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MYSTERY FICTION

MASTER OF HIS TRADE *Seymour Shubin* 2

BEST WISHES *J.R. Chabot* 6

AT WALTER'S EDGE *Chick Lang* 13

COLD INTRUSION A TOBIAS TALMO TALE
Rus Morgan 26

VIPER IN PARADISE *J.K. Cummins* 35

CHAIN LETTER *David Sakmyster* 49

MONSIEUR PICARDY *Norman Rubin* 61

CAY DE AMOR *Leslie Bessant* 67

CHARM OF SILENCE *Vera Searles* 71

UNO DINERO *Daniel R. Robichaud II* 76

THOSE STEPFORD GUYS *Winifred Seery* 86

ON THE ROCKS *Lawrence P. McGuire* 91

EXCERPT FROM TERLINGUA ALE *Margaret Searles* 93

YOUR AD HERE *Brandon Hebert* 97

DROP-DEAD GORGEOUS *Clay Waters* 104

THE THIRD LAW *Jennifer Granich* 110

LITERARY, POETRY, MAINSTREAM...

SIMPLIFY, UNITE, DELIGHT *Kristin R. Masterton* 65

COLUMNS - INTERVIEWS - REVIEWS

SPOTLIGHT ON SEYMOUR SHUBIN *Bret Wright* 4

ART DIRECTOR *GIN E.L. Fenton* 12

THE CRIME LAB GUY *John L. French* 22

THE INFORMANT *Bret Wright* 23

STARFIRE *Mary O'Gara* 46

EVERYBODY LOVES JUSTICE *G. Miki Hayden* 59

MURDER-GO-ROUND *Harriet Klausner* 120

Flash Fiction CONTEST WINNERS! 34

FMAM FEATURE AUTHOR...



"Alfie recommends: paws over this one — an accomplished professional's tale of a henpecked hit-man."

Master of His Trade

Seymour Shubin

"Charlie," his wife called to him from upstairs, "you left your room a mess!"

Chuck—why had she begun calling him Charlie of late when she knew he hated it?—closed his eyes against the sudden deep inner pain and then, after a couple of long breaths, managed to finish his coffee.

"Your pajamas," she called again, "can't you at least put them away?"

Chuck looked to the ceiling as if in silent prayer and then stood up from the kitchen table and took his cup over to the sink and rinsed it. That's all he would have to do, he thought, was not rinse his cup before putting it in the dishwasher.

Helen was coming down the stairs now. She didn't look at him as she went by him to the closet by the sink for a broom. He watched her as she opened the door and made a few sweeps of the broom out to the back yard. He still found it hard to believe that the slender, gorgeous dancer he'd met in Vegas had turned into this jowly, obese thing in only twenty years. And with what a mouth! Where once she used to talk to him with soft intakes of breath, and her eyes with almost a glow of wonder, it was now like a prison guard.

His eyes were following her now as she closed the door and walked by him again, only this time to open the door to the basement and disappear down there with the broom. He took another breath and called to her, "I'm leaving."

"Yeah, okay."

No "where you going" or "when will you be home," which he sometimes missed, like now, although that was crazy. If there was any one thing



Illustration Copyright © Stephanie Rodriguez

he still appreciated about her that was it. In fact, it was a must. Still, once in a while he ached for her to say just one time—one time—something like, "Have a good day."

He gathered up his briefcase from the table and, at the hall mirror, slid his necktie under his collar and tied it neatly. He then thrust his arms into his sport jacket and, with a quick lift of his briefcase, walked to the front door and out into the bright summer morning.

Sliding into his car, he put his briefcase on the passenger seat, then as though not trusting his memory he pressed his hand against it. Ah. He could feel the bulk of the gun against his palm.

He drove through the quiet streets of his suburban neighborhood, along with others heading to offices, and then out to the New Jersey Turnpike that would take him, some hundred miles away, to Philly.

As with all the other hits, he had this planned to the last detail: where whoever it was would be, at what time, whether to go by plane or car, and if a car whether a rental or a quickly stolen one or his own; and if his own, whether with a lifted license plate. And all of this after the deal had come to him in his carefully thought-out mysterious way, where the buyer didn't even know his real name.

By now he had fifty-one satisfied buyers.

Still, as at this moment, he liked to go over things in his mind, sometimes right up to the last minute. For instance, though he knew today's layout perfectly, he liked picturing himself taking the right streets, getting there at the exact time and— He stopped and almost punched at the steering wheel. Goddamn if his mind wasn't filled only with Helen and her did you put away this, that, did you do, why didn't you do, when're you gonna do? He absolutely loathed her. This wasn't anything new, but he'd always found a reason to excuse the bitch, like the fact that they'd never been able to have kids, or that time the goddamn dog died, or when her sister won the two-hundred-and-seventy million dollar lottery. And of course there was the matter of the fortune her parents left her, which hadn't given him a cent yet but was out there waiting, if he'd just outlive her.

So, no way would he divorce her.

But he was going to kill her! Not that this was a brand-new thought either; it must have rolled through his brain a million times. But now he meant it, and he knew it. He even found himself thinking of ways to do it, then quickly cut this off before he got too caught up in it. He had a job to do, and his head had to be clear. And it was now. Oh, was it ever!

By the time he reached the Walt Whitman Bridge, which would take him across the Delaware River from Jersey to Philly, he had even

stopped thinking of the job; there was such a thing as being over-prepared, which could stop you from vital spontaneous actions that might have to be taken. He paid the toll at the booth, half-looking away from the guy, and then, just as he had done on the Turnpike, was careful to stay under the speed limit as he drove into the city.

He knew Philly and its streets well. He'd made fifteen of his hits here—no, sixteen. Why in hell was he always forgetting Maloney?

After a quick glance at his wristwatch, he saw that he had over a half-hour to make the meet. That was fine; in fact he even slowed up a little because he'd rather be a little late than early. The guy would wait: what he thought he was getting was apparently important to him. They were meeting in a lonely section of huge Fairmount Park, where all that the bum knew was that a car would pull up next to his black Buick, and a package passed.

Chuck didn't remove his gun, which was complete with silencer, and put it on his lap until he turned a corner into the quiet park and saw the Buick parked near some trees. He pulled alongside it, facing the driver, a fat-faced guy of about sixty. Chuck lowered his window, and the guy did, too, and even started to smile. And then he seemed to hang there a few moments, even as two holes appeared in his forehead.

Chuck pulled away still quite slowly and once again stayed under the speed limit, driving this time to another bridge to Jersey, the Benjamin Franklin, so that there was no chance of him being seen coming and going so quickly.

He let himself relax on the ride back, let himself even glow about it.

It was only when he was about a half hour from his house that he began thinking of how he would kill her. He couldn't do it himself, of course, because he knew, like so many of those dopes apparently didn't, that the first person the cops look to is the spouse. Which went double when there was money to inherit. And anyway he didn't want them prying into his background. So he would

have to hire someone. But who? He didn't know anyone in the business JUST like no one knew him. So it would have to be a stranger. But who could he trust? Trust? Was he kidding? Again, those dopes didn't know how great a chance it was that you ended up confiding in a guy who would talk or even have you "hiring" a cop.

He couldn't make believe she was a suicide either. Couldn't pretend she died in an accident. Couldn't this, couldn't that! He JUST knew too goddamn much! He was barely aware that he was turning into his street. And when he came to his house he wanted to speed past it. Instead he pulled into the driveway and sat there, staring at the front door.

He saw her coming toward him from the side

of the house.

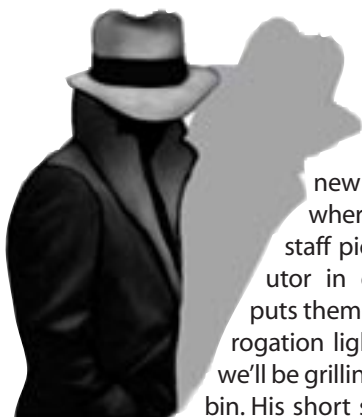
"You know you ran over the grass? You know there's new seed in it?"

She glared at him, then whirled away. He looked at her back until she entered the house. His hands grew tight on the steering wheel. Then they came up to his face as he cried.

Edgar nominee Seymour Shubin has had short stories in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, FMAM, and Dime, among many other publications. His thirteenth novel, The Man From Yesterday, will be published in September 2005; his fourteenth, Witness to Myself, in 2006.

Spotlight On ... Seymour Shubin

By Bret Wright



Welcome to a new feature in FMAM where the editorial staff picks one contributor in each issue and puts them under the interrogation lights. In this issue we'll be grilling Seymour Shubin. His short story, "Master of His Trade" appears in this month's FMAM. It's truly a noteworthy story, and so is its author. What better way could there be to kick off this column than with a best-selling yarn spinner?

Seymour Shubin is a veteran writer and story teller. He began his career by writing plain English articles on psychiatric emergency medicine. From there it was a short hop into the fiction

realm, with a quick stop off at Official Detective Story Magazine as an editor of true crime features. He then began to methodically study the life of detectives and crime solving. Renting an office in Philadelphia, he shadowed detectives to learn their trade, along with ghost writing several stories. Before long, he decided it was time for him to try his hand at a longer work centered on a detective writer who commits a murder. Anyone's My Name was born.

Anyone's My Name was a launching pad for Shubin. The book made the New York Times Best Seller list, and was later used as a text in criminology courses around the country. Book number thirteen The Man From Yesterday is fresh off of the press and available at bookstores now, and his fourteenth book, Witness to Myself is scheduled for release in 2006. His short works have ap-

peared in magazine ranging from Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine to the Saturday Evening Post. One of his EQMM stories was broadcast, and he won a "Story of the Year" award from Potpourri.

Over the course of a long and impressive career, Shubin has learned a thing or two about the business and craft of writing. His first book, for instance, was sent back for a rewrite. He added some philosophy to the book and when the publishers read the changes, they sent the manuscript back with the comment that they he was "as good an editor as a writer." He took out almost everything that he'd added and the book was accepted. This was his first lesson in overwriting, and one that stays with him.

The writing process has been a learning experience for him, too. He's finally settled on just getting it all out and cleaning it up later. "Writers get caught up in what they did yesterday," he says, which can be deadly to the creative process. "It helps when you know the ending." Of course, in the spirit of the exception always being the rule, Shubin laughingly admits that he hasn't known the endings of his last four books when he's sat down to write them.

A good beginning is a tough trick to master, too. The art of the opening has changed over the years, and Shubin has worked hard to stay on top of the demands placed on writers by agents, editors and the public. "When I wrote *Anyone's My Name*, I did a leisurely opening. That would never go today." But, he says, any other opening would ruin the book, so he considers it to be a kind of time piece from which to mark the changes in the public's taste for fiction.

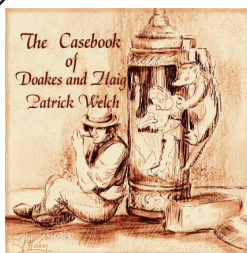
Having been on both sides of the writing profession, editor and writer, Shubin leaves us with a little sound advice for the new writer. First, just write. Get it all out and then go back and edit. Second, cover letters are extremely important when you send out a synopsis. It's how an agent or editor knows who they're dealing with and at what level. The synopsis that follows the letter needs to get down to business right away as well.

"Don't dawdle. Tell enough. Then go ahead and send some of your novel, too."

His last bit of advice might seem like a no-brainer these days, but it bears repeating: Be careful with agents. "There are a few bad ones out there." It used to be that agents were practically falling out of the trees to get clients, he says, but now it's much harder and there are some predators in the field who love nothing more than getting hold of an inexperienced writer. The best remedy is to ask a lot of questions and check the agent out thoroughly.

"By the way," he adds, "writing never gets easy."

Seymour Shubin has been around the block once or twice. He knows the business, and he knows how to write. A deadly combination. Welcome to FMAM, Seymour. Your story's a killer.



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"If you don't want enemies, real cut-your-heart-out enemies, don't mess with the grandkids."

BEST WISHES

J.R.Chabot

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Willie Medlin stood at the table beside his lawyer, his unfocused eyes staring straight ahead. His face showed nothing, but his body was tight with fear.

The judge and most the court had their eyes on the jury foreman. The judge asked, "On the charge of murder in the first degree, how do you find?"

"We find the defendant—not guilty."

Willie almost moaned with relief. His shoulders

sagged as he let out the breath he'd been holding. He turned to his lawyer and could see he was almost as relieved as Willie. It had been close.

