's faced wrinkled in sympathy. "He hasn't split the sheet with you or nuthin' like that, has he, ma'am?"

"Oh no. Good heavens. He's just out, with some friends."

"This time of day? Well, nice for some."

“Confidentially,” Mrs. Haller said, “I’m not really supposed to say where he’s gone.”

“Ah,” Powder said with a smile. “It’s a *secret*. Out gettin’ you a fancy anniversary present? Or is it your birthday?”

“No, no.”

Her statement was meant to be a finish to the conversation but Powder just stood and waited.

In a way, it was sad that doing nothing more than maintaining eye contact could intimidate the woman. But there it was. When she saw that Powder wasn’t going to leave, she shrugged and said, “Between you and me, it’s the first day of deer season.”

“Ah.”

“He managed a day off from work to go to Hancock County with some of his buddies.”

“I got it now, ma’am,” Powder said, truthful in more ways than one, because he’d been recording the conversation on a small recorder taped to the underside of his clipboard. “Well, tell you what. Why don’t I just go back to base and find out if you can sign for the letter yourself after all. I’ll explain the

situation to my boss. I expect she'll understand."

The boss Powder was referring to wasn't really his "boss" but she did understand.

Although Carol Lee Fleetwood worked in the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department's headquarters downtown, she was now a civilian. A paralyzing bullet near her spine ended her short but distinguished field career, even in this age of ramps and access. Still, in Holland they hire blind police officers because they're better at telling recorded voices apart, and as soon as Fleetwood had regained consciousness she declared her determination to continue police work. She might not be blind, but she was smart. There had to be a place for smart in IMPD, as it was then. IMPD now. Somewhere.

"Somewhere" eventually turned out to be in Human Resources, formerly known as Personnel. And once she found her slot there she rose to become, effectively, the top dog—some said bitch—in IMPD HR. Politically sensitive—and vulnerable—officers of high rank might establish the department's general personnel policies but it was Fleetwood who made the policies work—if they could work. She wasn't quite able to make silk purses out of any old policy-sow's ear, but she had a track record for making purses of cotton or even satin from the basest policy

materials. Nowadays it seemed that HR could hardly do without her.

"Roy Powder," she said when he walked into her office without knocking. She gave him a smile that crossed the years. "Well, well, well."

"Long time no wheel your chair," Powder said.

"You never wheeled *me*." "It did sometimes feel like it was the other way round, I admit."

They had worked together for a while in the then Missing Persons Department. They had also shared some personal time. But that was long ago and in another emotional country.

"How are you adjusting to work in the provinces?" she asked.

Powder's assignment as a roll call lieutenant was, in career terms, a demotion. He was no longer a detective and, more important to the many who couldn't stand him, he no longer worked downtown at Indianapolis's law-enforcement hub. But like Fleetwood, Powder had an intense commitment to effective policing. Even the most political members of IMPD would be hard put to assign him somewhere he didn't think he could improve. "North is good," he said. "I like getting the chance to help the kids become better policemen."

“And policewomen.”

A flicker of a smile indicated that Powder's failure to include both genders had been intentional, intended to provoke just the response from her that it had gotten.

Fleetwood sighed, perhaps reminded of Powder's downside. “So what brings you here that you couldn't have sent in on a postcard?”

“It's all e-mail these days. When was the last time you got a *postcard*?” “I was trying to talk in language that wasn't too up-to-date for you, Roy.”

“Ah, I was being matronized. But I'm into the *new* technologies now, Chair Girl. I admit, I hesitated at first, but then I decided if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. And now I love all the new machines. We can do so many things easily that were hard or impossible in olden times.” From a pocket he brought out the recorder that had been under his clipboard. He placed it on her desk.

When she refused to ask what it was and what it was for, Powder looked around the small office. Then looked around it again.

“Lost some marbles?” she asked.

"I just figured you'd have another wheelchair somewhere. For visitors to use, so we could all speak on the same level. No?"

"I don't need to tower over you to fire your ass," Fleetwood said.

Powder allowed himself a grin as he took one of the conventional chairs that was available for visitors.

"So are you well, Roy? I mean physically. I can't believe they've invented a cure for what ails your mind." Fleetwood leaned back and the wheelchair she sat in tilted with her.

"Me? Oh yeah, sure. And you? Walkin' tall?"

"As ever."

"As a matter of fact, you *are* looking good."

"Despite the added years?"

"I don't pay attention to *years*. You just look . . . settled. Yourself."

"I like what I do."

"And you haven't ballooned up like a lot of you cripples do."

She laughed, but only because she knew him well. “And you wonder why your career has dipped rather than risen? Or maybe you don’t.”

“I figured if I dropped in to see you, you’d make me the next chief.”

They both knew she didn’t *make* anyone into anything, although her recommendations for hiring and firing were almost never ignored.

“If you’re ambitious, why not run for sheriff?”

“I’m better as an appointee than as a candidate. Think about it. As chief I could make so many more men—and women—into better cops.” He waited. “Don’t you think?”

A tiny shake of the head indicated that she wanted to move on. “So what *can* I do for you, cowboy?”

“It’s what I can do for you,” Powder said.

“I’ve heard *that* from you before. Thanks but no thanks.”

“Listen to this.” He withdrew a small remote-control unit from a jacket pocket. He pushed a button. The digital recorder on Fleetwood’s desk came to life.

Together they listened as Mrs. Barry Haller said, "Between you and me, it's the first day of deer season."

"Ah," Powder was heard to respond.

"He managed a day off from work to go to Hancock County with some of his buddies."

"I got it now, ma'am."

Powder stopped the playback. "Want to hear it again?"

"What is it, Roy?"

"Officer Barry Haller's wife telling me that Officer Barry Haller is out hunting deer today."

"So?"

"He called in sick with flu."

She waited.

He said, "Haller's flu is a special strain, Deer Flu. I was thinking maybe you'd want to consider working on a vaccine."

"This Haller is one of yours at North?"

“Yes.”

“And you want me to do what?”

“String him up. Not because he’s such a bad guy, but because he’s way not the only one. We get an outbreak of flu—or whatever they decide to call it—every year when deer season starts. There’s a department-wide blip. It happens at other times, too. Squirrel, turkey, rabbit, even crow season. There are disproportionate claims of illnesses when each hunting season starts. Deer hunting with firearms is the biggest blip, though you can see the starts of the early and late deer-with-archery seasons, too, if you look for them.” He nodded with his lips tight and took an envelope out of another pocket. “It’s all laid out here. The effects are all statistically significant. It’s costing the department serious money in overtime to replace the missing men—and women—or it results in less effective police cover when we decide not to replace those who are missing.”

Fleetwood felt the thickness of the envelope Powder had given her. “What’s with the recording?”

“Evidence. There are four other guys out today on my roll call, one of them around the corner from Haller. But this was the only confession I managed to get.”

“Hardly a confession.”

“Testimony, then.”

“It wouldn’t ever stand up in court, Roy. It’s just a woman saying something. If it’s true, it’s self-incrimination as an accessory without being cautioned. And if it isn’t true, it isn’t true.”

“I’d get you pictures of the guys coming home with twelve-point bucks on their roofs if I could. I tried last year, but either they didn’t bag any or they left the bodies somewhere else.”

“Lot of them go straight to professional skimmers.”

“If you say so. I’ve never much seen the attraction of shooting Bambi.”

“My dad was a hunter.”

“And you were too, right?”

“Some.”

“What do you do now? Sit out in the yard with food on your hand and get the wild creatures to come to you? Then strangle them?”

"I leave strangulation for the workplace, Roy. So how long have you been working on this?" She held up the envelope.

"How long have I been working in the North?"

"Jesus." Powder had been a roll call lieutenant for years now, first at Northside and then, after reorganization, at North.

"Roll call lieutenants have to keep an eye on manning levels. And womanning levels."

"And Peyton Manning's levels?" But she shook her head slowly. "It isn't evidence."

"I'm not taking it to court. I've brought it to *you*."

Two nights later, Powder responded to what was apparently a routine burglary run. He was driving north on College just past midnight when the dispatcher called that a break-in at a convenience store had been reported by a neighbor. The store was out east on 56th. Powder got there within five minutes. Another police cruiser was just coming to a stop ahead of him. Sanford Billings got out as Powder pulled up behind. Billings unclipped the flap over his gun and waited.

In a moment, Powder was beside him. "See anything?" he asked.

“Nothing from the front,” Billings said. “All dark.”

“Not very convenient for a convenience store to be closed.” Powder looked at the building. The store seemed to have been developed on the site of a former gas station, not least because it was set at forty-five degree angles to both the roads that made up the intersection. The length of the building and some residual structural signs suggested there had once been two repair bays. There was no sign now of where the pumps had been and the forecourt was no longer covered. It was just a parking lot. No civilian cars were parked on it. But even as a convenience store, it was old-fashioned, the kind of place that the 7-Elevens had long driven out of business in most parts of the city—and world?

“I’ll go around back,” Powder said.

“I’ll check the front,” Billings said. “And I expect we’ll have one or two of the other guys here before long.”

It had been a quiet night. Almost any call that wasn’t a domestic drew several patrol cars, officers looking for a bit of action. As Powder headed around the side of the store he unclipped the flap over his own gun but drew his flashlight.

After pausing at the back corner, he discovered another small parking lot, also empty. The edge of the lot was abutted

by a grassy slope that led up to a few trees and the backs of some houses. If it was a neighbor who had called, chances were the neighbor lived up there.

Carefully he studied the fringes of the lot until he satisfied himself that there were no people lurking in shadows. You could never know for sure, but . . . He began to walk along the back of the building.

His flashlight revealed trash cans and a few decomposing cardboard boxes of uncertain contents. Halfway along he found a back door. It had been forced open. A glance inside revealed only darkness. On his radio he told everyone on his frequency where he was and that he would wait for backup before he entered the building.

With the light off, he studied the wall beyond the open door. There seemed to be nowhere to hide, so if anyone was still on the scene, he was inside.

Or she, Powder thought. He smiled, for Carol Lee.

In the darkness, he tried to hear any sounds that might be coming from inside the store, but all he could hear were ambient street sounds from outside. Then there were some doors slamming and faint voices. These belonged to arriving patrol officers. Someone would be coming round the

mountain soon, no doubt.

And, indeed, Powder heard footsteps behind him moments later. As he turned he expected to see Billings approaching. Instead it was Barry Haller.

Powder stared at Haller for an uncomfortably long moment. But it was too dark to see if Haller had anything on his mind besides his job. Funny, though, that Haller should be here. His assigned patrol area was miles to the west.

Oh well.

Powder beckoned Haller to lean in close. "I haven't heard anything from inside the building and there's no getaway car waiting back here. Probably whoever did it is long gone. Even so."

Haller nodded. Both men drew their weapons and Haller also took out his flashlight.

Powder turned his light on, took a breath, and headed into the dark void. "Police," he called. "Stay where you are." He dodged to one side and crouched. With gun and light he scanned the room.

Haller took the other side, his flashlight too searching for danger.

They found none.

By the doorjamb Haller discovered a row of three switches. He flipped them all.

The room flooded with light, showing it to be a large storeroom, with a desk, a computer, and a file cabinet against the wall opposite where they'd just come in.

There was no one in the room besides the two policemen.

"Clear," Haller called.

Each man took a door that led off the room on the end away from the desk.

"Clear," Powder called, finding a toilet.