Willie looked over at the spectator gallery where the family of the victim sat. The mother was crying silently. Her husband had his hand on her shoulder, trying awkwardly to give comfort, but his eyes were on Willie, the hurt and hatred contorting his face. Beside them sat the grandfa-

ther, a small, smartly dressed man, also looking at Willie. He didn't look angry, or disappointed, or anything. He just watched, calmly, almost with understanding, as if there was a silent agreement between them. Willie couldn't resist. He grinned and winked at them.

After Willie's release, a couple of reporters waylaid them in the hall, asking him if he had expected to be acquitted. He was feeling good now, happy to talk about it, until it became obvious they didn't much agree with the verdict. His lawyer got him away, put him into a cab and advised him to go home. He thought about maybe stopping somewhere for a drink but was afraid someone in the bar might recognize him, give him a hard time. He decided the lawyer was probably right. He'd go home, open a fresh bottle of Jack Daniels, and get quietly and very happily drunk.

His house, which he'd inherited from his aunt, was a small stucco on the corner of quiet, tree-lined streets in a neighborhood in the old part of town. At ten a.m., there was no one on the street. Kids were in school, parents at work or shopping.

He paid off the cabby with a nice tip, feeling better all the time, the reality of his freedom really sinking in. He walked to his door, fishing out his keys, already tasting the whiskey and tonic, very light on the tonic. As he put his key into the lock, something slammed him forward, making him lose his balance, his head hitting the door casing. Then he was on his knees, and the stabbing pain seemed to fill his body.

It was a room of elegance, of mahogany tables and paneled walls, of rich drapery and grand but comfortable furniture. Morning light flooded in through large, leaded windows, giving it all a feeling of warmth and hospitality. Tyra McDonald sat in a deep armchair, looking across a glass-topped coffee table at Aaron Porter. He was a little man, with small hands and fine features, his thin gray hair combed straight back. His clothes were casual but in keeping with the room they were in. He smiled and asked, "Now then, Ms. McDonald,

how can I help you?"

"It's about the Willie Medlin case."

"Yes, I guessed that much."

"I'd like to discuss it with you. I'd also like to say, right at the beginning, that this is not an official visit. I'm not here as an Assistant District Attorney."

His eyes narrowed as he considered that. "Then this is off the record."

"Yes, completely."

He stood up and moved to a table at the end of the sofa. "Well then, since that's the case, could I interest you in a small glass of Madeira? It's from a little vineyard in the Azores and is quite good." Tyra smiled and nodded, so he poured two glasses and brought them back. After they each had an appreciative sip, he sat quietly, waiting for her to start.

"I suppose you've been following what happened to Willie?"

"Avidly. After all, he did murder my grandson."

"The jury found him not guilty."

"The jury was composed of fools."

"That's often the case. Still..."

Aaron settled back in his chair, considering her. "You assisted in prosecuting him. It seemed to me you worked very hard at it. Are you having second thoughts about that?"

"No, not at all. I'm sure he was guilty, but it was a tough case. Frankly, we weren't at all sure we could convict."

"Even though Davey—" He closed his eyes for a second, braced himself and went on. "Even though the victim was found in his house?"

"You know what he said. That he loaned the house to his friend, Max, while he was off in Florida, that it was Max who kidnapped your grandson. A neighbor described Max as the man who grabbed your grandson."

"And pulled him into the back seat. Someone else was driving."

"But we know it was Max who picked up the ransom money. Other than the house, there wasn't much to connect Willie to the kidnapping."

"But there was plenty to connect Willie to Max. Before Willie went to prison, he and Max had been partners, of a sort. They had been into all sorts of things together."

"Which we weren't allowed to present in court."

"So the jury thought Max was working alone."

Tyra shrugged. "They had to consider the possibility."

Aaron sipped the Madeira thoughtfully then said, "All right, since you seem to be presenting the case for the defense, I'll be the prosecutor. All right?"

Tyra leaned back and sipped the wine, beginning to feel at ease with the old gentleman. "Fine. What evidence is there that Max wasn't working alone?"

"Three points that I can see. First, he wasn't bright enough. Not Max. Consider. He picks up the ransom, gets into his car and leaves. No problem. Three blocks later he sees a patrol car. What does Max do? Continue on his way like any normal citizen? Of course not. Not our Max. He panics, accelerates and begins weaving in and out of traffic, which of course gets the patrol car chasing him. He then runs a red light, collides with another car and ends up on the sidewalk. Then, to make it perfect, he crawls out of the car with a gun in his hand and starts a fire with the police."

"Which he lost."

"Yes. A pity. His testimony could have convicted Willie."

"No doubt. That's one point. What are the other two?"

"The key. When the police checked his record and found his previous connection with Willie, they went to Willie's house. It was locked. But Max had no house key on him. If he had the house alone, why didn't he have the key? Only one answer: someone else was there, waiting to let him in. At the trial, you made that point yourself, I thought quite forcefully."

"The jury didn't seem to find it important."

"As I said, a jury of fools."

"And your third point?"

The old man steeled himself again. "When the police finally entered the house, Davey was already dead. If Max had done it, it must have been before he picked up the ransom. Why would he do that?"

"You said yourself he wasn't very bright." She leaned forward, setting her glass on the coffee table. "So Willie was acquitted. And then he was shot. The police came to the conclusion it was a professional hit."

"I know. They questioned me and my son, extensively."

"Our opinion was that Willie had been lucky. A professional shooter, and he was only hit in the shoulder. Painful, of course. And the bone was shattered. He spent a week in the hospital."

A week after the shooting, Willie Medlin left the hospital. The elevator doors sighed open and a wheelchair full of Willie rolled out into the hall. It was pushed by an elderly woman wearing the pink smock of a hospital volunteer. Willie was grumbling inwardly. He'd been hit in the shoulder, for God's sake. His right arm was in a sling, but he could walk just fine. They said something about hospital regulations, but he didn't buy it. Stupid bureaucrats! It made him feel like an old man.

Walking behind the chair was a Deputy Sheriff, very alert and aware of everything around them. When they came to the big glass doors leading to the outside, he stepped to the front and held up his hand. He went through the doors and out into the bright midday.

A gray sedan pulled to the curb, and the passenger side window came down. The deputy approached it, peered into the front and back seats and asked the driver for his ID. He compared the picture on the driver's license to the man behind the wheel, nodded, and went back to the glass doors. Before opening the door, he turned and let his eyes scan the scene. There was a parking lot off to the left. He looked over the cars he could see, but none of them seemed to have anyone in

them. Still.... Across the street and to his right was a parking garage. Lots of places up there that faded into shadow. Too many places. He didn't much like it but knew there was nothing he could do. He pulled open one of the doors and watched as the wheelchair trundled out, staying close to one side till they got to the car.

"Make you feel important?" asked Willie.

The deputy ignored the remark and opened the car door. Willie used his good arm to push himself up and stood clear of the chair. The shot came in from above and to the right.

Willie grunted and fell. The deputy crouched, pulling his gun, moving to get behind the car. He heard the driver say "Oh damn," and then the car was moving, tires squealing as it raced off, leaving them all in the open. He swore viciously, his gun in both hands, his eyes scanning the parking garage, frantically searching for any movement. He heard movement behind him and, when he turned, saw the old lady in the pink smock kneeling beside Willy, trying to drag him back toward the doors. He wanted to go after the shooter but knew he couldn't. His duty was to the man he was trying to protect. Alive or dead, he had to get him back inside.

"This time it was the right leg," said Tyra. "Broke the bone, halfway up from the knee."

Aaron said, "Well, at least he was already at the hospital. That was convenient."

"I was puzzled. The slugs from both shootings were from the same gun. And both were carried out very professionally. Not a trace of the shooter. So here we have a professional assassin, firing at a standing target not a hundred feet away, and he misses. Twice."

Aaron smiled. "Mr. Medlin is indeed a lucky man."

"I don't know anyone that lucky. I'll be frank, Mr. Porter. I was sure either you or your son was behind this, but the misses puzzled me. I thought you, of all people, would want Willie Medlin dead."

"Me? Oh no, not at all. I'm very much against

the death penalty."

"You had good reason to want him dead."

He looked at her, rather sadly, then whispered, "Some would say so." His eyes half closed, and his face showed the hurt he still felt. "Do you have children, Ms. McDonald?"

"A daughter."

"Then you know. Children are as close to miracles as we get in this life." He paused, a little embarrassed by his emotion, then went on. "Davey had known love all his life. His very short life. He was four years old. He didn't even know what cruelty was. He was outside, playing with his toy bulldozer, making roads for his toy cars when these two animals—" He stopped, his eyes unfocused, not trying any longer to hide the hurt. "They grabbed him and threw him in their car and took him to that house and locked him in a dark, filthy room in the basement." He looked up and asked, "Can you imagine his terror?"

Tyra said nothing. What was there to say?

"They kept him there for four days while the ransom was being arranged. Then Max went to pick it up, and Willy waited. I wonder what Willy thought when Max didn't come back? That Max had betrayed him? No, as I said, Max wasn't smart enough. Then Max's shootout with the police was on the evening news, and Willie knew it was over. So he packed his bags and left town. But first, he went to the basement. He took a four year old boy, a boy who trusted everyone, and he strangled him and left his body there on the floor."

"And you didn't want Willie dead?"

"I wanted him tried and convicted, but I certainly didn't want him to receive the death penalty. I wanted him to spend the rest of his life in prison. That's all I asked."

"Yes, I know. It took me a while to realize that."

When it was time again for Willie to leave the hospital, they took no chances. An unmarked van pulled up close beside a delivery entrance at the rear of the hospital. SWAT officers were stationed at several positions around the area. Willy, sur-

rounded by men in body armor, was loaded into the back of the van which sped off with patrol cars in attendance. The same precautions were taken in getting him safely into his house. There was no trouble at all.

Willy quickly settled into a life of seclusion. The doors and windows were all kept locked. It was one of those old, settled neighborhoods where the mailboxes were still on houses, rather than at the curb. He only had to unlock the front door, open it just far enough to slip his arm out, grab the mail and slip back in. Most of the mail was solicitations and offers for things he wasn't interested in. He paid the bills by check.

He was afraid to go out. He never stood directly in front of a window but often sat at an angle, back in the shadows, watching the street. He was looking for anyone walking by, looking his way. Or cars that parked and no one got out. He saw one once, but it turned out to be the teenage girl across the street, parking with her boyfriend.

He soon ran into two major problems. The first was food. He didn't dare go out to shop, but supermarkets don't deliver. He found a pizza place that would and lived for a while on pepperoni and cheese and black olives. Afraid to leave, even to take out the trash, the pizza boxes and soft drink cups began to stack up. The Jack Daniels was gone on the second day.

Then there was money. He had some in a checking account, a modest amount left to him when his aunt died, but how could he get it? The bank didn't deliver either.

He called his only friend, Kenny. Kenny could make some withdrawals for him, could maybe do some shopping for the stuff he needed. It was Kenny who had agreed to pick him up at the hospital, who had sped off when the shooting started. Well, you couldn't blame him for that.

Kenny listened, told him never to call there again, and hung up.

Willie called a few of the neighbors, asking if one of their kids would be interested in picking up some extra cash. Nothing difficult. Just pick up

some stuff and bring it to him. Most of them, being all too familiar with what had happened at that house, didn't even bother answering before they hung up.

He had no choice. He waited until nearly midnight, went to the garage and started his car. Opening the garage door, he quickly got in and backed out. Driving off, he kept checking his rear view mirror. He went first to an ATM machine and withdrew three hundred dollars, the maximum. Then he drove to a market he knew stayed open all night. Hardly anyone was there. He filled a cart with everything he could think he might need and headed quickly back out to the nearly empty parking lot.

He was loading everything into the trunk, beginning to think maybe everything would be all right after all, when he felt the jolt and the pain in his left shoulder and knew he was wrong.

When the EMT crew arrived, they found him huddled on the ground, one hand covering his face, whimpering.

"That's enough," said Tyra. Her eyes held him, reprimanding.

"Yes," he said. "I agree."

"Do you know what happened to him? When he finally came home again, he went inside and wouldn't come out. People from a local church brought him meals. He took the food, but he wouldn't talk to them or let them in. His inheritance ran out, and his checks started bouncing. His phone service was cut off and the gas. They repossessed his car. His neighbors started raising hell. Finally, the Sheriff was forced to do something. They went into the house and almost gagged at the smell. They found him in the basement, sitting on the floor, talking to himself. He had a scraggly beard and hair down to his shoulders. God knows when he'd last had a bath. When they tried to take him out of the house, he fought them like some demented animal. They had to sedate him to get him out."

"I understand he's back in the hospital."

"He's at Rex Psychiatric Hospital."

"Is he insane, do you think?"

"That's what they're trying to determine. I went there this morning to see him. He seems a little better than when they pulled him out of the basement. They cleaned him up and he's eating regularly."

Aaron said, quite sincerely, "Let's hope he recovers."

"Even in the hospital, he can't turn a corner without peeking around first to see what's there. Sometimes he can't even bring himself to look."

Aaron said nothing, just looked at her.

"It's gone far enough, Mr. Porter. It has to stop."

"Yes, as I said, I agree. Imagine his thoughts. Shot in the right shoulder, then the right leg, then the left shoulder, then....What's next?"

"No, it has to stop."

"Of course. Can you imagine his terror? Wheth-

er he's on a psychiatric ward or wandering the streets, the poor man will spend the rest of his life hiding in shadows, glancing behind him, waking from horrible dreams, waiting for the fourth shot to complete the pattern. For the rest of his natural life. And I sincerely hope no one ever shoots him again. I want only the best for him."

He reached to the table and picked up his glass. "Here's to Mr. Willy Medlin. May he live for a hundred and twenty years."

Tyra stared, not moving.

"Oh, I'm sorry, your glass is empty. Another Madeira?"

John Chabot is a retired computer analyst. His stories have appeared in several publications, chiefly FMAM.



Meet the Staff at FMAM

ART DIRECTOR
GIN E.L. FENTON

Although I had always enjoyed reading mystery fiction, I had never tried my hand at mystery illustration before being asked to join the FMAM art staff. I never imagined I would soon be delighting in murdering people for fun and profit. My background was in glamour portraits, pinups, fantasy art, romantic and general illustrations, mainly for literary and speculative fiction magazines. My paintings were mostly of the "sweetness and light" variety: lots of unicorns, pretty fairies, and beautiful people. I had for a few years owned and edited a fantasy art ezine called *Merlin's Dreams Zine*. It was a magical fairy tale place for children and for adults who retained a sense of child-like wonder, featuring two or three fantasy artists—well-known and lesser known—and containing interviews, silly jokes, beautiful poetry, mini-stories, and pithy sayings by the great Merlin himself. Suddenly I found myself thrust into the grown-up world of serial killers and "whodunits"—quite a change, *and* a challenge.

In keeping with my usual method, I immediately immersed myself in the mystery world, learning all I could. My first stop was one of my favorite places: the local library. I consulted a stack of books on the history of the genre, and in particular on the illustrations and illustrators who have helped to elevate the genre's popularity. I also searched the web and watched lots of old B-movies. I am big on research and authenticity in my illustrations. I fell in love with the drama and the



Hitchcock-like angles of noir and hard-boiled detectives, and all the other types of mysteries. I was hooked. I love this genre!

So I started illustrating for FMAM, and with the benevolent guidance of the wonderful Babs Lakey, I learned a few tricks of the trade. I will always be grateful to Babs for so many things, but one of the first tips she gave me was to watch the little details – minor things like making sure the gunman actually has his finger on the trigger.

Eventually I was appointed Art Director of *Futures MYSTERY Anthology Magazine* where, in addition to my other duties, I was honored to be asked to create a new masthead, our Mystery Dame, and the first few covers for our exceptional, born-again magazine. Lida Quillen and Ardy Scott, the new publishers, have carried on the tradition of excellence that has made FMAM so special for all these years. Our art department is better than ever. We have an awesome group of highly talented professional illustrators and cartoonists. Their work is first-rate, and is a perfect match for the superior stories, which are, of course, FMAM's *raison d'être*, its greatest treasure and legacy. Hooray for FMAM. Long may she reign!

Contact Ginnie at artwork@fmam.biz with your comments or suggestions, your ideas about our Mystery Dame, or to apply as an FMAM illustrator or cartoonist, or to hire Gin's services as a freelance illustrator—to illustrate your book cover or create original artwork for your publication. Website—Art by GinELF www.artpinups.com

Each issue we'll introduce you to one of FMAM's fabulous team. So be sure to get your next issue of FMAM pdf or print to meet our Co-Publisher, Ardy Scott.

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On the edge is a precarious place to be; sometimes we get there without knowing it

At Walter's Edge

Chick Lang

Illustration Copyright © Teresa Tunaley



I can't really pinpoint the exact moment when Walter Lavalais went over the edge; it just happened. And right up to the day that he plunged to his death from the Atchafalaya Bridge, he was my mentor; even my friend. He was there for me when I first joined the Logan City Police Department; taught me the chops, showed me everything that I needed to know. He shielded me from 'too-much-too-soon,' and taught me how to keep from getting emotionally involved in sensitive cases.

"Have a passion for your job," he said, "which is simply setting things straight. Nothing more,

nothing less. Just don't let that passion cloud your judgment, don't let it make you into an empathetic fool."

Walter always delivered his messages with the confidence of a big man. He stood about six-foot-four and carried at least two hundred fifty pounds of controlled brawn. He was an animated speaker, punctuated his statements with emphatic gestures, and presented the gospel according to Walter with the conviction of a traveling tent preacher. His scripture was more practical than theological.

"Empathy is like ragweed," he once told me. "A

good cop avoids it before he becomes allergic to the truth."

His epistles seldom varied; he was all about maintaining a safe distance, keeping things uncomplicated.

"And sympathy?" he said. "That's like salt. Use it sparingly."

He led by example. Certainly he'd developed a sense of isolation, stayed 'once removed' from victims and perps, avoided any emotion that might impede his ability to think clearly, dispassionately. On the surface, it appeared to work, but personally I could never quite disassociate myself from the fear in the victims' eyes, the sense of displacement that the helpless projected, or their crumpled, violated postures.

The emotion that kept bleeding through my facade of indifference was anger. It had cost me many times, many things—a wife, a promotion, a peace that endured, and, like a starving rat, it gnawed at the insulation of my soul. Looking back, I believe that's what happened to Walter. The suppressed feelings of compassion, of frustration, of angry defeat jostled around inside him, rubbed together like so much dry tinder and ignited into a combustive flame that consumed his will to go on. He quit the force less than a year after his niece, Angela, disappeared without a trace.

It was a cold, drab morning, the horizon an ooze of pustuled yellow smattered with ashen clouds, as if a dirty pneumatic paint gun had been turned loose on the sky. I watched through my breakfast room window as a small, spotted terrier attempted to cross Highway 90 in the face of seven a.m. traffic. It almost succeeded before a speeding, late-model pickup nailed the animal just forward of its right haunch. Tossed high into the air, the terrier was dead before it hit the ground. I was still shaking my head over its fate when the phone rang.

"Jamie Vining here."

The voice that scratched at me from the other

end of the line sounded only vaguely familiar.

"Have you heard about Walter?"

"Deke? Is that you?"

"It used to be," he said. "Did I wake you?"

"Not by an hour. What about Walter?"

I could hear a faint moan as he sorted through mumbles until he found the strength to force the words out.

"He's dead, Jamie. Walter's dead."

My legs went suddenly unstable. I clutched at the breakfast table for support.

"You've got to be...What did you say?"

I felt my jaw muscles go slack, my chin collapse, gaping my mouth open in some pantomime of disbelief.

"Yeah, he went off the Atchafalaya Bridge sometime early this morning. A tug captain found his body. The current had swept him into a clutch of snags under the bridge."

Deke spoke quickly now, hissing the words, as if spitting out a bad taste. "Have-you-talked-to-him-lately?"

My throat seemed to constrict involuntarily; my tongue felt swollen, immobilized. I coughed. Deke was suddenly silent, as if all his energy had been spent in telling me his brother, my friend, had leaped to his death.

"Not since last week," I heard myself say.

The words meant nothing; were mere camouflage for the angst that invaded my thoughts.

"Did he say anything that might make you believe that he would...?"

"What're you implying, Deke? Was he depressed? Of course he was. A man doesn't spend twenty-five years on the force, then leave it, without some regret."

I was squeezing the phone so tightly that my knuckles ached.

"But..."

"You mean, was he suicidal?" I interrupted. "That's a crock of—"

"...but, he's been so down, and he was getting drunk almost every night, Jamie. Did you know that?"

"Walter could hold his liquor. I never saw him drunk all the years I've known him."

"How much time have you spent with him in the last year?"

There was more sadness in his voice than reproach, as if he, too, had neglected to shore up his brother's languishing psyche. A vitriolic guilt spilled over me.

"Not much," I said. "Evidently not enough."

Before the conversation could further deteriorate, I agreed to meet Deke at the City Morgue within the hour, then hung up the phone, thankful for the sudden silence to collect my thoughts.

I walked to the liquor cabinet, removed a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels, and added a full measure to my coffee. I drank it down quickly, as though its anesthetic properties were somehow sufficient for my pain. I finished dressing, tying and retying my shoes until the laces were of equal length on each side of the knots—searching for even the smallest catharsis. I checked my watch; still plenty of time. I rinsed my breakfast dishes in the sink, grabbed a trash bag from the pantry, and went outside.

The sky now resembled the pale underside of a toad, was dotted with pads of soiled clouds that were beginning to float toward Logan City from the west. A gust of wind thrashed through the purple-topped cane fields across the road and billowed the festoons of Spanish moss clinging fiercely to the giant oaks surrounding the apartment complex. I walked down the shell drive, looked both ways for oncoming cars, then crossed the highway to the spot where the dog lay sprawled with its legs in the air. I put its mangled body in the bag, tightened the drawstring, and made my way back through the bustling traffic to the apartments. I dumped the unlucky terrier behind the common garbage bin, thinking that I'd give it a proper burial later, when I had more time. I had fifteen minutes to get to the morgue and meet Deke Lavalais.

When I got there, Mike Petrie, the M.E., was in his lab coat and already well into his examination.

The wounds that dimpled and dented Walter's body, mottled his skin with ugly magenta splotches, were consistent, Mike said, with a man who'd been banged and bounced off rocks, scraped against unyielding shoreline, and soaked in dirty river water. As a law officer who'd seen more than his share of blood and gore, I should have been prepared for the shock. As a friend of the victim, I could barely watch as Mike poked and probed the body, searching for the cause of death.

After a thorough and lengthy procedure, he determined that Walter had died from a skull-cracking blow to the head.

"Could have hit a bridge abutment," he said, "or a submerged rock when he fell. It's hard to say right now. We may never know exactly what he struck, for that matter. But, whatever it was, it killed him."

I looked at the blue-gray mask of Walter's face, then turned and walked out of the room. I sat down on a bench in the hall and waited for Deke to come out. It would be later in the day before I'd know the full results of the autopsy.

"So dey tink he jumped?"

I looked up from my desk, where I'd been browsing memories for hours and half-heartedly going through the paperwork of suddenly unimportant cases. My partner, Tip Landry, was the interloper.

"That's Deke's theory. Thinks he was drunk. When Mike called me an hour ago, he said that Walter had a high level of alcohol in his blood. Doesn't mean he jumped."

Tip stared at me, head cocked pensively, as if my face were a teleprompter and he was waiting for his next line to pop up on the screen.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "We all like Walter, yeah."

He started to walk off, then turned back. "You know somet'ing, or is it jus' you gut feelin' dat Walter don't jump from da bridge?"

I collapsed back into my chair.

"I don't know, Tip. I don't know what I know, or

if what I know is true anymore."

"Yeah..."

He left the word hanging in the air—more an acknowledgment of my grief than anything else.

I took 'lost time' the next two days; tried to bathe myself in pleasant reminiscences and Jack Daniels. I stopped indulging myself long enough to attend the wake, which was little more than a prayer service and rosary recitation, then went back to my apartment and resumed my own way of dealing with sorrow.

If I'd looked in the mirror before dressing for the funeral, I might have been too embarrassed to show up. I could feel the thick stubble on my face; I scratched at it all during the service. And my eyes burned as if someone had taken a salt-shaker to them. No one else seemed to notice.

As the priest was concluding mass, someone pushed in next to me and knelt to pray. It was a young girl who looked so much like Deke's missing daughter, Angela, that my tongue froze and I forgot to repeat the litany.

"Pray for us," I heard her say.

She recognized me, jumped up, and ran back down the aisle and out the front door. I got to my feet and raced after her, as the crowd began to exit the pews. By the time I reached the steps outside, she was climbing into a parked car, and it pulled away from the curb just I reached the street. I was able to tell that it had a Mississippi tag, license number 808 JPL.

I stood in the street, my heart beating uncertainly, my thoughts swirling like a summer torrent. Someone touched my arm.

"Jamie? Anything wrong? I saw you run from the church."

"You didn't see her, Deke?"

"Who?"

"The girl, the one who came in late, then ran out when she saw me?"

"No. I was praying," he said. "Who was it? Is there a problem?"

I looked at the concern on his face; saw the sad exhaustion in his eyes.