"Clear."

Then together they approached the main passage into the public's area of the store. They entered quickly and cautiously, and rapidly they searched up and down the aisles of goods. There was no one in the store.

Powder moved in the direction of the main entrance, intending either to open it for the officers standing outside or

indicate through the glass that there was no one untoward on the premises.

“Hang on a sec, Lieutenant,” Haller said.

Powder turned. “What?”

The younger, taller man approached and leaned forward. Quietly he said, “It’s good to have backup you can trust, isn’t it?”

After a moment, Powder said, “What’s that supposed to mean, Haller?”

“Leave my wife alone.”

“What?”

Haller held Powder’s eyes for another moment. Then he stepped around and unbolted the entrance door. “Nobody home,” he said to the three officers outside.

“We have to stop meeting like this, Roy,” Carol Lee Fleetwood said in her office the next day.

Powder smiled and sat down.

“No, I mean it, Roy. I can’t have you coming here all the time.

What is it now? A statistical analysis of how many officers call in sick every Super Bowl Sunday? The World Series? The Pride Parade?"

Powder's smile vanished. "I want to make you a better non-cop," he said.

Fleetwood sighed. She looked at her watch. "Two minutes."

"Oh for crying out loud."

"One fifty-five. Fifty-four."

"Barry Haller threatened me last night."

"He what?"

"He clearly threatened that one day he wouldn't back me up when I needed him to."

"Did you record it?"

"No. And I'll take care of the threat. But the point I'm making is that he *knew* I'd been checking up on him. He said, 'Leave my wife alone.'"

"His wife?" Fleetwood gave Powder a look that asked whether there was more between him and Haller's wife than

had previously been advertised.

“Don’t be stupid. I’m saying that Haller *knew* his wife told me—me and not an anonymous letter deliverer—that he was off hunting deer. I’d never met the woman before, and it’s not like I was wearing my uniform.”

Fleetwood considered this. “Funny glasses? A fake beard?”

“Sunglasses and a Colts cap.”

“Maybe she described you well.”

“Because I’m so distinctive? You and I both know that without my uniform I’m just an average-looking guy in late middle-age. Nobody would look at me twice.”

Fleetwood considered this.

“I wasn’t there long and she never really *saw* me—I didn’t give her any reason to.”

“You can’t be sure.”

“So I’ve come in to ask whether someone in this office told Haller that I reported him for taking unauthorized time off.”

Fleetwood rocked forward. “You’re accusing *me*?” “Not *you*.

But I have legitimate cause to ask who else might have seen the report I left with you.”

“Not who might have seen it. Who might have tipped off Barry Haller.”

“Yes.”

“No one.”

“No one saw it?”

“No one in this office tipped off Barry Haller.”

“Just like that? No thinking about it? No reviewing where the report went after I left? Who had access? What time people left the office?”

“Just like that.”

Powder studied her face. Then he got up. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“If you say no way, then it’s no way. So there has to be some other explanation.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. I can help cops do their jobs better. Maybe I’m overreaching to try to help you non-cops.”

“Okay,” Fleetwood said. “And I *will* give your report some thought.”

“I’ll be back.”

She frowned, trying not to repeat that she’d just told him not to keep coming to the office.

“I’m preparing a report on absenteeism on Valentine’s Day. Why can’t they just say it with flowers?”

Powder was making a joke. Fleetwood didn’t laugh. He left.

Powder did some gardening after he got home from seeing Fleetwood. He no longer had a plot of land on the edge of the city but there was soil and some sunshine on two sides of his little house. It was enough to make do with, as were so many other things in his life.

Anyway, Powder’s gardening wasn’t about the fruit or the flowers. He gardened when he had something to think about. Today that something was Barry Haller.

Part of the mystery was how Haller knew it was Powder

who'd visited his house and found out about his hunting trip. If he hadn't learned this from someone in Human Resources, then from who?

And *then* Haller had threatened him. To imply that Powder might find himself without backup in a dangerous situation was about the worst threat one policeman can make to another without brandishing a weapon. What was *that* about?

Both the threat and its premeditated nature were puzzling. Claiming to be sick in order to take a day off to murder deer was bad—irresponsible—but it was misdemeanor territory rather than felony land. Even Powder wouldn't lock Haller up or fire him. Some community service, maybe. Emptying bedpans at a hospital for a month or two? Helping out at a deer sanctuary?

The target of Powder's report was a general attitude rather than any particular offender. Which Haller couldn't know, fair enough, so maybe he thought he'd been singled out. But even so, to threaten a superior and senior officer? Overkill, surely.

Many weeds died but Powder still did not find the missing bit of the Haller puzzle.

Neither did he find it at the beginning of the shift that evening.

Discreetly, Powder gave Haller special attention as he went through the assignments, alerts, messages from on high, and the rest of the appetizers, entrées, and desserts on the day's roll call menu. He also watched Lyndrick, Wear, and Dubinski, three of the other four "criminals" on his list. Connick, the fifth, was absent. He was in the hospital with a hiatal hernia. *Supposedly*. It was Larry Wear who was Haller's neighbor. They hadn't struck Powder as special friends in the past and today they didn't sit at the same table. Did they hunt together? Powder didn't know. When he'd rung the bell at Wear's house, no one had answered.

And Lyndrick and Dubinski? No answer at their doors, either. Who knew? Powder was stuck for ideas about how to proceed.

And he continued to be stuck until a call came through from a woman in a condo off College just north of Broad Ripple. She was worried about a prowler in the hallways that connected her unit to others.

The officer taking the call was one of the ND72 patrols, Valerie Muntz. Powder arrived shortly after to back her up as well as to observe how she handled the call. On the job little more than a year, Muntz appeared to be a high-fives female officer—one who seemed more comfortable with rough-and-tumble calls requiring chases and searches than with

mundane matters requiring sensitive dealing with the public. Since most calls about prowlers didn't lead to shootouts Powder decided to see how patient Muntz would be this time.

The member of the public turned out to be perfect for the purpose. Mrs. Jacqueline Fredrick was in her early seventies and spoke slowly and carefully.

"So what exactly did you see, Mrs. Fredrick?" Muntz said.

"It's not what I saw. It's what I heard," the woman said. "It was a man and he was mumbling to himself."

"Mumbling?"

"Making low and threatening sounds that weren't really words. I know everyone in this building, by name. I recognize their voices. There's just nobody who sounds like that. And it wasn't a visitor, because there are no cars parked in the visitors area outside. I can see it clearly from my living room." Mrs. Fredrick nodded when she finally finished this statement, to punctuate and affirm it.

Powder stood well behind Muntz and said nothing.

"So you didn't see anything," Muntz said.

Mrs. Fredrick looked exasperated. "It's what I *heard*. I just told you."

"What about condo security?" Muntz asked.

"What about them?"

"Did you report your suspicions?"

"Tell *them*? All they do is play cards all night."

"So you didn't report what you heard to them?"

"Of course I did. The man I spoke to said I shouldn't worry, they'd take care of it. Well, I can see their office from my kitchen window. Neither one of them left their building."

"And how long ago was that?"

"Must be forty-five minutes now."

"So you heard the prowler . . . ?"

"A few minutes before that. Look, Officer, are you going to search the building for him or not?"

"Well, I certainly didn't see anybody as I came into the building." Muntz turned to Powder. "Did you, sir?" She raised

her eyebrows, knowing that Mrs. Fredrick couldn't see her do it.

"No one, Officer Muntz. Nor did I pass any doors that looked like they'd been forced open."

"Me neither," Muntz said, latching on to something she hadn't thought of for herself. She turned back to Mrs. Fredrick. "So I'm not sure what I can do, ma'am. Would you like me to get someone to call you for an appointment to look over your apartment's security?"

"I would *not*, young woman," Mrs. Fredrick said. "What I want you to do is search this building and find the intruder."

"That doesn't seem appropriate to me, since you didn't see anyone. But we're happy to look around as we leave."

"I think your attitude is highly cavalier and irresponsible."

"Excuse me?"

Powder could hear the frown on Muntz's face, though he couldn't see it.

"Very off-hand. How will you feel if you leave now and in an hour's time you hear that somebody in this building has been robbed or murdered?"

Muntz paused before she answered this. "I would be upset, of course, ma'am. But you hear a strange sound that could have been somebody's radio or maybe even from the TV next door. How much time am I meant to spend looking in shadows for *that*? Your own security people aren't worried. If you don't think they do the job, then complain to your condo committee. We're here to help, but we're not exactly going to call in the National Guard because you heard something."

It was then that Powder got an idea about Barry Haller.

"Well!" Mrs. Fredrick said. "I've never been spoken to like that in my life."

"No offense meant, ma'am," Muntz said, "but if that's the worst you've ever heard, you've had a pretty lucky time of it."

Powder intervened. "Mrs. Fredrick, I'm sorry that Officer Muntz has been impolite." He stepped forward.

"I wondered whether you were just along for the ride," Mrs. Fredrick said to Powder. "Listening to all that . . . Outrageous. I pay your salaries."

"Now just a—" Muntz began.

Powder put a hand on her shoulder. To Mrs. Fredrick he

said, "Officer Muntz will be disciplined and I will see to it that she attends classes to help her learn how to be more polite in the future."

"Well," Mrs. Fredrick said, but her tone made it clear she liked this change of direction.

"Meanwhile, Officer Muntz and I will search through the public areas of the building. Before we leave, we'll stop back and tell you what we've found, if anything."

"Thank you," Mrs. Fredrick said. "Officer . . . ?"

"Lieutenant Leroy Powder, ma'am." He gave her a card.

"Don't be shy about calling again if you see, or hear, anything suspicious. We'll knock on your door in a few minutes."

When she and Powder were out of earshot down the hall, Muntz said, "I can't believe you bending over like that for a time-waster like that old woman."

"That time-wasting old woman pays for your salary, Muntz. And your pension. And for your sick days. And for your personal days, once you've been working long enough to get some."

"Yeah, but . . ." Muntz wasn't happy. "What if somebody's out

there getting shot just because we're in here chasing shadows?"

"You've made a fundamental mistake, Valerie."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"You walked into this building and you came to this woman's apartment. Right?"

"So?"

"And because you didn't see anybody on the way, you act like you've searched the place."

"I have."

"Work it through. Nobody left the building after she heard what she heard. She watched from the window."

"Right."

"And when you came in, nobody was coming down as you were going up."

"Exactly."

"So tell me what happened if Mrs. Fredrick was right and she

heard somebody in the hall. Where'd he go?"

"I don't know." Muntz felt her exasperation growing. She'd heard about the spots Powder put people in sometimes. She'd just never been on the receiving end before.

"Think about it," Powder said insistently.

"Okay . . . then he went into one of the apartments. He lives here."

"Reasonable. But Mrs. Fredrick says he doesn't live here."

"Then he vanished in a puff of smoke. I don't know."

"That's true. You don't." He waited while Muntz stared at him. Finally he said, "What if the prowler went up instead of down?"

"There are only two floors, Lieutenant."

"There's a roof."

"Why would a prowler go on the roof?"

"Why does a prowler prowl and mutter to himself? I don't know. But I think we should go ask him, don't you?"

And, as if to make the point as clearly as if it were a training exercise, Powder and Muntz did indeed find a man passed out at the top of a stairwell that led to the roof. From the smell of him he was almost certainly drunk. The empty bourbon bottle by his side was another clue.