"It was Angela, Deke. I swear it was Angela."

Shock registered in his widening pupils, then disappeared almost as quickly as it had come. It was replaced by a piercing stare that scanned me up and down, as if he were taking stock of my condition. He smiled, an irritating smile that said he suddenly understood where the problem lay. He reached out and patted my stubbled cheek.

"You look like hell, Jamie. Why don't you skip the cemetery? Go on home, get some rest, and I'll check on you later."

He turned and started back up the steps to where the cars were lining up for the funeral procession. He stopped halfway to the top and looked back at me.

"You might want to lighten up on the bourbon, too. It doesn't help."

My head began to throb and my limbs felt suddenly weak and shaky. I no longer had the strength to argue; I walked slowly to my car. For a brief moment, I wondered if I'd seen anything. Or was it, as Deke had insinuated, that I was suffering the apparitions of a drunken man trying to set things straight, resolve all mysteries and redeem order from chaos?

Then Walter spoke to me, as if he were once again sitting next to me, giving instructions in a stern, intimidating voice.

"You may not do anything else well, cher, but, you're a cop. A good one. Now do your job. Tomorrow's another day."

As I started home with that admonition ringing like a doxology in my ears, the crudded sky opened up just enough for a ray of sunlight to gleam through. I finished the litany.

"Pray for us," I said aloud.

I turned off Highway 90, headed for the office instead. I checked in with Lieutenant Marquand, then sat down at my desk to begin my pilgrimage of discovery—starting with running the license tag from the car at the church. It took only minutes to trace it to one J.C. McGruder, Jones County, Mississippi. If that told me nothing else, it said I hadn't been totally hallucinatory. I laughed aloud.

Just then, Tip made his ample presence felt by plopping ceremoniously into the chair in front of my desk.

"Private joke?" he said.

A participatory grin creased his face, like people get when they've missed the punch line and everyone else is laughing.

"I hope so," I said. "Wouldn't want to remove all doubts about my insanity."

He shrugged, then began shuffling through the papers that I'd left strewn across my desk.

"Looking for something in particular?"

"Was gone help wit' Walter's paperwork. Lackin' a suicide note, I figured you was prob'ly gone say it was an accident, huh?"

"Too soon to tell. I'm working an angle right now."

"An' what? You want me to guess, yeah?"

"I saw Angela Lavalais at church today."

He squinted his big jitterbug eyes until they were mere black BBs.

"An' she was dancin' inside a bottle of J.D., I bet."

"I'm serious, Tip."

"Me, too, cher."

After I explained, he made a suggestion.

"You don't tink she make dat long drive today, no? Why not check da motels?"

Within thirty minutes, we'd struck gold. She was registered at the Holiday Inn in Franklin, under the name Mary Jenkins, but she'd had to give her tag number and it matched the one I'd taken off the car. The clerk said she hadn't checked out; she was paid up through tomorrow. She was there now, he said.

I told Marquand what was going on, that we were trying to clear up an old missing persons case, and who it involved. Like Deke and Tip, he seemed leery of my present ability to think clearly, but he condescended to let us make the trip to Franklin under one condition: that I was to let it drop if the girl was gone when we got there. We had no time, he said, for chasing phantoms. I decided against phoning Deke. There was no reason

to get his hopes up until I could show him proof that Angela was still alive.

I put in a call to the Franklin P.D., asked a favor of Nate Benoit, a cop I'd known for years. I lied, told him that the girl was a suspect in a crime, asked him if he'd sit on her until I could get there. He was glad to help.

Tip opted to drive. It was drizzling rain now, and my hands were still a little shaky from all that had gone on in the last few days. I sat back and watched the rivulets course down the window as we rode, and the spikes of lightning that stabbed through dark, rumbling clouds. The few words spoken were mostly patronizing pats on the back from Tip.

"Is all gone be okay, Jamie. I know is tough losin' a fren', yeah."

I continued to stare out the window and read unanswered questions in an unconcerned, unfor-giving sky.

Why now? What did it mean? Where had Angela been for the last two years? What did her sudden appearance have to do with Walter's death? Was she just paying her respects? And why didn't she stay behind and at least speak to her father? The only answers I would get for now were thunderclaps and the steady beating of wind-driven raindrops against the window.

With the late afternoon traffic and a sometimes blinding rain, it took us forty-five minutes to get to Franklin. When we pulled up to the Holiday Inn, I saw a black-and-white parked in the side lot. I motioned for Tip to pull alongside.

"She's still in there, room one-sixty-nine," Nate said, water dripping off the brim of his hat as he stuck his head out the patrol car window. "So what's her sin?"

An interesting choice of words, I thought. "That's what we're here to find out," I said.

"You need me to hang around?"

"No. We just want to ask her some question. He started to roll up his window.

"And thanks, Nate. I owe you one."

He nodded, waved, backed out at an angle, then drove off.

"Two doors down, Tip. You ready?"

"Whatever you say, Jamie. Ah'm jus' along fo' da ride."

Tip pulled the cruiser into a space almost directly in front of the room. We climbed out into a driving rain and ran under the second floor canopy. I knocked on the door.

"Angela?" I said, wiping my face with my hand.

I heard a TV blaring, but no one answered. I knocked harder.

"Angela? It's Jamie Vining. Open up, I need to talk to you."

"Go away! I don't have anything to say."

"It's pouring down out here, Angela. Please let me in."

"What do you want?"

The muffled voice was louder now, as if she'd moved closer to the door.

"I want to know if you're all right, where you've been. Open up, please."

"I'm okay. Now leave. I don't have anything to say to you."

Tip rapped the door with his fist.

"If you don't open—"

"I've got a gun. I'll shoot if you don't leave. I mean it."

We backed away, stood on each side of the door.

"Angela, I want to know what the hell is going on. Now open the door or we'll break it in."

The first shot hit somewhere near the handle and splintered wood toward the outside. The second one blew a hole as big as my fist in the hollow-core, scattering more paint chips and wood shards on the sidewalk.

"Dammit! I told you to leave, didn't I?"

Tip had his gun drawn and was braced against the wall, two feet from the doorway. "What now, cher?" he said.

"She's got to be on something..."

"I ain't much worry 'bout dat. She jus' took a

shot at da law, mon. Ain't much choice now."

"Angela! Drop the gun. Whatever the problem is, this won't help."

A man in the next room stuck his head out his door, then jerked back inside.

"If you don't leave, I'm going to shoot myself next. I'm warning you, don't come in..."

Her voice was top octave now, and sounded like the high-pitched squealing of a charging swamp hog.

"...do you hear me? I'm going to blow my brains out."

"What brains? Da girl musta fried dem a while back, yeah," Tip whispered.

"Skipped that sensitivity class last month, did you?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind," I said. "Angela, put the gun down and let's talk. Nobody's going to hurt you."

"I warned you," she screamed.

Tip hit the bottom of the door in a roll block just as the next gunshot exploded in our ears. The door crashed from its hinges. I dived in over Tip's sprawled form and sprang to my knees. I saw Angela slumped against the wall, the revolver still in her hand, and a mass of dark blood running down the right side of her face.

"Da crazy..."

I snatched the gun and pitched it into the corner. Then I lay Angela across the bed and put my hand to the wound. The blood flow was profuse, but it felt like a crease in her scalp. Maybe she'd changed her mind at the last second; maybe she was just too strung out to aim straight. Whatever the reason, she had failed if her intention was suicide.

Tip was on the phone dialing 911 when I heard the sirens outside. I suspected the man next door had beaten us to it. I grabbed a towel from the bathroom and used it as a compress to stop the bleeding. Angela was out cold.

A minute later, Nate Benoit burst through the doorway, gun in hand.

"Hell, man, you shoot all your suspects during

questioning?" he said, holstering his automatic.

Tip hung up the phone, frowned at Nate, and turned back to me. "Da ambulance is on da way, Jamie."

Angela was moaning, and the towel was beginning to crimson around the edges.

"I should have punted this one, Tip. Look at her arms."

From the inside crook of both elbows to just above the wrists, Angela had fresh bruises and needle tracks.

"How da hell you s'pose to know, cher?"

"She warned us. I should have backed off. We could have done it another way."

"It was her call. Wit her hopped up lak dat, it was gone be bad any way it went down, yeah."

Nate Benoit put his hands on his hips, then added his two cents. "I guess you know that you just made it a Franklin case, huh?"

The paramedics shoved their way past a gathering crowd and pushed into the room. They took one look at Angela, and motioned me out of the way.

"You fellas need to leave, please. Go out there and get those people away from the ambulance. Let us do our job."

They had her out of there and on the way to Foundation Hospital in a matter of minutes. Tip and I followed the ambulance. Once Angela was in the emergency room, I phoned Marquand and filled him in on what happened.

He was as upset as I've ever heard him. He jumped right into the middle of the ABCs of cursing and added a few creative expressions of his own, not the least of which was something in Cajun. Loosely translated, it had to do with feeding my genitals to an alligator. I handed the phone to Tip.

"He wants to talk to me?"

"No, but I'm tired of listening."

I walked down the corridor, found the exit, and walked out under the high canopy that overhung the emergency room entrance. I stared out at an orange-peel sun that had come out only long

enough to tip its hat and was now disappearing below the horizon. Accumulated rainwater was thrashing through a nearby gutter and gushing out the glutted end onto the pavement, and a misting drizzle blew underneath the canopy and sprinkled my face. The Devil was beating his wife somewhere out beyond the silhouetted oaks, and a portion of Hell was left attended by fools—a colony called Franklin, Louisiana.

"Marquand was blaming you for da way tings turned out. Thought you was drunk." Tip had slipped up behind me.

"Yeah, I got the same impression, only it felt more like I'd backed into an airplane propeller."

"I told him da girl didn't give us much choice."

"I ought to hire you as my lawyer," I said, turning around.

"Huh?"

"Makes a great defense for being drunk."

"You wasn't drunk."

"Sounds like a vote of confidence to me."

He chuckled me on the shoulder, like Walter used to do. "If you tryin' to self-destruct, let me know, Jamie. I got dis ting 'bout standin' next to explodin' bombs."

The rain started to come down in sheets again, began blowing under the canopy. We walked back inside.

I spent the next three days dealing with fallout. The Franklin P.D. was pushing for jurisdiction; Deke Lavalais was blaming me for what happened to his daughter; and my landlord wanted to evict me for leaving a dead dog to stink up the apartment complex. In the meantime, Angela was fighting a battle on two fronts.

She was recuperating nicely from the self-inflicted head wound, but she was looking at going down for several firearms violations, and her forced abstention from heroin was driving her up the walls. All I was interested in were some answers.

I made the trip from Logan City every day; every day Angela went ballistic and the nurses ran me out of her room. The last time, Deke Lavalais

was waiting for me in the hallway. He looked at me as if I were a cut of prime meat and he was ready to grill.

"You—you're the reason she won't see me," he screamed. "You put her in there, now she's going to jail because of you."

I could almost hear Walter whispering in my ear. 'Never argue with a fool.'

"I'm sorry that you feel that way, Deke. But I didn't put that needle in her arm."

'Lighten up,' said Walter, as Deke drew back to take a swing at me. I crossed my arms in front of me, warding off the blow.

A nurse stuck her head out of Angela's room.

"She wants to see you," she said.

Deke dropped his arms to his side, his hands turned outward as if to say 'thank God'. He started past me.

"Not you," the nurse said, putting out her hand to stop him. "Him."

"Wha-aat?"

I left Deke standing in the hall, his face twisted in surprise. I shut the door behind me.

"Jamie?"

"What is it, Angela?"

She looked more like an embalmer's lab demonstration than a living, breathing human being. Her eyes were almost lost in dark sockets, and her skin had the pallor of sculptor's clay. She had tubes sticking in her from all angles, and the room smelled like someone had forgotten to empty a bedpan.

"Can you get me a fix?" she said, her voice thready and pleading.

"You know better than that."

"Please, I know you can. You can do anything you want. You're a cop."

I remembered what the doctor had said, that he was going to start her on Methadone soon to offset the convulsions of withdrawal.

"I've got to have something. Please, don't make me beg," she said.

"I can talk to the doctor, Angela. That's all I can do."

"Would you? I'd..."

She broke off and tears streamed from her eyes.

"Will you talk to me, Angela? Tell me—"

"Just get me something for this pain. You will, won't you?"

"Tell me what happened. How you disappeared and why. And why you came back."

She lifted a shaking hand.

"You'll help me?"

"I'll do what I can, Angela."

She began to talk—in long, feverish sentences with no punctuation, her voice scratching like a needle across a vinyl record. How she'd got hooked on drugs at fifteen, after her mother had succumbed to cancer; how she'd been seduced by her history teacher; how she'd gotten pregnant by him and been afraid to tell her father. How the man had tried to get her to abort the baby, and how the priest had been totally insensitive to her plight. How she'd finally given in to fear and the pressure from her lover, and had let him take her to some quack in Golden Meadow who'd ripped her unborn baby from her womb. All the while she clutched my hand, as if I would leave her to her pain once she'd finished her story.

"It's all right, Angela. I'm going to help you, I promise."

I glanced over at the nurse. Her face was as white as her uniform.

"Would you get me some water?" I said.

She just stood there gawking.

"Ma'am?"

"Oh yes, sir. There's a pitcher by the bed, sir, and some cups."

"No. I want bottled water. Will you step down the hall and get me one out of the machine, please? Here's some money."

"Yes, sir," she said, taking the dollar. "I'll be right back."

"Thank you."

Angela had her eyes closed; her bony hand was wrapped tightly around my wrist now. She seemed to be repeating the Lord's Prayer.

"Angela? Go on, honey."

She attempted a smile. It got caught in the tube that hooked over her bottom lip. She started again.

There were complications, she said, and the bleeding wouldn't stop. The teacher dropped her off at a local emergency room and left her on her own. She was too young to admit herself, and as a last resort called her Uncle Walter, swearing him to secrecy before she'd tell him where she was. On and on, the soap opera continued, until she came to the part about Walter and the history teacher.

"I-I don't really know what happened. Donnie... Mr. Agar... just wasn't there anymore. One day he was a teacher at the high school... the next day, he wasn't. Uncle Walter said he left town. But nobody knew about it, and Donnie didn't tell anyone. He was just gone."

She went on to say that Walter had gotten her to a doctor in New Iberia, someone who owed him a big favor—she didn't know what kind. She threatened to run away if her uncle told her father anything about what had happened. After a few days in the hospital, she agreed to stay at Walter's house until she could decide what to do. It was after her uncle had suggested she talk to the priest, and after she'd found her lover's bloodied car key holder with his name on it that she became afraid. She stole Walter's pickup, the one he'd later told me he'd sold, stole it while he was at work, and ran off with no particular destination in mind.

I couldn't wrap my mind around it all. It was a gothic tale. On the one hand, too sordid and unbelievable; on the other, a typical twentieth century tragedy. The pain came from personalizing it, and Walter, with family involved, had been unable to avoid breaking his own rule to keep things uncomplicated.

The rest of Angela's story was about pimps and 'johns' and drugs and degradation, and I listened, in spite of myself, in spite of all that I'd been taught, with a heart that was being bruised by every detail.

Angela had ended up in Laurel, Mississippi with some lowlife guitarist named McGruder, and had been living the life of what she called a 'band-aid'—what we once called 'groupies'. Every now and then, in her weak moments, she called Walter and checked in. He always tried to talk her back home; she always hung up and swore she was never going to call again. The last time she phoned and couldn't get him, she tried the office. That's when she found out he was dead. She took McGruder's car and came to the funeral, feeling totally responsible for Walter's death.

Why had she gone off the deep end when we found her at the motel? She didn't know. Maybe it was fear, she said. Maybe it was guilt. Maybe it was the drugs; she couldn't say. But she cried, and apologized, and begged for forgiveness, and squeezed the blood from my wrist.

"I've got to go now, Angela. I've got to go back to work. You understand?"

She peeped at me from those hollow sockets, her red-rimmed eyes bleeding with tears.

"You'll help me, won't you? You'll get me something for this pain?"

"I'll see to it, baby. Don't you worry now," I said, prying her fingers from my wrist. "I'll do it right away, okay?"

She bumped that tube with a half-smile and closed her eyes.

"Your dad's outside. You really ought to let him in to see you. It'll be okay, I promise."

She waved feebly, her eyes still closed, as if she were no longer able to fight the inevitable. I walked toward the door.

"Jamie?" she whispered. "Thank you. Thank you for listening."

When I exited the door, the nurse was standing there with a bottle of spring water in her hand.

"Did you really want this? Or did I do a good thing by leaving you alone?"

"Yes," I said, leaving her standing there with the bottle.

At the end of the corridor, I met Deke getting off the elevator.

"I think she's ready to see you, now."

His face lit up. I turned and got on the elevator and didn't look back.

As I stepped out into the cool, evening air, I tried to lie to myself—that the sepsis was contained within those antiseptic hospital walls; that life was more logical than emotional; that a plan, if carefully prepared and faithfully followed, would insulate you from harm. But it was a lie, after all.

Walter had learned that, somehow. Before he went hurtling through the air to his death, he must have known. The scales don't always balance. Sometimes, when you get too close to the edge, you fall.

Was he drunk? Was he out there on the Atchafalaya Bridge fighting the universal battle between right and wrong? Angela was underage; he could have forced her to come home. He had control, but he lost it somehow. Perhaps when he took the law into his own hands—what happened between Walter and Donnie Agar? I remembered the disappearance. Nothing ever came of it. Was Walter responsible? Did he stand on the bridge railing and complain, fist raised, to an unresponsive God? Or did he simply deal with his failure to maintain a safe distance in the only way a guilt-ridden man could?

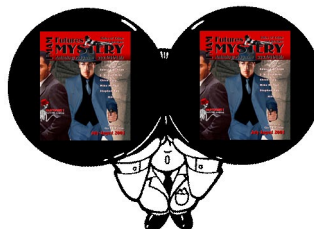
I'd never know all the answers. Hell, I wasn't even sure of all the questions. What I did know was that I had a case of sorrow that not even a

gallon of Jack Daniels or a jolt of self-righteous anger could cure, and that, as bad as it hurt, sorrow was better than the alternative. 'There's always tomorrow,' Walter often said. I wish he had listened.

I got in my SUV and turned down the highway toward Logan City. The sky was clearing. I saw the first star. There were still things to do, things to set straight, and I had to see a man about a dog.

Chick Lang is a part time schoolteacher and computer consultant who spends most of his spare time writing fiction. In the last three years he's garnered nearly sixty writing credits in various publications, including FMAM. He is currently serving in an editorial capacity for FMAM, The Muse Marquee, and Coffee Cramp Magazine. Presently he lives in Laurel, Mississippi with his wife Cheryl and daughter Natalie. Chick can be contacted at:

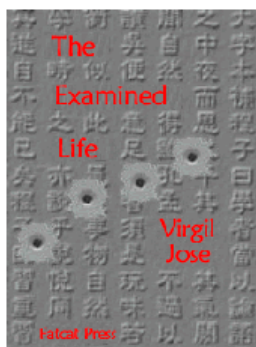
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The Examined Life

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If You Like ... a Good Mystery

The note on the short story assignment for English class read, "You are a mover and a shaker. Continue to write." Doctor Sarah Roody's inscription gave Rupert Holmes all the permission he needed to fill his life with written word and song. He wrote for pleasure in his teens and twenties while pursuing a career in music that has spanned decades.

So, what do you do with your life after you've been labeled an "American treasure" by the Los Angeles Times? If you're Rupert Holmes, you write and supervise the production of musicals on two continents, winning multiple Tony awards in the process. You create and write a hit sitcom. You write chart-topping songs for pop bands. You win "Edgars" for your stage productions ... and you write a mystery novel called *Where the Truth Lies*, which gets optioned by Hollywood and made into a movie starring Kevin Bacon.

That's what you do when you're Rupert Holmes.

"I've always written," says Holmes. Indeed, he has. A prolific writer, Holmes always seems to have something going on both the front and back burners. *Swing*, his second novel for Random House, blends his passion for music with his love of mystery fiction in a unique sort of way. Although the book is wonderfully written, tight, and self-contained, the publisher requested one last revision of the sort that most authors will never hear: Random House wanted a full musical score to go with the book. Not only that, but they wanted the music to have additional clues that weren't in the novel and – "Oh yeah, they wanted it in about six months. No pressure or anything."

Holmes managed the task with aplomb, writing and recording seven original songs, most with full Swing band accompaniment. The CD is smooth, and adds a depth to the storyline of the book that is quite striking and unlike anything else out there. Although the book stands very well on its own merits, the deluxe edition that includes the CD is worth the extra couple of dollars.

Holmes is quite philosophical about his success in the mystery world. A name, he says, will only take you so far. After that, talent and hard work are all that stand between you and suc-

cess. "Ninety percent of the work in a manuscript goes into the first half, the second half requires the other ninety percent."

Underneath the entertaining personality is a soul that is driven to plumb the depths of human emotion every way it can. When he writes, he writes with passion, exploring every aspect of a character. In fact, he has a tendency to overwrite the first drafts of his books. "The first third of my novels are almost always over-written," he says. "I like to get to know my characters . . . set them in motion and just run after them. I have a hard time getting to the crisis because I'm enjoying the characters and their lives so much."

His lead character in *Swing* is especially real to him. Not that Ray Sherwood is a paper alter-ego, but "He's all the things that haunt me. The humor, the music. Where there is good in me, I've tried to put that into Ray. So I guess that he's the closest thing to me that I've ever written."

Part of the affinity for a character comes in the way a writer presents him or her to the world. Holmes says that point of view is particularly important in a mystery novel. For him, a good mystery means that the narrator is somewhat in the dark about what's going on. Writing in third person doesn't appeal to him for that exact reason. "You wind up wondering 'who is this god telling the story?' But if A and B are conspiring against C, and if C is telling the story, then there's no fog in the story telling . . . it just naturally gravitates toward first person."

He uses a classic pop tune to drive home the idea of choosing the correct narrative point of view. "I'm a huge Beatles fan, but 'She Loves You' is the strangest song they ever wrote. Here's this person – we don't know who it is – and he's saying, 'I'm sounding happy because she's in love with you. You should be glad! Yeah, yeah, yeah.' Who's this being sung to?"

Of course, there's more to a story than point of view. There's actual story-telling that must occur and it must draw readers in and keep them there. "The story is finished when it's told. That sounds a

little trite, but it's true. The bigger question in my mind is always 'When does the story begin?'" This is where Holmes feels he excels. As a song writer he's practiced at the art of telling a story quickly. Think of a song as a piece of very short fiction set to music. "As a 'story songwriter' most of my 104 songs are fiction. I mean, if you think about it, all songs are stories, and most fall under the category of fiction. Eleanor Rigby probably didn't exist."

His foray into the printed word has been met with commercial success and a warm reception from the writing world. The writing community, in his opinion, is much more welcoming than others he's familiar with. "There are probably more overtly crazy people in music" than in the writing he says. But the best thing about being a writer, when a person looks at it pragmatically, is the low startup cost. "You can start with a pencil and a pad of paper," and then you can change the world. Or at least entertain somebody for a few hours.

When the vision of a book is fully realized, both the author and the reader leave the experience with a sense of loss. The author has to say goodbye to a cast of characters that he has lived with and grown attached to. The reader puts the book down with a sigh, knowing that the characters live on but the reader will no longer be witness to their private moments and inner thoughts. A kind of disappointment, or a certain air of mourning prevails until there is a sequel, if there is one.

On the other hand, novels are often turned into movies. The best of these allow a reader to see the characters come to life, and to fully experience the world as the author wrote it. In the case of *Where the Truth Lies*, Holmes had the unique experience of seeing his own vision portrayed masterfully. "I had a private screening, which was unbelievable," he says. It wasn't a little room with noisy equipment running in the background, but a full theater with his own private phone to the projectionist's booth to start and stop the movie. Directed by Atom Egoyan, Holmes says the film version of his book is a "remarkable and creative representation" of his novel. "Most of the scenes

look like what I had in my mind when I wrote them in the book."

Fiction coming to life. Whether it's in the reader's mind, or interpreted to the big screen, there's a magic to writing that Holmes believes he was born to do. With the release of his new movie, a box set of his songs coming out soon, a murder-mystery-musical play called *Curtains* opening next summer with a score written by Candor and Ebb (*Cabaret*), what's left to do?

"Well, I'm working on a couple of new novels and developing some series characters. One is contemporary, and the other is extremely period."

Paul and Linda McCartney once told Holmes that they were huge fans of his. This floored the young Rupert Holmes. But it doesn't come as any great surprise to the rest of us, because Doctor Sarah Roody was right: Holmes really is a "mover and a shaker."

What will he do when he finally sets his keyboard aside?

"I won't drink any Pina Coladas, that's for sure. I hate those things!"

**Next issue: Interview with Lida E. Quillen.
FMAM's Owner and Publisher**



"THINGS ARE WORSE THAN I THOUGHT."



"Alfie recommends: paws over this one—a smartly paced, intelligently written puzzler that not only asks 'whodunit,' but how."