How and why did he get into the building in the first place? Why did he go up as high as he could? There was no way to tell and they couldn't ask him because his sleep was deep. But hey.

"You," Powder said to Muntz, "will stay with this member of the public until the ambulance gets here."

"Oh for—"

"When he is safely loaded aboard, you will go to Mrs. Fredrick. You'll explain what happened, and apologize sincerely and profoundly to her. I will come back tomorrow to ask her how you presented yourself. What she says will have an effect on your future."

By this point, Muntz had gone quiet.

"After your apology, you will follow the ambulance to the hospital and you will stay with Citizen Doe until he wakes up. You will ask him what he was doing in the building and how

he got in. These are important security issues. You will not leave his side until you learn the answers to these questions. And you will make no stops on the way to the hospital. Do I make myself clear?"

Powder left home early the next afternoon and he did, indeed, stop to talk with Mrs. Fredrick.

"That girl policeman came by this morning," Mrs. Fredrick said. "She looked terrible."

"Remorse at having been rude to you, I expect," Powder said.

"Well, I don't know about *that*. But she did apologize. I offered her a cup of coffee, or a place to lie down for a nap, but she went on her way."

"She's on duty again tonight."

"I hope she manages to sleep during the day. The poor thing looked exhausted."

"Did she tell you about the prowler?"

"She said he thought he was somewhere else."

"A different building?"

“Chicago. He has mental problems, it seems. There was a number in his pocket that the hospital called. He walked out of a facility in Illinois. They have no idea how he got here, and your young officer couldn’t find out how he got into the building. A bit worrying, but it doesn’t sound like it’s going to happen again soon.

Powder nodded slowly as he absorbed this information. Muntz seemed to have followed instructions. It would be interesting to see how she behaved at roll call.

“Would *you* like a cup of coffee, Lieutenant?” Mrs. Fredrick asked. “And I have some fresh chocolate chip cookies . . .”

But Powder declined the offers apologetically. He had a second stop to make. This one was at the house of Barry Haller.

Although he was in his uniform he carried his baseball cap and his clipboard, just in case it was Mrs. Haller who opened the door. They would help remind her that he’d been there before. His sunglasses were missing, but only because he’d left them on his car seat and squashed them.

As things turned out, Mrs. Haller did answer the door, but this time she was the one wearing the sunglasses. Big ones. They completely covered her eyes and the area around them.

“Oh,” Powder said. The big shades caught him by surprise.

“*You*.” Her voice indicated surprise, too.

“You recognize me then?”

“I’m not a total dummy, no matter what . . .” She left that sentence hanging and spoke a different one. “I didn’t expect *you* to be coming back here, *Lieutenant*.” “No? Why not?”

She frowned. Stuff was going on inside her head but all she said was, “I just didn’t.”

Today’s blue-and-white gingham pinafore was as fresh and bright as the red-and-white one was last time, but the woman herself seemed neither bright nor fresh. The disjointed way she stood in the half-opened doorway struck Powder as saying she didn’t care how she presented herself this time. Or was that too much to read into posture?

Either way, he wanted to take a look at her without the sunglasses. It was not a sunny day. “Would you take those sunglasses off for me, please, Mrs. Haller?” His best commanding tone of voice.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve got conjunctivitis.”

Did she? Or was something more anatomical swelling up in the darkness? Oh well, he’d tried, and if you don’t ask, you don’t get. “Who called you a dummy, ma’am?”

But this time Mrs. Haller wasn’t prepared to allow herself to be shifted away from her own agenda. “What do you *want*, Lieutenant? Got another letter to deliver? Because if you do and it has to be signed for, you can stick it where the sun don’t shine.”

Underneath the sunglasses? If he’d had an envelope he’d have given it a try. However, he said, “I’m sorry that I deceived you the last time I came to the door.”

“Me, too.”

“So it’ll be cards on the table today. I’m here because I want to speak with Barry, man-to-man and away from the prying eyes and ears we have around the station.”

“He’s not home.”

“Well, I could wait for a while.”

“He’ll be at work tonight. I don’t know if he’s coming back before then or whether he’s going to get a bite while he’s out.”

“What’s he doing?”

“I don’t know where he is or what he’s up to.”

“You don’t mind not knowing?”

“I’m used to it.”

“Not hunting?”

“I don’t *know*, all right?”

“Look, Mrs. Haller, when I came here the last time it was because I suspected that Barry was one of our officers who regularly takes unauthorized time off to go hunting. I no longer suspect that and I want to apologize to him.”

Powder couldn’t see if Mrs. Haller blinked a couple of times at this, but there was certainly a gap before she responded. “Well, he still isn’t here. You want me to give him the message, or what?”

“You see, quite a few of the guys and gals who work for IMPD, they like to hunt. And they like to get out there on the

first day of the season, while the deer are still plentiful and haven't been scared away from the easiest places to find them. But although Barry took the first day of the season off, I looked at his individual attendance record. And it doesn't show a pattern of taking off seasonal starts. Not like some other officers whose records I've been looking at."

Mrs. Haller waved her hand with what Powder took to be mild exasperation or confusion. "What's all that supposed to mean?"

"Does Barry go hunting a lot?"

She considered for a moment. Deciding if she was allowed to say? Then, "Yeah."

"Does he have a dog?"

"*What?*"

"A dog. A hunting dog."

"No. We don't have any pets."

"But does he hunt between the middle of March and the middle of April?"

"How am I supposed to know *that?*" "Think back, around

Easter time this year?”

Powder watched as she remembered Easter. Eventually she said, “Well, yeah. I guess so. There’s always something in season.”

“That’s true. But between mid March and mid April the only hunting that’s in season is if you’re running a dog after opossums and raccoons.”

“After . . . ?” She shook her head. “I don’t know anything about possums and raccoons.”

“Does he ever bring the game he bags back home?” When she frowned, Powder said, “You know. To eat or to skin?”

“No. Because I don’t want dead bodies lying around *my* house. Which he knows, and he respects my wishes.”

“Or maybe pelts from animals he’s killed that were cleaned elsewhere?”

“No.”

“How many rifles does Barry have?”

“One.”

“Just one rifle for killing deer, squirrels, rabbits, crows, turkeys, everything?”

“How many does it take? I don’t know. Maybe he has a dozen more down in the basement, next to his power tools and the ham radio. I don’t go poking around in his stuff.” After a moment she added, “And he doesn’t poke around in my stuff.”

“May I come in and take a look—at Barry’s stuff?”

She sighed and then shook her head. “No, I don’t want you in my house.”

Powder waited.

“Look, Lieutenant, I want to be helpful here, but I don’t see the point of all these questions.”

“I’ll explain in a minute. First, may I ask if you know that all the deer that are killed in Indiana by legitimate hunters must be checked at an official deer check station, within forty-eight hours of the kill?”

“I’m getting a headache now,” she said. “What are you *talking* about?”

“I’ve contacted all the state’s check stations and Barry has

never checked in a deer kill. Not this year or last year or the year before. Or a turkey kill, because turkeys have stations, too."

"Why are you *telling* me all these things?" Mrs. Haller's agitation was growing.

"Maybe he's just a bad shot." Powder turned his eyes away from her. He found a small dark hole just over the top of the doorframe. He spoke to the hole. "Or maybe, Mrs. Haller, maybe Barry has not gone hunting at all. Not for deer, not for turkeys, not for foxes, not for coyotes, not for rabbits, quails, pheasants, or green frogs. Not for anything that has a season here in Indiana."

"What?"

"Did you get all that, Barry?" Powder said, addressing the camera directly. "Because if you missed anything, we can go through it again tonight at the station. Maybe we should do a few runs together. See what we can manage by way of giving each other backup."

"It just shows how statistics don't prove anything by themselves," Powder said in Carol Lee Fleetwood's office the next afternoon.

“Does it?” Carol Lee said wearily.

“What statistics prove all depends on what you ask them. You see, I was looking for Deer Flu and I found it. And Haller showed all the signs. The symptoms, if you will. But if I’d gone through his *individual* attendance history before I went off half-cocked because he called in sick this time, I’d have seen it. It’s all there, plain as day.”

Fleetwood knew he wanted her to ask what “it” was. She sat and waited.

Finally Powder said, “Haller is off duty on a Monday every three weeks. Every single Monday on a three-week cycle for more than two and a half years. Now a lot of those Mondays fitted in with his time off on rotation, but he’s also traded days with people—more than anybody else on his shifts. This time, the Monday just happened to coincide with the start of deer season and maybe that’s why he couldn’t get anybody to trade with him. So in a backwards kind of way it *was* Deer Flu that got him. He didn’t have any personal days left, or any vacation, so he called in sick.”

“But not so he could go hunting?”

“The hunting was a story for his wife—who I think he beats up, by the way. What can we do about that?”

"Has she made a complaint?"

"No." So Powder knew the answer to his original question. He left it and went on with his discoveries. "At first I thought these Mondays might be for something personal, like an affair. But mistresses are more flexible than that, aren't they? And maybe more demanding. Has to be a Monday, every three weeks? Doesn't sound like a mistress to me. What do you think?"

Fleetwood stared silently.

"Ah, not willing to go public on your knowledge of mistress behavior. Got it. Smart. Never admit anything. Well, for Haller, it wasn't that. But the other thing that bothered me, besides the Mondays, was how he knew it was *me* who came to the door at his house the other day. Well, you know that bothered me. I came here to ask about it."

"To make accusations," Fleetwood said.

"And I'm sorry for that. Yeah, sorry, sorry. My apologies to you and your dedicated staff, because it was nothing to do with you guys. The thing is, it also wasn't because Mrs. Haller recognized me. I finally worked out that the next most likely thing was that Barry put in a camera at his front door, and that's what it turned out to be."

“What for? Security?”

“Just the right question,” Powder said. “Have you ever thought that maybe you’re wasted stuck here in this office?”

Fleetwood tilted her head and waited.

“Ah, ah, it’s because you’re wasted that you are in this office. Well, getting back to Haller, it’s not just the expense of putting a surveillance camera in. Or maybe more than one—maybe he has them all around the property—because they’re not as expensive as they used to be, what with webcams and all that. The bigger question was your question. *Why* would he put them in? Who might come to the door that he wanted a record of? It wasn’t just in case I happened to show up trying to catch him out, now was it?”

Fleetwood again sat silently. But she was interested. He could tell she was.

“So what could he be up to that required him to go away for the day every third Monday and that also required him to have unusually tight security in a house in an ordinary residential development?”

This time Powder out-waited her. Fleetwood said, “I know you want to tell me, Roy, so why don’t you just get on with it.”

"Turns out Officer Haller needed those Mondays to make deliveries of hydroponically grown skank to his connection every three weeks, north of Lafayette. Good stuff for top dollar. They raided the warehouse where it grew on the edge of Muncie this morning—it'll be all over the news tonight. Lots of exaggerated numbers about street values, no doubt, but it was a big operation. Long flat building about fifty feet on a side, with heat and lights. The growers got around the tell-tale sign of unusually large electricity consumption by making most of it with their own generators. Of course, Barry didn't do the farming himself—that was his brother. But Barry did the delivery runs because it impressed—and scared—the buyers to have a cop in the loop." Powder paused for a moment. "Don't you find it surprising that the powers that be don't celebrate how nowadays in this country we've liberated ourselves almost completely from dependence on foreign-grown weed?"