>>

Dr Talmo matches wits with the fiendish identical twins. Is the murderer Peter or Paul?

COLD INTRUSION

from "A Tobias Talmo Tale"

Rus Morgan



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I arrived at the Coral Gables Country Club and Golf Course in Gastonia, North Carolina, as a freak ice storm was closing in—while my fellow 300 members of the New York Anthropological Forensic Association unpacked their bags—four hours before Dr. Leonard Murphy was brutally murdered.

I am not a practicing forensic professional, but I

do have graduate degrees in Criminology, Criminal Law, and a doctorate in Forensic Anthropology. Over the years I have established some credence in the field because I have a mind that has an overpowering need to balance things. I cannot leave the hanging thread. Because of this modest success, I had been engaged by the conference Chair, Dr. Roland Crossen, to be the mod-

erator for a panel of four PhDs. They would be discussing the art of not screwing up a crime scene.

The retainer was not that good, but all expenses were paid for the three days, including first-class air. The panel only lasted four hours on the second morning, and the rest of the time was my own. I reveled in the thought of some serious rest and relaxation with someone else picking up the tab.

I disembarked at the Charlotte/Douglas airport and boarded the shuttle bus with a gaggle of chattering forensic professionals. An out-of-season flurry of snow gave me the chills.

I have always been deficient in the "cocktail talk" department, so I spent the greater part of the 18 mile trip to the lodge engrossed in a recently published treatise on advanced decomposition. We arrived slightly in advance of check-in time in an ice-cold mist which was turning the air gray. The weatherman had promised the precip was going to get worse and temperatures were going to plummet into the low 20's. This was happening as we waited for our rooms to be readied.

I was to meet Dr. Crossen in the lobby. I sat down and reflected on my duties with the panel. It consisted of Dr. Dolan Crinemeier, Dr. Charles Windemere, the identical twins Drs. Peter and Paul Latross and Dr. Leonard Murphy—none of whom I had previously met.

A wealthy man from old money, Dr. Murphy was the preeminent pacesetter in the field. He was, I found, for good reasons not loved by anyone who found it necessary to come into contact with him. His reputation preceded him. A brilliant scientist with advanced degrees in Forensics, Anthropology and Criminology, he was universally respected and loathed. For the first 30 years of his career, he had amassed knowledge as a forensic pathologist as a full professor at prestigious Froman University. He was a domineering instructor there. His classes were an hour of pontification, suffering no questions. First-year students who blithely ignored an upperclassman's warning and

witlessly stuck their heads in the old lion's mouth withdrew headless from his class.

I hoped I would not have to spoil my four days here by personally intersecting with him prior to the panel, but I was not that lucky.

I am an avid observer of people and the aura they create around themselves. I heard Dr. Murphy before I was aware it was him. The lobby fell strangely silent as a querulous voice penetrated the air. I turned to watch this man who was raising his voice, and I received a marvelous lesson in how not to treat your fellow humans. The owner of the voice was indeed, I later discovered, Dr. Leonard Murphy. He was a spare senior citizen, flat of belly and chest, with a dun-colored mat of thinning hair: a testy old welterweight in a rumpled gray suit who did not traffic with lesser lights below the lofty ledge of his own PhDs. Even with his peers he was known to be short, sharp, and unforgiving.

He was, to be perfectly blunt, an arrogant, spoiled bastard.

At ten decibels above the sound in the room, he first flogged the cab driver for not getting his bags in quickly enough. Then he turned his wrath on the room clerk for not having the suite ready immediately. When it was finally available, he speared the porter with his ire. None did he tip, and he grumbled his way off after the bellman as they made their way to the elevator. As a conciliatory gesture, we heard the concierge put him on the third floor with a sweetheart view of the heated pool. We all exchanged relieved glances when the doors closed and the elevator lifted above the lobby.

The lobby area filled rapidly as taxis, buses and private cars scurried up under the front portico. The vehicles quickly ejected their occupants and scuttled off in the freezing rain like rats fleeing a sinking ship.

"Tobias Talmo, Dr. Tobias Talmo, please come to the front desk."

I was reading to pass the time but was still star-

tled to hear my own name in the midst of the steady hum of humanity. I strolled up to the concierge and was met by a rotund little man in a light-colored suit. He was slightly shorter than I and had less hair. He glanced myopically at my badge through thick glasses and extended his hand.

"Ah, Dr. Talmo, it's a pleasure. I'm Crossen."

I liked this little man instantly: a distinguished Doctor with two advanced degrees in his own right but with no pretense about him.

We exchanged pleasantries. He asked me to join him and the rest of the panel in the bar for a friendly drink. We sifted our way through the crowd to the lounge area where we found the other three panel members in comfortable chairs around a low table. Crossen introduced me all around. We all had something in common: we wore glasses.

The cocktail waitress appeared and I ordered an Armagnac. In a few moments she placed a snifter in my hands. As I swirled the aromatic brew and appreciated the delightful aroma, I had a few moments to unobtrusively assess my panel members.

Dr. Dolan Crinemeier was the thinnest and the youngest of the trio at about 45. With more than 50 peer-reviewed published articles on criminology and forensics to his credit, he was a natural selection for the panel. I remembered his name from one of the text books I had read when I was taking my degree. I mentioned that to him and he smiled and quietly preened.

Dr. Charles Windemere was bulked up through the shoulders like a weight lifter, and it was evident as he mashed my right hand. A wide boyish grin belied his years of experience as Medical Examiner for Consuela County in California. His research there in the degeneration of the mortal remains under varied circumstances has led to more than one conviction.

The twins were a kick. Identical in every respect, it was impossible to tell them apart. Two knowing smiles below two pairs of impish eyes topped by

the same shock of gray hair made you think you were standing in a mirrored room. They played the game and were tremendously amused that no one could tell them apart. They were dressed exactly alike in dark blue suits. The suits were expertly tailored to conceal the beginning paunch of the late middle-aged professional. The twins had a disturbing habit of one starting a sentence and the other ending it.

Dr. Crossen laughed and said, "They help us out, Dr. Talmo, by promising to always put Paul alphabetically on their right." He pointed to the left one. "So that is Peter...I think," and we all laughed.

With a twinkle in his eye, Paul, the one to my left, spoke. "Dr. Talmo, your keen sense of observation is well known to this group." He paused just a moment and Peter caught up the thread: "So we would like to make you a small wager." Peter stopped and Paul continued: "If you can tell us apart before this convention ends..." and Peter stepped back in: "...we'll present you with a case of that delightful brew you are drinking."

I took a sip and asked, "And, Doctors, what happens if I can't come up with the answer?"

Their smiles were warm, but there was a bit of an edge in their tone. They dropped the gauntlet together. "We place you on the heap with all the rest of the people who have tried and failed."

I had no idea how I was going to win, but the challenge had a visceral appeal I could not deny. "You're on," I said, and emptied my snifter.

I set the glass on the table and rose. There were objections all around to my leaving, but I explained that since I was not an expert moderator, I needed some time to prepare. As I walked past the twins, I bent over and rested a hand on each of their shoulders. "You've really made this trip interesting—thank you," I said, giving them each a pat.

Dr. Crossen went with me to make sure I was properly checked into a room. He gave me a handful of material to prepare me for the panel and invited me to sit at his table during the eve-

ning meal at 7:00. We would hook up at the cocktail party just before dinner. He said he had to run because he had an appointment with Dr. Murphy and didn't want to keep the great one waiting. First he snagged a roving photographer who was snapping pics in the lobby and insisted on a picture of the two of us together.

For once the weatherman was on target—or perhaps slightly below it. The mist morphed into a steady, soaking rain and met the dropping temperature. It began to glisten and cling like glue. It feathered from the trees, rimmed the huge windows in the lobby, and began to form shining stalactites from the bottom of the outside balconies.

Over-laden tree branches were snapping. A large tree at the end of the driveway gave up, flopped over, and took a telephone pole with it. That took out the electricity and phones and isolated the country club as effectively as if it had been transported to the moon. The club had an emergency generator so life inside went on as usual, but outside it would remain under ice until the weather turned warmer. The weatherman on the tube expected that to be in about 48 hours.

I rummaged around my suite and was pleasantly surprised to see my favorite brandy and a snifter in the mini-bar. Anyplace that served this marvelous brew couldn't be all bad. I poured an ounce in the snifter and swirled it around, inhaling the heady aroma. I reveled in the serene view of the golf course from my eighth floor window. I was on the opposite side of the building from the swimming pool. Outside, the earth shuddered to a standstill as Mother Nature festooned the building with four inches of glittering ice. In the few minutes I was in the bar she had turned the roads, cart paths and other flat spots into skating rinks, and anointed the gorgeous golf course with a glassy sheen on which even the foxes could not move.

I lay back on the bed and watched the news. Then I connected my laptop and checked my email. It was still an hour before the cocktail party

and I dozed.

The phone dug me out of my torpor, but it took me a few moments to realize where I was. I could not ignore its buzzing so I picked it up.

I recognized Dr. Crossen's voice as the words tumbled out of the phone. "Dr. Talmo, something terrible has happened I'm afraid. Dr. Murphy has been murdered—can you come down here immediately?"

I tried to push the fuzz out of my head. "Of course. Yes, where are you?"

He spoke to someone on the other end then returned to me. "Three-eighteen. Please hurry."

A crowd milled in the corridor leading to 318. I wound my way through them and bumped into the Doctors Latross, who were being detained by two security guards. I raised my eyebrows at the twins, and Peter smiled ruefully. "They think we did it."

"Did you?" I asked.

Peter was blunt. "I found him and raised the cry."

"Couldn't have happened to a nicer fella—and that's all we're going to say," finished Paul.

"Have either of you seen the body?"

"No," Paul said.

"Yes," Peter countered. "One of us had an appointment to meet with him but couldn't get an answer. We finally called the concierge and found him."

"Then why are they holding you?" I pointed to the wall just above the next room. "There's a camera right up there that ought to clear you."

"Because one of us was in there earlier," Peter said.

"And we're not telling who, and that really is all we are going to say," said Paul.

I turned to continue and was jostled against one of them by the crowd. He flinched and I said, "I'm sorry, Doctor. I didn't mean to bump you. What's the problem?"

He shrugged it off but raised his arm so I could see a small bandage protruding from his sleeve. "I

scratched my arm on the table in our room, and it's a bit sore. I'm fine."

I continued through the crowd and found a tight group just outside the door of the late Dr. Murphy's room

The roster had belched up five coroners and three meds who stood around like patrician monks and concurred on the verdict. Dr. Murphy had been felled by one surgically-placed, brutal upward thrust. It was a long sharp instrument inserted just below the sternum. It was rammed immediately up into the left ventricle. Loss of consciousness had come mercifully in that instant, followed by death in seconds.

Dr. Crossen, towing another portly gentleman, flagged me. Without preamble he introduced us. "Mr. Carnigan, this is Dr. Tobias Talmo. Dr. Talmo, Mr. Carnigan is the owner."

Carnigan was a study in nervous dread with a twittering voice to match. "We've never, never had anything like this happen before. I can't imagine."

It was obvious Dr. Crossen was looking to me to conduct some kind of an investigation so I shook Carnigan's limp hand and asked Crossen, "Have you found the murder weapon?"

"No."

"Any assumptions?"

"None, except one of the Latrosses has to have done it."

He was serious. I asked, just to double check, "How was he found?"

"Peter Latross had an appointment with him and couldn't gain entrance. He called the concierge and then they found him."

I acted dumb. "That doesn't guarantee complicity."

Crossen was solemn. It was difficult to accuse a colleague of this sort of depravity. "Paul Latross had an earlier appointment and was let in. I think he did the dirty work and Peter is covering for him."

"Since you can't tell one from the other, how do you know which went in earlier?"

He went blank. I told him I wanted to see the room and the body and turned to the hotel security guard on the door. He handed me a pair of rubber gloves and two bags for my feet. I put them on and he let me into the room. There were two or three other criminologists from the convention already casing the scene. I did not want to interfere or be distracted so I kept to myself. I scanned the suite.

It was a deluxe accommodation, including two spacious rooms and a large bath. In the bedroom I saw a king-sized bed, a dresser with a mirror, and a work area with an open laptop. A 42 inch flat-panel TV clung to the wall. The bath, shower and lav had gold fixtures, and there was a Jacuzzi in the bath. In the living room there were a free-standing wet bar and refrigerator, two comfortable chairs and a sofa around an ornate coffee table. A microwave, a coffee machine and another flat-panel wall television completed the furnishings.