"I'll try to remember to send around a memo," Fleetwood said, although her face showed that she was impressed at what Powder's number crunch had turned into.

"Well, we don't really have to worry about Mrs. Haller getting beaten up anymore, because Barry will be spending all his time away from home now. There are a lot of lessons to be learned here, you know."

“Oh yeah?”

“I really try to help my officers to become better cops, you know that. But it’s a lesson to me, because there’s no point trying to make a ‘better’ cop out of someone who isn’t a ‘good’ man in the first place. Or woman.”

“True enough,” Fleetwood said.

Powder got up. “And I hope you’ve learned your lesson and will become a better non-cop from it.” He didn’t wait for her to respond this time. “Because Haller shows that you really must not rush to take punitive action against all those other guys—and gals—who *seem* to have been afflicted with Deer Flu. Give me a chance to check out their individual absentee records first. See you around, Carol Lee,” he said, and he was gone.

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GOLF ETIQUETTE

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Jim Davis is a veterinarian who lives near the Lake of the Ozarks in central Missouri. He enjoys hunting and fishing as well as riding his motorcycle. When he is not punching cows, the rest of his free time, he tells us, goes to reading and writing fiction, fixing up old cars, and the occasional round of golf. He has hinted that he has several new story ideas for Bradley Carter, the private eye who debuts here in his first published story. We hope so, because it's a fine debut.

Parker Goodman was the chicken king of northwest Arkansas. I grew up hearing his name on almost a daily basis, but most anyone from the Bentonville-Rogers area could say the same thing. Parker had taken a hillbilly butcher shop with seven employees and parlayed that bet into a nationwide poultry company. Housewives had come to believe that nothing but a Goodman's bird would do. My father had something to do with that as well. He took a job

with Goodman Poultry when Parker—Goodman had to borrow a nickel to have two to rub together. My father put his money on Parker when they took that fledgling company public, and the stock that made up most of my daddy's pay those first few years put five kids through college. All of this made me even more nervous when the Great Man said that he wanted to hire me to find his wife.

"By God! You are the spitting image of old Clayton," said Parker. He handed me a glass of single malt with one ice cube. I would rather have had a beer. "How is your daddy? I haven't seen him in a coon's age."

"He's doing well," I said. "Spends most of his time fishing. Losing Mom kind of took the wind out of his sails."

"Yes, sir, I can imagine. We all hated to see her suffer so. Damned cancer." He motioned to a leather couch near the bar, and we sat down. Parker had always been larger than life to me, but right then he just looked like an old man. He had played linebacker for the Razorbacks back in the sixties; it looked like all that beef had finally gone to seed. "She was a fine woman, your mother. Yes, sir." Parker was saying the words, but he seemed to be gathering himself, perhaps to tell me why I was here.

I had done some work for Goodman Poultry Company since I

became a private investigator, but I had always dealt with the company lawyers. The work had been pretty straightforward: exposing employees faking injuries and digging up background material to defend lawsuits, that sort of thing. The corporate offices were nice, but Goodman's home was opulent. Parker had built his current home only a few years ago, and he'd certainly spared no expense. The elaborate woodwork was highlighted with hand-painted gold pinstripes; original paintings were individually lighted against dark burlwood panels. A slight smell of furniture polish hung in the air. I'll admit to having been somewhat intimidated by it all until I saw a black-and-white photo on the marble mantel over the fireplace. There was Parker Goodman and my daddy, both in bib overalls, standing next to a scald pot. The ground was covered with feathers, looking like a snowstorm where they had been plucking chickens hanging from a rail fence. I looked around at the house and thought, *Old Jed's a millionaire.*

"How's Marcus?" I asked, trying to make small talk. Parker's son and I played baseball together growing up. We were friends then, although Marcus was always rather aloof, maybe stuck-up.

"Oh, Marcus, yeah, Marcus is just fine. He pretty much runs the company now."

I knew that wasn't true. Parker ~~was~~ the company, and he would hang on to the reins of Goodman Poultry until they peeled them out of his cold dead fingers.

"Listen, uh, Bradley," said Parker, "I've got a little trouble. I think you can help me." The older man stood up and went to the bar to refill his glass. I had yet to touch mine. "You see," he said, still facing the bar, "my Lorna, she's wandered off." He turned toward me and hefted the bottle. I shook my head.

I didn't know how to respond. Parker's wife Lorna was one of the pillars of society around Bentonville. She had been involved in or hosted every worthwhile charity event in the past twenty years. Was Parker telling me that she had run off?

"Lorna's not herself lately," he said. "She's got some issues—health issues." He plopped back down on the couch, spilling some of his scotch on his white shirt. I saw other stains now on the jacket, and his nose looked like a relief map of the Ozark Mountains. He had always been one of the best-dressed men in this neck of the woods and always wore a suit to the office. But right now, he looked like an alcoholic version of Colonel Sanders.

"I'm not sure I'm following here," I said.

"I don't know," he said, sounding frustrated. "Maybe she got the Alzheimer's or somethin'."

"Have you filed a missing persons re—"

"No, no, no!" He cut me off, stood up, and began to pace. "She left without telling me a damn thing. I don't know what the hell she was thinking." He sat down on the coffee table right in front of me. "I want you to find her." He pointed a thick finger at my chest. "I want her back here." The finger pointed down at the floor.

"I really don't do missing persons," I said. I had no intention of getting in the middle of a marital dispute.

"Goddammit! You don't have to do anything but tell me where she is. I'll do the rest." His face was inches from mine, his neck bulged at the buttoned white collar, and his rancid breath made him that much more common. My respect for the man was plummeting. Parker Goodman was desperate.

"I suppose I could ask around," I said, sinking back into the couch, trying to avoid his breath.

He leaned closer and grabbed my shoulder, made me look at him. "I know you can find her, boy. They say you're good." All right, he stroked my ego, plus, the intimidation factor was

high. "You know this town, and you can get into the club. Talk to those women. Somebody knows where she is."

"Mr. Goodman, I really don't—"

"Here's some money," he said, pulling a wad of bills out of his pocket and shoving them at me. "There'll be five thousand more tomorrow. I'll send Billy around with it. You find her. You hear?"

I was always mesmerized by huge wads of cash. In a moment of weakness I reached out and took the money. "I'll see what I can do," I said.

"You find her."

"Yes, sir."

"But be discreet. You will be discreet."

"Discreet. Yes, sir."

Parker filled me in on Lorna's usual routine. We toured the master suite of the big house, the spa and exercise room, and finally her desk and computer.

"She spends a couple hours every morning in here," he said, "then she goes to the clubhouse and works out there." He

pointed a thumb back at the exercise room. "I bought all this damn equipment, and she goes to the club to do her exercisin'."

"May I?" I asked, sitting down at her computer.

"Sure. Sure. You look at whatever you want." He moved toward the door and picked up his jacket. "I'll be at the office. The housekeeper's here today, so leave it unlocked."

I tried to ask a few more questions, but Parker seemed to want to move on. He had delegated the job to me, now I was expected to produce.

Lorna didn't use a password, but her computer yielded little of interest. The e-mails were all regarding volunteer organizations and church stuff. The housekeeper spoke very little English and didn't appear to be close to Mrs. Goodman. I decided to go to the club and try my luck.

The Goodmans resided in a gated community alongside current and retired executives from Walmart, Tyson Foods, and J.B. Hunt. The clubhouse was lavishly appointed and was the hub of social life among the nouveaux riches who made up its membership. I was welcome here because my father was a member. Not that Daddy was rich, far from it. His membership was paid courtesy of Goodman Poultry

Company. The golf course gleamed in the sun with zoysia fairways, manicured greens, and freshly raked bunkers; it certainly rivaled anything on the pro tour. I had played the course occasionally with my dad, so I knew my way around.

In the clubhouse I ingratiated myself with some society ladies who had been friends of my mother. They invited me to have lunch with them, and I was making quite a hit with the old gals. I had received offers of introduction to two single daughters before I finally steered the conversation around to Lorna Goodman. I thought I was clever enough about it. I told them that I wanted to speak with Mrs. Goodman about a memorial my sister was in charge of. It concerned the Goodmans' youngest son Roger. Judy, my little sister, was president of the local chapter of MADD. Roger Goodman had died in a tragic car accident involving alcohol just after he finished high school. Roger was a little different, as I remember, but he was universally adored by his classmates, and was a gifted artist and sculptor. He was also a first-class drug addict. The memorial project was to be a replica of one of Roger's sculptures that they wanted to erect in the city park.

Although two of the women chatted on enthusiastically about the memorial, I noticed the other two exchanging glances just before they excused themselves and left the table. The remaining ladies offered to go to the Goodman home to

introduce me, but I declined the offer, knowing full well that Lorna Goodman was not at home.

I was convinced that I had struck out as far as gaining any clues to Lorna's whereabouts, but as I waited for the valet to bring my car around, Alice Henning, one of the ladies from lunch who had excused herself, walked up behind me and laced an arm in mine.

"I know what you do for a living, Bradley," she said, raising an eyebrow. I had to smile at the eyebrow. Many of the ladies who frequented this establishment couldn't raise an eyebrow to save their soul since the advent of Botox. "It isn't like you to suddenly want to socialize with a gaggle of old women."

"And . . ." I said.

"We need to have a chat," she said. The valet had just stepped out of my car. She turned to him and said, "You can bring it round in half an hour, Chet. This young gentleman is going to buy me a drink."

She steered me around the outside of the main hall through a series of patios until we reached an outdoor bar by the pool. She motioned to the girl behind the bar, held up two fingers, and guided me to a table.

"I might as well ask," she said, "did that old fool Parker Goodman put you up to this?"

"Put me up to what, Mrs. Henning?"

"Pshaw!" she said, with a limp-wristed wave of her hand. "Now you don't want to be that way with me."

The barmaid arrived with two martinis; it seemed to be a day when other people were choosing my drinks for me. I glanced up at the girl, trying to escape Alice's intense gaze.

"Hello, Bradley," she said.

"Hello, Miss Bowen." She looked right fetching in her little bartender outfit. That red vest accentuated her generous attributes. "I haven't seen you in a while."

"Well, you should come around more often," she said. "You could fix that."

"Now, sugar," said Alice, "y'all can take this up later. Right now this handsome young fellow has business with me." She leaned forward and put her hand on mine in a possessive gesture.

Karen gave me a wink and walked back to her post at the bar. The way she walked, she was expecting me to be

watching. I felt obliged to meet that expectation.

"That's enough of that," said Alice, seeing where I was looking. "Now, answer my question, Bradley."

"I'm sorry," I said. "What were we talking about?"

"You're good," she said. "But dodging the question pretty well answers it. Parker sent you."

"I don't understand," I tried. But it wasn't going to work. Alice was too savvy for that, so I decided on a different approach. "I was under the impression that Mrs. Goodman was having some health issues . . ."

"Are you kidding me? He told you that?"

"Well?"

"That's a damn lie!" Alice's reaction at least told me that I was getting somewhere.

"Do you know where Lorna Goodman is?" I asked.

"I do not," she said, taking a noisy slurp from her drink.

"Parker's just worried about that damn book." She toyed with her olive for a moment and then said, "Let me give you some advice, honey." She gave me a look that meant business.

"You need to leave this alone." I thought she put more emphasis on the "You" than was necessary.

"Wait a minute," I said. "What's this book you spoke of?"

"Oh," she said with a glance at her watch, "I'm going to miss my tee time." She downed her martini, kissed me on the cheek, and left me sitting there with my untouched drink. I hate martinis.

"Did your date dump you?" It was Karen, cranking up an umbrella over the adjoining table.

"Looks like it," I said. I was still watching Alice. She had joined Dee Wallace near the first tee, and they were in earnest conversation. Dee was the other one from lunch. I turned my attention to Karen Bowen. She was reaching up to untangle the umbrella from a potted palm. "What about you?" I asked.

She turned around to look at me. "What?"

"I'm feeling kind of lonely all of a sudden. And used. And dumped."

"So what do you want from me? Another martini?"

"I don't like martinis," I said. "I like sweeter things." I moved in

closer.

"Poor thing," she said. "You haven't called me in months." It sounded like an accusation or maybe a rebuke.

"I'm a busy guy," I said as I slipped an arm around her waist. "I just don't get out much anymore. No time to socialize."

"Why, Bradley Carter, are you going to try to kiss me right here?"

"I was thinking about it. Yes."

"You are incorrigible."

"I am that."

She looked around the pool deck. It was empty except for one old guy reading a newspaper and sipping a bottle of Evian. "Meet me at the outside entrance to the lockers in five minutes," she said.

It wasn't my first time in the ladies' locker room at the club. Karen took me in the back way along a row of polished mahogany lockers with brass nameplates. She stuffed me into one of the changing rooms. The door didn't go all the way to the floor, but at least it had a lock. Our little liaison lasted until Karen smoothed out her blouse and buttoned up

the red waistcoat that was her uniform.

"I better get back out there," she said. She was looking in the mirror and combing out her hair.

"No need to rush off," I said, running my hands around her waist. I kissed her ear and put my cheek against hers. Her skin was still hot, in spite of the air conditioning.

She looked at me in the mirror and giggled as she ducked out of my grip. "You are something else, Bradley. Now let me get back to work." She cracked the door open and looked around. "The coast is clear," she said, stepping out into the locker room. "You better call me this weekend."

"I'll do my best," I said.

She rolled her eyes at me and clicked the door shut.

After Karen left by the front entrance, I peeked over the top of the door and slipped out of the changing room. I walked back along the row of lockers until I came to one with Lorna Goodman's name on it. The security at the club was topnotch, and it would have been an insult to the members to put locks on the lockers. I quickly scanned the contents, but found nothing but a sleeve of "Komen for the Cure" pink golf balls and a worn-out pair of FootJoy golf shoes. I closed the

locker and was about to leave when I noticed Alice Henning's name on one of the adjoining lockers. I opened it. Alice had left her purse in the locker, so I rifled through it. Ever since I was a little boy, I've been amazed by all the pockets, nooks, and crannies in a woman's purse, and it was no different with Alice's. The purse smelled like Chanel No. 5, reminding me of my mother's. For a moment I thought I was looking for a pack of Doublemint. There were credit cards and a checkbook, cosmetic case, and a ton of credit-card receipts. But then I found it: Lorna's name on a piece of club stationery with an address in Naples, Florida.

Back at my apartment I wrestled with whether or not I should tell Parker Goodman what I knew. He was, after all, my client, and I had no stake in this if not for him. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the wad of bills that he had given me. There were lots of fifties and hundreds, and they smelled good when I fanned them with my thumb. I thought about what Alice had said, and I knew damn well that Parker was lying to me about Lorna. I wondered what was in the book that she had mentioned. I hate it when a client lies to me, but I can't say that it is unusual. I decided to let it go for a while. I could call Parker when I knew for sure where Lorna was. I pulled a cold Budweiser from the refrigerator and sat down at my computer. I booked a flight to Florida for the following day.

Early the next morning Parker's man showed up with five

grand in a shoebox. I guess Parker didn't want anyone at the office to know what was going on. I hadn't counted the wad he'd given me the day before until now. All together, I had over six grand just in Ben Franklins. I put the shoebox in my gun safe.

I started to sweat as soon as I got off the plane in Fort Myers. Florida was a luxurious respite from the cold winters up north, but, as any of the locals would tell you, summer was another matter altogether. I rented a Ford Mustang with a GPS unit and found a hotel room for the night. Traveling always wears me out, and I watched the Cardinals play the Cubs in St. Louis on ESPN. I don't know how it turned out; the Cardinals were up three to two halfway through the sixth inning when I fell asleep.

The next morning I headed south on I-75 toward Naples. It didn't take long to find the address. It was a cozy little townhouse on a canal, a short walk from the beach. I walked up the steps and knocked on the door.

"They're not home."

I turned to see a woman on the porch next-door watering some flowers in hanging baskets. She was younger than me and sported a deep tan under her cotton sundress and bleached-blond hair.

"Do you know where I might find them?" I asked.

She concentrated on her job until water ran out of the soaked basket, then she put down the hose and came down the steps. She crossed the small yard and stared up at me. "Are you related?" she asked. "You sound like you're from Arkansas."

"Just a family friend," I replied, "a friend of Lorna's."

"Well, she's here, but I think she went to play golf," she said.

Lorna loved the game, so it made perfect sense. "Do you know what course she goes to?" I asked.

"The one right on the beach, at the hotel." She shielded her eyes with her hand and squinted at me in the bright sunlight. "And you're not a relative?"

"No, ma'am, just a friend." I started towards my car before she got too nosy. "Thanks." I gave her a wave. She waved back slowly, looking perplexed.

I drove back north to the Naples Beach Hotel and Golf Club. The place was crawling with activity. Summer vacation had sent families scurrying to Florida to see the Mouse and go to the beach. It appeared that many had infiltrated the Gulf side

of the state as well. I headed straight for the golf course thinking that I might talk my way into a look at the schedule for the tee times.

A cute blonde in a too-small pink polo shirt smiled at me from behind the counter at the pro shop. She was brown and fit and looked like she might be on the college golf team somewhere; her name tag said "Doris." "What can I do for you?" she said.

"I was going to ask if a friend was on the course," I said. "But if you're the instructor, I think I need a golf lesson."

She laughed. "You don't look like you need lessons—in golf or anything else."

"Depends on the level of play, I guess."

"Who's the friend? You supposed to meet someone for a tee time?"

"No," I said. "She's not expecting me. Her name is Lorna Goodman."

She scrolled down the computer and then spun the monitor and leaned over to show me. "There's only one Lorna, but her last name is Wagner." She pointed to the name. "She's not a hotel guest."

I wondered if Lorna would use her real name. The chances were pretty good that she wouldn't, and I thought I remembered seeing that name, Wagner, somewhere else. "You know, that might be her," I said. "I think she went back to her maiden name."

"She should be coming up on nine soon."

"You mind if I wait and see if it's her?"

"Not at all. Can I get you a drink or something to eat?" She was eager to please.

"Sure."

I ate a hot dog and was finishing off a soda when I saw a tall blond woman get out of her cart on the ninth fairway and walk to her ball. From that distance she looked a lot younger than the fifty-eight years I knew her to be. She had an athletic build and looked as healthy and vibrant as any of the ladies on the LPGA tour. I watched as a divot flew up, and I heard the click of her iron. The ball lofted high and thudded onto the green, backing up a few feet before stopping within a yard of the pin.

"Is that her?" Doris had come up behind where I sat at a table

in the shade.

"Yes, ma'am, that's the Lorna I'm looking for," I said.

"She's good," said Doris. "Low handicap. She's been turning in her cards all week." She leaned over and grinned at me. "Isn't she a little old for you?"

"And you're a little young," I said. She stuck out her bottom lip as if I had hurt her feelings.

Lorna frowned when she saw me. She chirped the tires on the cart as she locked up the brakes. I got up and walked over to her as she wrote down her score. She stopped writing and sat there in the cart looking straight ahead. When she pulled off her sunglasses, I could see a tear running down her cheek. I started to say something, but she interrupted.

"That damned old coot!" she said, pounding her gloved hand on the steering wheel.

"Mrs. Goodman, I—"

"Don't call me that!" She turned to look me.

"Ma'am, my name is—"

"I know who you are."

I had always found it difficult to react to women in situations like this, so I did the only thing I knew. I turned on the charm. "Can I buy you some lunch?" I asked.

"I think you better buy me a drink," she said. She wiped away her tears with a tissue and got out of the cart, tossing her scorecard onto the seat.

We walked over to a little cabana bar next to the beach and sat at a table under the thatched roof. The bartender came over and Lorna ordered a martini. I asked for a beer.

"Is he here?" she asked.

"Parker?" I said. "No."

"Of all people," she said to herself, shaking her head. "How did you find me?"

"I'm an investigator," I said. "It's what I do."

"How much did he pay you?" she said. "I'll double it." She looked suddenly frustrated. "I'll get the money."

I'll admit that I was a little disgusted with myself getting into a bidding war between a man and his wife. But I was painfully aware that this woman way outclassed the man who had

actually hired me.

"Are you feeling okay?" I said. "Your husband is worried about you." I felt like a fool.

She looked at me as if I had lost my mind. "Do I look sick to you?"

"Definitely not," I said. We sat there for a moment and stared at each other.

She downed the first drink and the bartender brought her another. She leaned back in her chair and looked at me. Suddenly, she sat up. "You have no idea what's going on. Do you?"

"Oh, I think I'm beginning to get the picture." I hoped that I sounded more confident than I was.

She laughed until her chin started to quiver, and I thought she was going to cry again.

"I put up with that old fool for thirty-nine years," she said. "Thirty-nine years. I was just a kid when we got married. He was nineteen years older than me. Can you believe that?" She sniffled and took another sip of the martini.

I was thinking that I should apologize for finding her, but I was

just doing what I was hired to do. Wasn't I?

"I don't think he ever did love me." She looked off at the Gulf; I don't believe she was actually seeing that gray-green expanse of water. "I was just part of the plan. All he ever loved was that damned company." She got quiet again, crossed her legs, and sipped at her drink.

I remembered seeing her back when we played baseball. She was the knockout mom that every teenage boy had a crush on. She was still beautiful. The laugh lines were a little more pronounced, but there was no evidence of adulteration with cosmetic injections or surgery.

"Hell," she said, "he doesn't want me; it's the damn book."

"What is this book that I keep hearing about?" I asked.

She smiled a little then and said, "I took his little black book—as insurance—a way to defend myself."

I just looked at her. Was she talking about infidelity? "You mean he cheated on you?"

"Oh, he did that all right, but, no, that's not what's in the book."

"So what is in the book?"

"Parker kept track of everyone who owed him favors." I guess I had a stupid look on my face. She continued, "That's what is in the book. The name of every congressman, senator, judge, and whomever else he bribed or blackmailed, and how much they cost and what they did for him. It was an ego thing with Parker. And it's all in his own handwriting. He doesn't give a damn about me. He just wants his book back."

"Can I ask you something?" I said.

"You might as well."

"Are you going to divorce your husband?"

She looked at me and gave a frustrated laugh. "Do you know how hard that would be? He's not just going to let me go."

"What choice does he have?"

"Not much as long as I've got that book." She sat there for a moment with her eyes closed. The breeze off the water ruffled her hair. She opened her eyes and said, "Did you ever play golf with Parker?"

"Well, yes. Once or twice."

"Did he beat you?"

“Well, yeah, but . . .”

“He cheats.” She looked off at the ocean again, took another sip of her drink.

“I’d say he shaved a few strokes off, yes.”