The victim was on his side on a ten-thousand dollar Persian rug. He was in the fetal position, holding his belly and curled around his own hands. His face indicated the shock he must have felt for just a moment after the fatal blow. He wore pants, a shirt, but no shoes. The clothes were together in a precise unit next to the bed. A little blood always looks like a lot of blood, but this time it was not an illusion. He had bled out copiously in seconds from the golf-ball-sized hole just above his belt-line. The blood was thick and syrupy and soaked the rug in front of him in an area as far as I could reach with my arm. Had the murder weapon not penetrated his heart and killed him, the blood loss would have.

Opposite the entrance door at the other side of the suite was a large sliding glass door that led out onto the balcony. The carpet was slightly moist in front of the door, indicating someone had opened it for at least a few moments. I slid it back and quickly stepped into the biting cold. I was overlooking the inner courtyard.

The only part of the lodge and grounds that

had been spared the ice was the heated swimming pool below. It had become a monster steam bath with clouds of vapor rising above it, and the pool was not visible from three floors up. I extended my hand from the balcony and felt a difference in the temperature climbing through the mist from the pool.

Spikes of ice glittered on the overhangs all around the courtyard. One of the spikes had already broken off above me so I gingerly stuck my head through the open spot to look down and out. All the windows I could see were rimed with hoarfrost and hung with variously-sized icicles. In other circumstances it would have been a fairy tale picture to mail on a Christmas postcard, but here and now it rang a somber note. At my feet were some diluted brown stains that may or may not have been blood.

I had seen enough. I went back inside. I went to the door and took off the gloves and booties. Crossen was there but Carnigan was not with him. The din in the hall drowned out normal conversation, so I put my mouth close to his ear. "I want to see the surveillance tape."

We were in the Security Control room on the eighth floor. Fifteen feet by 20 feet and packed with electronic gear and monitors. There were 40 monitors with 40 different scenes.

While he located the disc we wanted, the supervisor informed me there were 400 cameras in the hotel, with another 20 on the grounds and around the swimming pool. As he talked the pictures were changing. The cameras were recording the scenes in one-second bursts so everyone looked as though they were doing the robot dance. The supervisor indicated the seated guards. "One guard to every ten monitors," he said. "Nothing gets past us here."

We were in luck. The camera that covered that section of the hall was directly across the hall and at ceiling level. It gave a bird's-eye view of Murphy's door. Crossen and I watched the monitor as Crossen himself came around the corner and was admitted into Murphy's room. Twenty minutes

later, at 2:15, the door opened and Crossen came out. He was followed halfway by Murphy, who was making some obvious gestures.

"Murphy always had to have the last word," Crossen reflected.

At 3:00, one of the Doctors Latross came down the hall, knocked, and was let in. He was in there exactly 13 minutes before he exited. No one else could be seen in the doorway.

At 4:30, another Doctor Latross came down the hall, knocked and stood there repeating his knock for three minutes. He then pulled a cell phone from his pocket, made a call, and was joined in 5 ½ minutes by the concierge and a security guard.

They all went in, then the guard flew out and ran down the hall.

I turned to Dr. Crossen. "I know how Dr. Murphy was killed, and I know who killed him— but I don't know why. Why don't you bring the Latrosses and their armed guard up to my room in an hour? I should be able to clear this whole thing up."

In my room I booted my laptop. I was looking for information. I keyed in "Froman University" and their website popped up. In search I asked for *Faculty, Murphy*. In a moment I was looking at the sardonic and sour countenance of one Dr. Leonard Murphy, PhD, 35 year tenured Professor of Forensic Anthropology. He had been hired as a junior professor at this all-male school. He immediately began to publish brilliant insights into the fledgling discipline of Forensic Anthropology and within two years was offered tenure. From there his career was a shooting star. I'm a hard-copy man, so I printed out this information.

At this point the search engine hyperlinked me to another site. It morphed into the local newspaper files from that city and led me into Dr. Murphy's bio. It gave me basically the same information as the academic biography but added one thing. At eight years into his academic career there was a hiccup. He was accused of plagiarism

by two lower classmen. With the barest hint of a payoff, the charges were dropped and his star continued to ascend. I printed this information also.

The newspaper bio linked me back to the school. The only other interesting bit of info was that two years later the school allowed women into the traditional all-male school.

I poured myself a sip of Armagnac and digested my info in front of the picture window. The golf course was vibrant with diamonds. I could see a red fox actually trying to negotiate one of the glassy greens. His legs splayed out but then he brought them together and did a Buster Keaton on his back. He flipped over but couldn't make his feet and disappeared over a slight rise, crawling on his haunches like a tiger getting ready to pounce.

I went back to the laptop and searched for the Drs. Latross. Was this coincidence or an important clue? They matriculated at Froman University just before the hiccup in Murphy's career. With their field of study, they both would have to have been his students. They left very suddenly "for personal reasons" in the middle of their sophomore year. Was there a connection?

"The key to this puzzle is the identity of the Latrosses," I said.

We were all gathered in my room. Dr. Crossen was in one of the overstuffed chairs with his legs comfortably crossed. The twins sat defiantly on the couch in the middle of the room, and two burly security guards flanked the hall door and never took their eyes off the twins. Timothy Halliburton, the tall slender chief of hotel security, lounged discreetly between the twins and the hall door like a vigilant Doberman pinscher. The hotel manager, Mr. Carnigan, stood nervously by the big window.

I methodically served drinks all around, including the twins. I took my time in order to increase the tension, although it was already an oppressive presence in that room.

All eyes were on me as I sipped my Armagnac. I

tipped my snifter in the direction of the twins. "Before I tell you who the murderer is, let me establish a motive."

I glanced at the twins, who were quietly sniffing their brandy. Neither one displayed anything more than passing interest.

"The twins left Froman University in the middle of their sophomore year—ostensibly for personal reasons. They transferred to Dartmouth. There they established their brilliance long before graduation by publishing papers on micro-forensics; in particular, molecular degeneration in relation to the elements. Those papers, although brilliant and ground-breaking, were relegated by their peers as addendum research to dear old Professor Murphy's publications back at Froman University."

I paused and smiled sympathetically at the twins. They were both beginning to seethe.

"It really hurts when someone steals your greatest idea and calls it his own, doesn't it? Particularly when he is the authority in the field and it is your word against his."

"That son of a bitch," they hissed together.

"Thank you both for confirming my hypothesis. That wound has been festering for over twenty years, and the opportunity today was just too tempting for you two to pass up."

Dr. Crossen interrupted anxiously. "Dr. Talmo, come back to the subject please. Just which one of these gentlemen murdered Dr. Murphy?"

"Dr. Paul is the murderer of Dr. Murphy," I said and smiled at Dr. Crossen.

He snorted. "I think we all agree that one of them did it, but the question is—" he pointed in the direction of the twins—"which one is Paul?"

I had been looking steadily at the twins. Neither showed any anxiety when I named Paul. In fact, both now looked quite at ease.

I inhaled the bouquet from my brandy. The room held its breath like a church belfry just before the bells ring. "I know which one is Paul," I said quietly.

There was the barest flicker of acknowledge-

ment from them. I was hoping one would blink, but both simply shrugged and smiled.

Halliburton stopped his pacing. His voice was an odd falsetto coming from such a tall man. "How do you know that without a shadow of doubt when I understand no one else has ever been able to tell them apart?"

I held a finger up at Halliburton to put him on hold for a moment, and I walked around to where I could stand behind the twins. Crossen leaned forward, and all eyes sought me. I grinned. I loved this part of it. These things came naturally to me, but I know they are bewildering to those who are not similarly endowed. I directed my question to Crossen. "Today in the bar, you told me they always said Paul was on the right, right?"

"Yes."

"The twins agreed with that also, so if they were telling the truth, then Paul ought to be the one on the right right now—right?" I looked down at the twins.

The Drs. Latrosse raised their sniffers in unison to me. They were both grinning.

Then I dropped the bomb. I put one hand on the shoulder of the left twin. "Paul at this moment is sitting on the left, and he is your murderer."

I felt him stiffen and knew I had hit a nerve.

Dr. Crossen was pleased, but the scientist in him refused to accept the obvious just because it was presented. He said, "This is all well and good, but we need proof. How do you know?"

I set my snifter down so I could use both hands. "There are five kinds of twins. These twins are monozygotic—or identical twins. They are exact copies of each other. Since they admitted in the bar without duress that Paul was on the right and Peter on the left, I took them at their word. When I stood up and started away, I leaned down and spoke to them, but what I really wanted to do was look at the top of their heads."

Crossen was following what I said but was having a hard time giving it credence.

I continued: "In mirror twins, the hair crown rotates opposite on one head from the other. I don't

know if this is *always* true or not, but frequently the direction of the crown on identical twins is reversed. In other words, the hair lies opposite way on the top of their heads. I hit it lucky because it was true of the Latross twins. Paul was indeed on the right and his crown lies clockwise. Peter's lies counterclockwise. So if you will look at the top of their heads you will find Paul. He is the murderer—and at this moment is the twin on the left."

I watched the twins closely. Both were white-knuckling the stems of their brandy sniffers.

Halliburton said, "Fine—but how do you tie one or the other into the murder?"

"When I saw Paul on the monitor, I could see the top of his head as he stood for about 30 seconds in front of the door waiting for Murphy to open it. The head I saw there had a clockwise crown."

The twin on the left, Dr. Paul, snapped the stem on his snifter. He sat there dumbly as blood slowly dripped from the bottom of his hand. Halliburton snatched a bunch of tissues from a box and dropped them into Paul's lap.

Crossen shook his head. He was suffering from overload. He gave me a long drawn-out "Okaaay" and asked, "How was the deed done?"

I sipped my Armagnac for a moment. The aroma always inspired me. "Murphy let Paul in. They must have argued, maybe even struggled. Regardless, Paul stepped out on the balcony, snapped off a large stalactite from the ledge above, and in a monumental fit of rage rammed it like a pike into Murphy's belly. Then he walked back out onto the balcony and threw that bloody icicle into the swimming pool. I noticed some brown stains on the balcony floor which probably will be either Paul's or Murphy's blood. Paul scratched his arm during that period of time—sometimes ice can be very sharp. If you look under his sleeve you'll find a bandage that was not there in the bar, and that should wrap it up."

"So that's why we've not been able to find the murder weapon."

"Yes. And, of course, you never will—it dissolved

in the pool long ago."

Halliburton and the two security guards bundled up the twins and ushered them off down the hall, followed by Mr. Carnigan.

Crossen poured himself a parting brandy and downed it. "What a sad thing for those two, Tobias. Paul will go to jail for murder and Peter will go to jail for conspiracy."

"Yes," I said, "and I'm not going to get my case of Armagnac now with both the Latrosses in jail."

Crossen paused at the door. "Oh, I think I can fix

that. The board will have no trouble approving the bonus—just give me an address where I can have it shipped to you from France."

In other lives, Rus Morgan was an actor, builder, chicken farmer, salesman, father and husband. He is working on his sixth novel in Memphis, Tennessee. He is a member of SMFS, SEMWA and is a Mensan. Although he has published a lot of non-fiction, this is his second published work of fiction.

FUTURES FLASH FICTION CONTEST

WINNERS

"Change of Heart" by Peggy Ehrhart is our first place winner! Peggy will receive \$35.00, a free copy of "Death to the Centurion" and her story will see publication in an upcoming issue of FMAM.

"Just a Little Game of Cards" by Vera Svetozarev is the second place winner. Vera will receive \$20.00, a free copy of "Death on Delivery" and her story will see publication in an upcoming issue of FMAM.

"Graves of Echo Canyon" by Deborah J. Ledford won third place. Deborah will receive \$10.00.

The three finalists are—**"Bittersweet"** by Debi Watson.

"Night Watch" by Nancy Sweetland.

"The Dead Lady's Coat" by Joan Leotta.

All winners and finalists will receive an attractive award certificate suitable for framing.

Judges for the FMAM 2005 Flash Fiction contest included Barry Ergang, Marlene Satter, Ken Scott, Earl W. Staggs and Bret Wright. Six finalists were selected by the judges.

The final judges were Babs Lakey and Lida Quillen.

Congrats to the winners and thanks to everyone who participated. All the stories were great reading.

Lida E. Quillen, Publisher

FMAM, Paladin Timeless Books and Twilight Times Books.

Viper In Paradise

J. K. Cummins

"I guess you gotta be careful what you wish for," I said to Fujikawa Matsumoto, the Sheraton Maui Hotel's chief of security. "I was hoping all week that Helmut would take a flying leap, but I sure didn't expect nothing like this."

I don't think Fuji heard me because he was looking down to where ambulance attendants were wheeling a gurney with Helmut's battered body past the swimming pool. When he found out we were here on vacation with the victim, Fuji had herded the members of our little party up to the second floor, open-air lobby for some nose to nose conversation.