“But nobody said anything.”

I saw her point. Parker Goodman was a big man in Arkansas. He was famous for getting what he wanted. He didn’t play by the rules, but he expected everyone else to. In fact, he counted on it.

“I have never shaved strokes in my life,” she went on. “I knew about all those little bimbos he carried on with at those conventions. Do you know how humiliating that was? He had two little boys at home. ‘It’s just part of doing business,’ he’d say. How can a person be like that? And he’s ruined Marcus. He’s got him thinking and acting just like the old boar himself. And oh—my God! Roger! That precious, precious little boy.” She was tearing up again. “He was so tenderhearted; definitely not cut out of the same cloth as his daddy. He got into drugs and booze.” Her voice broke. “How do you live up to someone like that? How is it that you can’t earn your own father’s love and respect?” She was crying now. I moved over and put an arm around her. She didn’t push me away. “If God

worked that way,” she said, “there would be no hope for any of us.” I turned her around, and she put her face into my shoulder. My chest was tight as I thought about my own father. My daddy loved me. There was never any doubt in my mind that he loved me. I didn’t have to earn it. I couldn’t earn it. Lorna Goodman’s tears soaked through my shirt.

She finally pulled away and looked up at me. “What are you going to do?” she said.

“Me? I’m not going to do anything.” My voice was raspy because my throat had a big lump in it. “I stopped working for Parker Goodman about half an hour ago.” I hugged her close, so that she wouldn’t see the tears in my eyes.

“Thank you,” she said, working hard at her composure. “Oh, thank you! I can’t tell you any more right now, but everyone will be so much happier this way. You’ll see. That little book is just an insurance policy . . . to make sure he lets me go.” She looked at her watch. “I’ve got to go,” she said. “I’m sorry, but I have to meet someone.” She got up to leave.

“You okay to drive? I can take you wherever you need to go.”

“Oh, no. No. I’ll be fine.” She leaned over and hugged me again. “Thank you so much.” She started for the parking lot, and then she turned and looked back at me. “You tell Parker .

. . you tell him that, after all these years, I'm finally taking a mulligan."

A mulligan, I thought, a do-over. It is an exceptional person who doesn't take a mulligan once in a while. I walked out to my rental car and pondered whether or not to try to find a guide and go fishing. I decided that I wasn't in the mood. I wanted to end my employment with Parker Goodman as soon as possible. It seemed like a good idea to just head on back to the airport at Fort Myers and light a shuck for Arkansas. I was flying standby and figured maybe I could catch the evening flight out. It had crossed my mind to give Parker back his shoebox, but, right now, I wasn't feeling that charitable.

I got a boarding pass and had some time to kill. A Delta flight had just arrived from Atlanta, and I was watching the people coming off. A good-looking older man with a sun-block shirt and a fly-rod tube came bounding down the gangway. I didn't have to see his face to recognize that carefree walk.

"Hey, Bradley," my daddy said in his warm southern drawl. "What in the world are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," I said.

"I'm gonna catch me some bonefish," he said. "And I gotta

get my clubs off the carousel. We're gonna do a little golfing, too."

I looked around. "Who came down with you?" I asked.
"Jerome? Case?"

"No. No," he said. "I'm meeting a friend—some friends—down here." He suddenly sounded like me when I was a teenager, trying to explain where I'd been all night. It was out of character for him not to invite me to go with him, but I suddenly knew all too well why he couldn't.

"Well, you be careful," I said. "I'm on a case, so I gotta get on this plane." I could feel myself blushing.

"Maybe next time you can stay and go fishin'," he said, looking relieved.

"Yeah, for sure," I said. "Next time, for sure."

"I love you, son," he said, giving me a big bear hug.

"I love you too, Daddy." I hugged him back.

"Well, I don't want you to miss your plane," he said.

"Go on and get your clubs," I said, "before somebody else does."

He said goodbye again and headed off down the concourse. I started to get in line, but then I ducked back out. I could see his bright yellow shirt quite a ways down the concourse. "Daddy!" I yelled. Lots of heads turned, but he heard me and turned around. "Tell her I said she only gets one mulligan!" The stunned look on his face was priceless. I waved again and got on my plane.

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

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SIGNED “MUTUAL TRUST”

by Richard Macker

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REVIEWS

SIGNED “MUTUAL TRUST”

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In the spring of 2010, a new short story collection by Reider Thomassen, a.k.a. Richard Macker, entitled *Djevelpakten*, was published by the Norwegian publisher Kolofon. It included some new stories, and some published in magazines as far back as the 1970s. This month's Passport to Crime selection from Richard Macker won first prize in the Scandinavian crime short story competition sponsored by *Aftenposten*, one of the largest newspapers in Norway, in 1975. This is the first time the story has been translated and published in English.

Translated from the Norwegian by Runar Fergus

She stood on the busy street corner close to the Tellus cinema. The buttonhole of her pale blue suit held a yellow Ladies'-delight, as they had agreed upon. She was blond

and far too plump, her nose was disproportionately large, and her round face was characterized by naive expectation. *She is punctual*, he thought. *And she has expensive jewelry, elegant clothes.* He watched for a while, in seclusion, with a satisfied grin. Then he pulled himself together, cleared his throat, and stepped forward.

“Johanne, here I am.”

She jumped, then smiled to-wards him. Her teeth were too large as well.

“Kristian?”

“Yes”

They shook hands. Then he pulled her towards him and kissed her on the cheek. “You look wonderful, Johanne. Just as I had expected.”

He heard how she drew her breath, relieved and contented, noted how her heavy frame still shook with excitement.

“You . . .” she spoke softly, eyes shining with emotion, “you’re so tall, so handsome. I can’t really believe that . . . that . . .”

My God, he thought. *She resembles a deranged, engorged*

cow. Obviously, he didn't mind being told that he looked great. But somehow the praise had lost its value, he had heard it so often before, at least from naive, lovesick women.

"Oh no," he said, flicking her lightly on her large nose ". . . don't exaggerate, now. As I mentioned in one of the letters, I have always been ashamed of my receding hairline. I hope you don't think . . ."

Her calf's eyes blinked at him, blanker than ever. He knew exactly what she was about to say.

"But Kristian, you have beautiful, shiny hair. A bit thin at the edges perhaps. It suits you, makes you look intellectual."

He stroked her cheek while thinking to himself: *Intellectual, where did you learn that word, you flat-footed goose?*

He took her arm and guided her down the street. *The first act is over, he thought*, now for the second act.

"Come on, dear, I know of a nice little place where we can chat without being disturbed."

The places he chose were always in different parts of the city. He didn't want to be recognized at the same place with new women all the time. He was very meticulous with details.

Without intelligent planning he would have been out of the game a long time ago—he would have lost his livelihood.

He took aim for a small restaurant just outside the center of town and they were soon seated in a peaceful corner of the cavern-like premises. A candle fluttered on the table. He ordered a bottle of fortified wine to loosen her tongue. A dark-skinned violinist was doing the rounds playing sentimental gypsy music. Her eyes were shinier than ever, and he knew she wouldn't be able to hold back the tears.

“Oh, Kristian, imagine us sitting here together, you and I. It's wonderful. I can hardly believe it.”

She stroked his hand. He put on his slanted, slightly melancholy charmer's smile.

He had got in touch with her through the newspaper. She was the “disappointed and disillusioned with love” type, had a broken marriage behind her, and “bore a great sorrow in her heart.” Furthermore, she was from a wealthy family, “but money isn't everything.” She was looking for someone to confide in, a safe shoulder to cry on, someone to hold her hand, to walk down quiet wooded paths with, someone with whom to experience the heights of passion. In short, she was a rare find, and he put all his experience and routine into his first letter to her. But he was fairly sure of himself, as she had

concluded her letter by saying "Your looks are quite important." Now he was sitting there with the golden goose, and she cackled willingly away:

"I want to tell of my great sorrow, Kristian. I believe I can do so now, you will get to know everything about me, darling."

He did get to know everything, and then some. About her ailments as a child, her complexes during puberty, about her failed marriage with a Spaniard named Barca, about her child, whom she loved above everything on earth, but who had died at merely five weeks old. That was the great sorrow she carried, and he had to struggle to lay his expression in the requisite compassionate folds.

Her story was miserable enough, but it didn't affect him in the slightest. He had heard far too many of the same type, and the fools had only themselves to blame. He was more inclined to yawn or doze off, but he didn't let her suspect that. He gently caressed her chubby hands, stroked her cheeks, which the wine had given color. The words spilled forth from her, and she spoke of disloyal girlfriends, malicious employers, numerous bodily ailments, and strict parents who had no understanding of her. This made him prick up his ears, and he gently probed her to expand on the issue, so that it only sounded natural when he inquired:

“Where do your parents live?”

“At Silverwood, they have a lovely villa there.”

He had to concentrate to avoid smacking his lips. Silverwood was a name that spoke more than a thousand words. She had to be far more well-to-do than he had dared to hope. And she was an only child! He listened intently as she described her mother, who was “strict, hard, but basically has a good heart.”

Finally, the bottle of wine was empty, and she grew quiet, empty of words and repressed emotions. Now it was his turn.

“And now, Kristian. I want to know everything about you.”

He had several “stories of his life” in store, and he chose the one of the orphan who went to sea at an early age but who returned ashore to get an education, about the small business he had established, but which had burnt to the ground, about his marriage to Lovise, about all the lovers she took while he rebuilt his business, about how she had revealed all of his trade secrets to one of them, his greatest competitor.

Johanne gripped his hand and squeezed it tightly.

“How could she be so mean? So vile? How do people

become like that?"

She had tears in her eyes, and using an old trick, he managed to produce some of his own. They sat holding each other for a while, and he thought: *Curtain call, Baby Fool, let's proceed to the third act.*

Things went exactly as predicted.

"Will you accompany me home, Kristian? For a cup of coffee and a cake I have baked . . . for you."

Twenty minutes later, they were in her apartment. While she was in the kitchen, he looked around with practiced eyes. Everything exceeded his expectations: expensive furniture, paintings, and objects. Her parents may have been strict, but they were nevertheless very generous.

She served him coffee, and the cake she had baked, a sugary, sticky affair that revealed that she was as inept in the kitchen as she was at the writing desk. Finally, she fetched a bottle of liqueur, and when they had finished a couple of glasses, she leaned towards him, breathing heavily.

"Kiss me, Kristian. Kiss me hard."

He closed his eyes and let himself go. After the embrace, he

gasped for breath and loosened his tie. He had to undergo the ordeal once more, but to his relief, she suddenly tore herself away from him and said:

“No, Kristian. No! We cannot go any further. Not until . . . I mean, only if we were to be . . . married. I’ve been burned before and I just want everything to be right between us. Do you understand, Kristian?”

He understood perfectly, and sighed with relief. “The heights of passion” was what he had feared most. At least he didn’t have to worry about that.

He had to suffer an interminable and nauseating farewell ritual before they separated. They agreed to meet the next day to go to the cinema.

“Goodbye, Kristian,” she said at the door, with a low, tender voice. “I love you.”

“Goodbye,” he groaned, pale with exhaustion.

“Goodbye, you inane, marriage-crazed creature,” he mumbled to himself as he descended the stairs.

During the following weeks they met every day. He struggled along quiet paths in the woods, forced down the dreadful meals she served, and sat holding her hand on the sofa,

listening to her selection of sickly love songs. ("Likes all types of music, except country and western.") Finally he felt that he had gained her complete trust, and he popped the question he had been waiting with for so long.

"Johanne," he said, flicking her nose playfully, "isn't it time your parents got to meet their future son-in-law?"

She threw herself at him with full force and kissed him intensely.

"Kristian, do you really want to marry me?"

"Yes," he whispered, his guts turning. "I finally feel sure that I have met the right one. I love you, my darling little Johanne."

A few days later she announced, with a voice full of emotion, that her mother wanted to meet him.

"Father is in South America on some important business, so you will meet him later. He will be so happy, I know it. Mother is expecting us at seven tonight."

He made an extra effort with his looks for this important meeting, had his hair cut at the city's best hairdresser, donned his new, expensive suit.

Mrs. Nadja Kram—Johanne's mother—received him in the

hallway. She was slim, dark-haired, and refined, and her green eyes inspected him for a long while. However, his slanted, melancholy smile appeared to convince her of his pure intentions.

A few glances at the huge living rooms spoke of prosperity and wealth beyond his wildest imagination. They sat down to a set table, and Mrs. Kram rang a silver bell. A young, attractive maid appeared.

“Britt, will you serve the coffee now, please. And bring out the best cognac for Kristian.”

The girl disappeared, and Nadja Kram offered him a cigarette from a silver case. Then she took one herself, inserted it into an ivory holder, and smoked with lazy deliberation, while asking him the questions a mother asks on behalf of her daughter in such circumstances. He was well-prepared, and his modest, emotional answers appeared to deeply move her.

Later on, a delightful evening meal was served. He had rarely felt so comfortable, and confirmation that everything was going according to plan came when Nadja drew him aside and said:

“Dear Kristian, I can see that you are an honorable fellow. I

am so happy for Johanne. You have no idea what she has been through. But now she is over the moon. Poor little Johanne, things haven't always been easy for her. She is—well, I hope you'll forgive me for saying so—so hopelessly naive. Stupid, some might say. I believe it comes from her grandfather on her father's side. He studied for the priesthood. But she has a heart of gold, and she will always love you. I trust you feel the same way?"

"Yes," he said, his eyes fixed on a shimmering candlestick. "I love Johanne just the way she is."

Nadja Kram smiled and patted his hand.

"Do you like the candlestick, Kristian? Pick it up, feel its weight."

He did as she said.

"Is it . . . gold?"

She smiled even wider.

"Yes, gold. Old family inheritance. I would like to present it to you as a wedding present. Well, in addition to certain other things, of course."

A week later, he and Johanne once again visited Nadja

Kram. She seemed efficient and determined, and asked to speak with him privately.

"I have been in touch with my husband concerning the plans for the wedding and for your and Johanne's future. He was very happy, and sends his regards. He would like a simple ceremony, but we agreed to give you Strandheim as a wedding gift."

"Strandheim?"

"Our former property in Sandby, Johanne's beloved childhood home. We made the mistake of selling it when she married José Barca and moved abroad. But now she wants to live there with you. My husband can arrange for a job at his factory in Sandby, if you are interested. Don't worry about being overtaxed. The most important thing for us is that you take care of Johanne. She desperately wants a new child, you know."

His heart was thumping in his chest. This exceeded all his expectations. First a few months, perhaps a year of marital bliss, then a small "accident," a fall from a cliff or the cabin cruiser. Then everything would be his.

"But perhaps you would prefer to live in the city, Kristian?"

“My primary concern is to ensure Johanne’s happiness.”

She caressed his hand. Her eyes were glassy.

“Thank you, Kristian. Thank you so much.”

She returned to her normal, businesslike self.

“The valuation of Strandheim is one and a quarter million. I have spoken with our business lawyer today. It’s slightly difficult to arrange immediately, due to my husband being in Rio. I only have just over a million in my account, and the sellers want the money immediately. I’m not quite sure how to handle the situation. Excuse me for inquiring, but could you possibly manage the small remainder, one hundred and fifty thousand? Then we can complete the deal today.”

He smiled casually.

“I’ll take care of it immediately, dear Nadja.”

He was back an hour later with the money. It had cleared out his account, everything he had worked and struggled for was there. But so what? He would receive tenfold in return.

Nadja Kram retreated into her office. She smiled contentedly at him and Johanne when she returned.

“Everything’s in order, dear, it’s all sorted out. But I would like you to drive down to Sandby immediately to look over the house. The former owner would like to show you around and sort out certain formalities.”

“Oh,” said Johanne, putting her hand to her stomach, “. . . I’m so dreadfully nauseous. Do we have to go straightaway?”

“Yes dear, it’s very important. Kristian, could you go alone? I’ll let them know that you’re on your way.”

“Of course, Nadja. I’ll take care of it.”

“Fine. I’m happy you sold your car, by the way. It wouldn’t look right turning up in that ancient thing. Take mine, won’t you?”

Nothing could have suited him better. He got into the luxurious car and drove the one hundred miles to Sandby in record time. He had finally achieved what he had always wanted.

In Sandby he had no trouble finding Strandheim. Friendly souls gave him directions, they had obviously heard of the place since childhood. And it didn’t surprise him, as the huge white villa was beautifully located by the sea, surrounded by acres of costly real estate. He almost broke into a triumphant laugh. This was to be his. He had reached his goal.

A feisty and wizened old man opened when he rang the bell.

“What is it? If you’re selling something, I would recommend you to leave immediately. Business is not carried out at the door around here.”

“I’m Kristian Grossman, the new owner. Mr. Ladvik is expecting me.”

The wizened one raised his eyebrows and stood like that for some time, as if perplexed by the news.

“The new owner. I see, I understand. One moment, please.”

He disappeared, and returned awhile later, accompanied by a sturdy, severe man in his sixties. It was *Ludvig* Ladvik, the country’s most feared public prosecutor. Kristian Grossman recognized him from newspaper pictures and television interviews, and pangs of anxiety swept through his body.

“Listen here,” said Ladvik, with the voice that had caused so many defendants to give up their last hopes, “. . . what is this cock-and-bull story I’m hearing? I own this place, and I intend to do so until the day I die. Who are you, anyway? Some kind of crook? A con artist? I don’t like the look of you. Remove yourself immediately. You are disturbing me in my writing on harsher sentences for tax evasion. Get lost! Now!”

Kristian Grossman attempted some feeble protestations, but they died out before he could utter them. A terrible suspicion struck him, and he got into the car and drove back to the capital at a speed a rally driver would have envied. "I'll wring that swindling Nadja Kram's neck," he thought to himself, his knuckles white as he gripped the steering wheel.

He was soon face-to-face with Nadja Kram. But he didn't attack her, he just stood there gasping. The Nadja Kram he was staring at now wasn't dark, slim, and elegant. She was blond, somewhat overweight, and had a sharp, piercing voice:

"A different Nadja Kram? What on earth are you on about? I am Nadja Kram! I, and no one else! My husband and I returned from holiday a few hours ago. We don't have a daughter named Johanne. We have a son, and I'll let you meet him. Per, come here for a moment!"

A young, blond giant appeared. He looked agitated.

"Mother, someone has been in the house while you were gone. Some things have disappeared, remember that golden candlestick you inherited from Auntie Malla?"

The red-faced woman let out a high-pitched scream and rolled her eyes. Then she pointed to Kristian Grossman with

a trembling finger.

"It's him. It has to be him! He said he had been here when we were away. He's a thief, a crook! Do something! Call the police! Grab him!"

Kristian Grossman escaped through the garden as fast as his legs could carry him, cleared the fence in one bound, and jumped into the car. He was soaked with sweat and anger, and swore to himself as he made his way through traffic. He had been fooled, but he would have his revenge by bashing Johanne Kram's head in if it was the last thing he did.

However, there was no opportunity for revenge. He stood paralyzed on the threshold of the apartment where he had laid down so many hours of work towards his goal. The woman in the doorway wasn't Johanne, she was far younger and prettier, and she giggled as he completed his stuttering explanation.

"Come here, girls!" she cried over her shoulder to a couple of other girls of the same age. "We have a gentleman caller. He's quite good-looking, but I think he has sunstroke. He claims that someone named Johanne Kram lives here and refuses to believe that the flat belongs to me, Tina Hoff. Isn't he exciting? But then, maybe it's his way of picking up women. Nothing would surprise me about men."

Confronted with the laughing, mocking women, he lost his capacity for speech. He snarled at them like an animal, then got into the car, trembling with anger. "I have to get home," he thought in a panic, "home to calm down with a stiff drink."

He returned to his own flat, but the sight that met him there was not very inspiring with respect to calming him down. Two stocky men were going through his belongings. They didn't seem at all perturbed when he appeared.

"What on earth is this supposed to mean?" said Kristian Grossman with a feeble voice.

The elder of them, a short, stocky man in his mid forties, smiled coolly.

"Police, Grossman. Inspector Lien here. We have a search warrant."

He wafted a piece of paper under Grossman's nose.

"We've been busy while you were away, Grossman. Look at what we've found."

He held up a transparent plastic bag containing something heavy and golden. Kristian Grossman's heart sank. It was the candlestick he had handled, the small "wedding present"

promised to him by “Nadja Kram.”

“And of course you’ve never laid eyes on this before?”

“No. I mean . . . yes.”

Inspector Lien grinned.

“Aha, Mr. Grossman. You seem to be the decisive type. That makes everything so much easier. Well, well, you can decide what you want to tell managing director Gerhard Kram. He’s just as receptive to excuses as a Spanish bull is to sugar cubes.”

Kristian Grossman paled.

Lien held up another piece of paper.

“Tell me, now, have you seen this before? A copy of a receipt for a withdrawal of one hundred and fifty thousand from the Trust Bank. In an assumed name, no less. A hidden account, in other words. My, that’s quite a find for our beloved, but feared, public prosecutor Ladvik.”

The other policeman, who had been gone for a while, reappeared and spoke quietly to Lien. Lien nodded, then grinned once again at Grossman.

“Well, well, I must say. You have the nerve to drive around in the Italian ambassador’s car. Are you not aware that that could seriously harm your health? Ambassador Dampezzi is the most hot-tempered man in the country.”

Kristian Grossman swallowed. “Listen,” he said with a low voice, “I’ve been the victim of a huge scam.”

Inspector Lien laughed heartily.

“Huge scam! That’s a good one. I would rather say that it is you who is doing the scamming.”

The phone rang, and he gestured towards Grossman.

“Be my guest, pick it up. Your last act as a free man.”

Kristian Grossman picked up the phone and spoke a dejected hello. Then he pricked up his ears. There was something familiar about the jarring female voice. It was “Johanne.” But now she didn’t sound devotedly naive and prattling. Now her voice reminded him of the icy chill of the headmistress’s voice at the school he once attended—the one for difficult children.

“Kristian Grossman. You have now made the acquaintance of ‘the women’s league.’ We are an organization with thousands of members all over the country dedicated to

protecting our members from types like you. The money you have lured from seven gullible women over the past four years will now be returned to them. You will probably spend a long time behind bars. But once you get out, we will be ready for you. You won't get anywhere, Grossman. You will have to find an honest occupation, live an honest life. Good luck!"

A click sounded as the phone was hung up. Kristian Grossman stood gasping, like a fish on land.

"Well," said Inspector Lien, "are you not feeling well? Your eyes are glazed over. Was that the devil himself you were speaking to? Anyway, none of my business. We have to go. The bars await you."

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REVIEWS

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by Jon L. Breen

Though Sherlock Holmes never figured in an overtly science fictional adventure, many sf writers have contributed to the extra-canonical literature, among them Philip Jose Farmer, Isaac Asimov, Mke...



BLOG BYTES

by Bill Crider

Thriller ran on U.S. television for sixty-seven episodes back in 1961-62. Now that all the episodes have been released in a fourteen-DVD set, Peter Infantino and John Scoleri decided to blog about...

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THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen



Though Sherlock Holmes never figured in an overtly science fictional adventure, many sf writers have contributed to the extra-canonical literature, among them Philip Jose Farmer, Isaac Asimov, Mike Resnick, and Poul Anderson. Each of the first four volumes of Anderson's collected short works (NESFA, \$29 each) has a single detective story with Holmesian associations: "The Martian Crown Jewels" in *Call Me Joe* (volume 1), the title story in *The Queen of Air and Darkness* (volume 2), plus two less widely known stories. In

the current volume 3, *The Saturn Game*, is “Eve Times 4,” a comic space opera featuring several humans, a couple of colorful aliens, and a fair-play mystery some readers may solve; and the forthcoming volume 4, *Admiralty*, includes “The Adventure of the Misplaced Hound,” not quite as good a detective story but even more broadly comic and Sherlockian in its references.

Though Holmes is mentioned only in passing in Dana Martin Batory’s *Dreams of Future Past: The Science Fiction Worlds of Arthur Conan Doyle & H. G. Wells* (Wessex Press, \$13.95), over half of this collection of previously published essays concerns the work of Dr. Watson’s agent, including the strong influence of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* on his writing and a rather shocking account of the sexualimagery in the Professor Challenger story “When the World Screamed.” From the same publisher is *Sherlockian Heresies* (\$19.95), a collection of delightfully contrarian essays by the late French journalist Léo Sauvage, who will be remembered for *The Oswald Affair* (1966), one of first books critical of the Warren Commission’s report on the JFK assassination. While a book titled *Sherlock Holmes for Dummies* (Wiley, \$19.99) seems of dubious necessity, the volume by Steven Doyle and David A. Crowder provides a thorough, readable, and authoritative summary of all things Sherlockian. The principal author is co-founder of Wessex

Press. The outstanding item in our annual birthday round-up is the latest novel about eminent fans of the Baker Street sleuth. Though it follows fictionalizations as excellent as Anthony Boucher's *The Case of the Baker Street Irregulars* (1940) and Arthur H. Lewis's *Copper Beeches* (1971), this quite different novel by Jon Lellenberg may be the best of them all.

**** Jon Lellenberg: *Baker Street Irregular*, Arkham House/Mycroft & Moran, \$39.95. In an espionage saga extending from 1933 to the early years of the Cold War, New York lawyer Woody Hazelbaker helps settle the affairs of mobster Owney Madden, joins the BSI, and participates in intelligence activities before, during, and after World War II. Clearly based extensively on fact (and a whole second volume is projected to document and clarify), this extraordinary historical novel is recommended to anyone interested in the run-up to World War II in the United States and the role of code-breaking in the defeat of Germany and Japan. Excellent talk in place of physical action gives a much more authentic feel than the cinematic choreography of lesser novels. Historical characters abound, from FDR and Churchill to the founding Irregulars, many of whom (notably radio commentator Elmer Davis) had an important role in the war effort. Also appearing is prolific British thriller writer Dennis Wheatley, who would have appreciated how Lellenberg draws several plot strands together for a startling ending.

*** Ann Margaret Lewis: *Murder in the Vatican: The Church Mysteries of Sherlock Holmes*, Gasogene, \$18.95. Three of the unrecorded cases—the death of Cardinal Tosca, the Vatican cameos, and the two Coptic Patriarchs—are recounted with much Roman Catholic background. One is narrated by Pope Leo XIII himself, and two include appearances by G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown. The use of Holmes and Watson in overtly religious fiction may raise eyebrows—after all, Doyle never depicted Holmes as a convert to Spiritualism—but the stories are engagingly written. The plots have some clever elements, though short on clues.

*** Tracy Barrett: *The Case That Time Forgot*, Holt, \$15.99. In this series for ages 8 to 11, teenager Xena Holmes and her brilliant ten-year-old brother Xander, American kids transplanted to London, endeavor to solve cases that defeated their great-great-great-grandfather Sherlock. From an unpromising beginning, their third adventure, involving a stolen Egyptian amulet said to have magical powers, gathers considerable steam, with a fair-play mystery that will both enthrall and educate young mystery lovers.

*** Victoria Thompson: *Murder on Lexington Avenue*, Berkley, \$24.95. New York Detective Sergeant Frank Malloy and midwife Sarah Brandt investigate the murder of a

wealthy businessman with a deaf daughter and a strong opinion on the still-controversial topic of deaf communication methods. The police procedure, though casual by present-day standards, seems right for around 1900, and the grasp of period attitudes and realities is impressive. Clues are fairly provided, and the main villain is one of the most unusual in recent memory.

*** Cynthia Riggs: *Touch-Me-Not*, Minotaur, \$24.99. The ninth case for 92-year-old Victoria Trumbull, police deputy in a small Massachusetts town, involves stalking, electronic voyeurism, quilting, and a case of manslaughter that a local electrician goes through sometimes darkly comic machinations to cover up. The novel combines inverted detection and whodunit, with involving characters and a well-realized Martha's Vineyard background.

*** Hailey Lind: *Arsenic and Old Paint*, Perseverance, \$14.95. San Francisco art restorer and reformed forger Annie Kincaid, with a nose for mystery and an increasingly complicated love life, is one of the funniest and most likable first-person sleuths in the current market. Her fourth case begins with the discovery of a bleeding corpse in a bathtub at an exclusive San Francisco club, the scene recalling David's painting *Death of Marat*. This series deserves to continue.

*** Sasscer Hill: *Full Mortality*, Wildside, \$13.95. Jockey

Nikki Latrelle, compelled to visit her upcoming stakes mount Gilded Cage late one night at Laurel Park, finds the mare dead in her stall. Other equine and human deaths follow. First-time novelist Hill, herself a Maryland horse breeder, is a genuine find, writing smooth and vivid descriptive prose about racetrack characters and backstretch ambience that reek authenticity. Familiar plot elements are gracefully handled, including that old romantic-suspense conundrum: which of the attractive but mysterious males is the good guy and which the villain?

*** Al Roker and Dick Lochte: *The Midnight Show Murders*, Delacorte, \$26. The second case for chef and TV personality Billy Blessing may be the first mystery signed by a celebrity collaborating with a pro that concerns in part a celebrity collaborating with a pro. Other inside jokes from the mystery and show-biz worlds abound, as Blessing reluctantly leaves his New York base for Los Angeles where he is all-too-close a witness to spectacular murder on live TV. A fairly clued puzzle adds to the fun of one of the best celebrity mystery series.

*** Randy Singer: *Fatal Convictions*, Tyndale, \$13.99. In Virginia Beach, Alex Madison, pastor of a small church and in his day job an almost literally ambulance-chasing personal-injury lawyer, defends a Norfolk imam accused of the honor killing of a married Muslim woman and her Christian lover.

The plot is satisfactorily complicated with a string of well-sprung surprises, the courtroom action authentic and plentiful, and the dramatic wind-up expertly managed. The author himself is an attorney and pastor.

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Next Article

BLOG BYTES

by Bill Crider



Thriller ran on U.S. television for sixty-seven episodes back in 1961-62. Now that all the episodes have been released in a fourteen-DVD set, Peter Infantino and John Scoleri decided to blog about them on a site they've named *A Thriller a Day* (<http://athrilleraday.blogspot.com>). Each day, Scoleri and Infantino offer their sometimes barbed, always insightful and witty criticism of a single episode of the series. They rate each show on a scale of one to four Karloffs, and they're really tough graders. They may have completed the series by the time you read this, but their remarks will remain available for a long time to come. So far they've had one guest commentator, David Schow, and even a podcast with exclusive audio commentary.

But that's not all. As if one excellent blog weren't enough,

Enfantino and Scoleri have revived *bare•bones*, “the beloved (if erratic) print digest” and created the *bare•bones* e-zine (<http://barebonezez.blogspot.com>). So far, there have been long articles about *Manhunt*, one of the now-defunct crime digests that flourished in the middle of the last century; Richard Matheson’s short stories in *Playboy*; the *AHMM* stories of Robert Edmond Alter; and many others. I’ve particularly enjoyed Enfantino’s reviews of *The Sharpshooter*, one of the trashier men’s adventure series from long ago. This blog is a must-read for me every day.

Another site where I like to while away the hours is *Spy Guys & Gals* (<http://spyguysandgals.com>). Almost anything you want to know about series spy fiction published after WWII can be found here. Go to the proper page, click on a character’s name, and you can find out the series name, the character’s code name and nationality, the organization he or she works for, the author’s name, the number of books in the series, the publishing history, and much more. The “much more” includes reviews of the books and an overall grade for the series. A lot of work has gone into this site, and it’s a lot of fun to read. Be careful, or you might find an entire afternoon has gone missing.

If it’s general information you want, check out *Omnimystery News* (<http://www.omnimysterynews.com>). This site will

keep you up to date on DVD releases and what's coming up on television. There are book reviews, too. You might even want to solve the weekly Mystery Godoku Guzzle from Hidden Staircase Mystery Books. Unlike sudoku, this puzzle uses letters instead of numbers, which is always good news for someone like me.

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Two Birthdays

Each year, *EQMM* joins the Baker Street Irregulars, the world's oldest Sherlockian organization, in celebrating the birthday of Sherlock Holmes. Since shortly after the BSI's inception, in 1934, a birthday dinner for the great fictional sleuth has been an annual event. On Twelfth Night, 2011, according to the Irregulars, Holmes—alive and living in Sussex tending bees—will turn 157. At this year's banquet in his honor, there will be copies of *EQMM*'s February issue at each place, as there have been for decades. But as this year also marks *EQMM*'s 70th birthday, we'd like to point out that the birth of this magazine is actually connected to that of Holmes.

Ellery Queen was, as nearly every reader of this magazine knows, the pseudonym of two collaborating cousins, Manfred B. Lee and Frederic Dannay. It was Dannay who did most of

the work of editing *EQMM*, while Lee took the lead in other Ellery Queen projects. That division of labor was significant for us, for Dannay might never have had a career in mystery writing or editing at all had it not been for a book he received when he was just twelve years old. The book was *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Reflecting on that turning point in his life, Dannay once wrote: "I opened the book with no realization that I stood—rather, I sat—on the brink of my fate. I had no inkling, no premonition, that in another minute my life's work, such as it is, would be born." By his "life's work," Dannay meant more than the novels and stories of Ellery Queen, important as those are. He meant this magazine too, which was inspired by his love of the work of Doyle and other great detective writers and whose reprints, in the early years, included some of the cases of Sherlock Holmes.

Unlike the BSI, we can't give *EQMM*'s birthday a specific date, (although it was in the autumn of 1941 that the first issue went on sale) but Twelfth Night seems as good a date as any for a party. Cheers to the BSI and all those readers whose lives, like our founder's, were changed by Sherlock Holmes!

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Ellery Queen: 70 Years

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Top of Ellery Queen: 70 Years

REVIEWS

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