Meantime, the other security guys were talking to any folks who might've seen Helmut take his nosedive off Black Rock.

When the body was gone, Fuji said, "Please sit down." He looked at each of us in turn, like he was sizing us up for a jury or something. Then he leaned forward and quietly said to Lucida, "Mrs. Hoffman, why was your husband trying to kill that boy?"

Eyes down, Lucida just bit her lip and shrugged.

Now, I didn't have anything against the security guy, but I could see right then we were gonna be enemies. Lucida's been my friends for years, but she's never ever talked about her past. I figured it

musta been bad and left it at that, but this thing with the young Hawaiian was gonna make her look suspicious, and I was afraid if Fuji started in on her, she'd break down, and it'd all come spilling out. I jumped in before he went any further:

"What makes you think Helmut was looking to hurt the kid?"

"One of my men saw the struggle on Black Rock just before Mr. Hoffman fell." Fuji shifted his gaze from Lucida to me. "If I'm to properly fill out my report, I need to know everything that happened before and during tonight's ceremony."

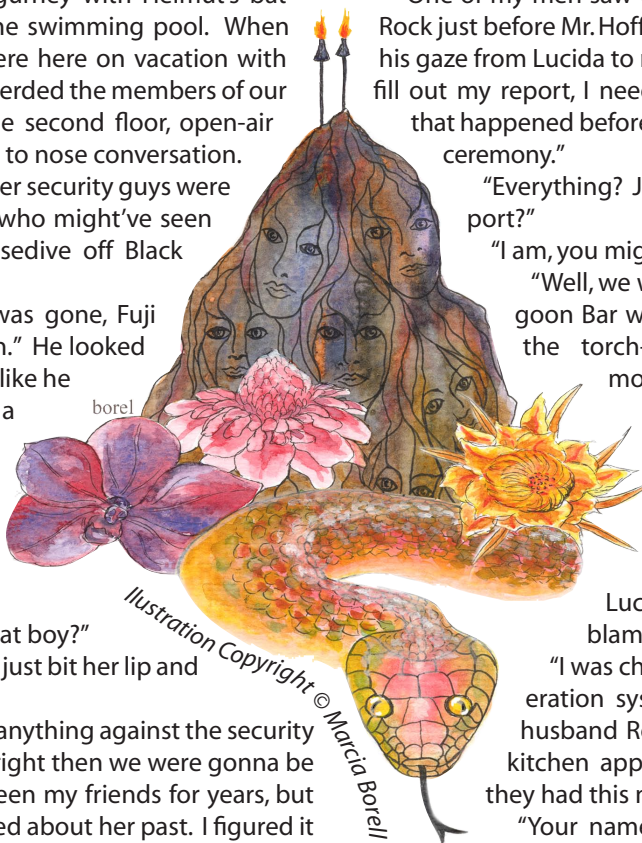
"Everything? Just for an accident report?"

"I am, you might say, punctilious."

"Well, we were sitting at the Lagoon Bar waiting for sunset and the torch-lighting. Helmut's mood was getting lousier as the clouds got darker, and he was tapping his swizzle stick on the side of his glass and glaring at me and Lucida, like we were to blame for the weather."

"I was checking out the refrigeration system at the bar," my husband Roy said. "I'm keen on kitchen appliances, you see, and they had this nifty..."

"Your name, please?" Fuji took



out a little black notepad.

"Roy Wilson."

"You were a friend of Mr. Hoffman?"

"To be honest, more like an employee. Helmut has a string of appliance stores called Kitchen City. I won a sales contest—and me and Wanda are on an all-expense paid trip to Maui. I'm Hoffman's right-hand man."

Roy's face clouded over. "Was his right-hand man."

"I see." Fuji wrote something down and then looked up and asked,

"And you are Wanda Wilson, the wife of Roy Wilson?"

"You betcha," I said, giving Roy a pat on his meaty thigh. "I've been married to my Rowdy Bear all of twenty years now, and every one a happy one, but he works so much this is our first vacation in five years, that is, if you don't count our going to visit the Matterhorn. Ha-ha. I work in a gift shop at Disneyland." I knew I was talking too much, making a fool outta myself, but I wanted to keep Fuji off Lucida. "I'll just bet you were a cop before you got this job, right?"

"You are correct. After a mild heart attack, I retired from the police department with twenty years service, but found that I needed something to feel useful."

"So security guard, huh?" Roy said brightly.

Fuji gave him a pained look, then asked, "Was this your first time to watch our little Hawaiian ceremony?"

"Nope, no sirree, we saw it the night we arrived." Roy paused to think back over our schedule before adding, "That woulda been on Sunday night, and it was the same guy lighting the torches."

Fuji ran an index finger along the knife-edge crease in his khaki uniform, then said, "Do you find that significant?"

Now, Lucida is a tiny little thing, probably ninety-five pounds soaking wet—about what a plus-size girl like me weighed in 3rd grade—but she seemed to be hunching in on herself, getting smaller and smaller.

Before she disappeared altogether, I changed the subject. "We stayed here tonight to watch the torch-lighting again because we were supposed to be taking a dinner cruise on a catamaran, but it was cancelled on account of weather."

"Yeah," Roy added with a laugh, "and was Helmut pissed-off. He said the cruise guys were idiots and pointed at some kayaks and said, if those little boats can ride out a storm, certainly a sixty-foot catamaran can."

I looked over Fuji's shoulder at the ocean and decided the tour operator was right. What was a glassy blue sea minutes ago was now seething with wind-blown whitecaps, and palm trees that had been swaying like hula dancers were now doing the jitterbug.

"So there was some tension while you waited for the ceremony?"

"I guess you could say that." I tapped the cover of my Fodor's Guide to Maui and said, "To lighten things up, I started reading stuff out of the travel book, like how Hawaiians believe that Black Rock—the 50' high black lava reef that juts out into the Pacific—is a jumping off point for their spirits when they die. If there aren't any ancestors to receive them, the spirits just wander around the rocks forever, causing mischief."

Fuji's mouth edged up in what was close to a smile. "Are you saying, Mrs. Wilson, that it was a 'uhane that pushed Mr. Hoffman off the reef?"

Down at the Lagoon bar, a ukulele and steel guitar started playing "Lovely Hula Hands," and a group of young people walked past our little confab, talking and laughing, maybe on their way to dinner at the Terrace Restaurant. They probably hadn't even heard about the death leap off Black Rock. I wished I hadn't. I hoped Fuji'd finish up soon, so I could finally relax again.

"Of course I didn't think it was a 'uhane—I'm not superstitious. Anyhow, Roy came back and sat down, and we watched all the tikis being lit around the grounds. When the Hawaiian guy with the torch headed for the reef, Helmut jumped up from the table and took off without a word.

The young guy was scrambling over the boulders, making his way to the top, when I saw Helmut was following him." I turned to Fuji. "You know, I'll say this about him, for a sixty-year-old, Helmut sure was fit."

After making a couple notes, Fuji said, "And then what happened?"

I hesitated. I sure wasn't going to tell Fuji that Lucida jumped out of her seat, shouting, "Stop him, stop him! He is going to kill Kevin!" Or how dumbstruck I was that my friend knew the young man's name.

Roy picked up the story: "The kid was holding his lei out in each direction, you know, as a prayer to the gods. He flung it into the Pacific and was getting ready to take his swan dive off the top of the rock when Helmut took a swing at him."

"And..." Fuji prompted.

"And the young man blocked him," I continued, "but then Helmut grabbed his throat and wouldn't let go. The kid shook him off and got ready to dive. Helmut rushed him, but when the boy stepped aside, Helmut went over the edge, scrambling in the air like on those Roadrunner cartoons before he fell to the rocks below."

"The Hawaiian kid dove in after him," Roy added. "He searched the waves till he found Helmut and dragged him to shore. I ran over, but the minute I saw how beat up he was, I knew the ambulance was gonna be taking him to the morgue, not the hospital."

Fuji looked up from his notes and turned to Lucida. "I'll ask you again, ma'am. Do you know of any reason why your husband would try to harm that young man?"

Lucida's hand flew to her mouth, and her shoulders were rising and falling with sobs she was trying to hold back. She kept staring at the floor, like she'd lost something.

"Listen, my friend's had a bad shock. It was her husband who died, you know."

"How long were you and Mr. Hoffman married?"

I didn't say a word, but I couldn't help thinking

"Too long." My guess was Lucida stayed with him partly because she's Catholic and partly because she felt she owed Helmut for getting her American citizenship.

"Um, uh, ten years," Lucida said in a small voice.

She was born in the Philippines, but Helmut always called her his "China Doll" and asked her to wear those satiny oriental dresses with mandarin collars. She'd been twisting the top button since we sat down, and I expected it to fall off any second. I guess she musta realized what she was doing because she switched to tugging at the silk scarf she'd tied around her neck this morning.

I don't know if Roy knew I was trying to keep Fuji off Lucida, but he piped up: "When they cancelled our cruise, we signed up for the luau down at the Hyatt." He gave a sidelong glance at his watch. "I know Hoffman just died and all, but to tell the truth, the man always treated me like dirt, and the brochure says they have kalua pig that's been buried in the ground all day, chicken cooked in coconut milk, marinated raw fish mixed with seaweed, and I'm even gonna try some of that poi stuff."

"Yep, that's just like my Roy." I grinned, showing Fuji all my teeth. "He only has three interests in life: me, kitchen appliances, and food. This time of night, it's no contest, so I hope you're just about done with that accident report of yours."

"I will order something to help stave off hunger." Fuji spoke briefly into his radio and then turned back to Lucida. "Had you and your husband been getting along well lately, Mrs. Hoffman?"

"Now, hang on, Mr. Matsumoto, I don't know what you're getting at, but this is starting to sound like you're interviewing suspects, not writing an accident report. There musta been a couple dozen people saw Helmut go flying into the Pacific without anybody laying a hand on him."

"I apologize." His head did a little bow. "Old habits die hard for a former policeman. Just one more question of rather a personal nature, and then I promise to proceed with, as they say, 'just

the facts, ma'am."

"Are you gonna need me for this?" Roy gave his big closing-the-sale smile. "You see, I would really like to try some of that kalua pork."

The smile Fuji returned was stiff. He probably thought we should be acting a little more sad about Helmut dying and all, maybe rending our garments or something, but I could tell him the world was a better place without Helmut Hoffman.

"Had any of you noticed Mr. Hoffman behaving in a strange manner lately?"

I was afraid Roy might jump in with how when the young Hawaiian came by to light our tiki torch, he glanced over at Lucida and they shared a look that said they knew each other. How we'd seen Helmut's complexion turn from its usual pinkish color to beet-red, and how he gave Lucida a look woulda fried eggs. How he'd jumped up from the table, knocking over his chair, and took off running.

Since I didn't want Roy going on about any of that, I fielded Fuji's question. "I don't know what you call strange, but Helmut has been organizing us all week. I guess you could say that's what he does best—boss folks around, telling them what to do. Monday we were up at dawn to bicycle down into the Haleakala Crater..."

"Nobody told me how cold it was gonna be and I nearly froze my butt off."

"Yes, I see," Fuji said, too polite to roll his eyes, "however, was..."

"Tuesday was snorkeling at Molokini off a dive boat," I added. "Wednesday we drove to the Hana coast and saw the waterfalls, and Thursday the guys played a round of golf at the Plantation course at Kapalua."

I wasn't about to mention Lucida disappearing soon after they'd left and not reappearing until we were going to dinner. She'd given me a heads-up look, then told Helmut we'd both gone shopping in Lahaina. Of course, it was me who caught the shopping trolley to Hilo Hattie's and got Lucida a flowered sarong-like dress and myself a cou-

ple muu-muus—the most comfortable things I ever put on—but I'd figured what the heck, the poor kid's a bird in a gilded cage, needed some time to herself. Now that I thought of it, though, she'd begged off the bicycle trip on Monday too, saying she had jet lag and needed to rest.

"I made par on the 18th hole, you know, the real long one," Roy said, "which was pretty fantastic considering I'm a 24 handicap."

I was glad for Roy's help keeping the tourist patter going. Maybe we could bore Fuji into giving up on trying to get to the bottom of Helmut's accident.

"I am glad that until tonight you had been having an enjoyable visit to our island, but I need to ask..."

Roy leaned forward like he was gonna stand up. "Can we go now?"

Fuji held up an index finger. "Not just yet, please. I must beg your indulgence for a little while longer."

"What's to tell?" I said, scooting down on the couch, so I could put my feet up on the coffee table. "It was an accident! What else can we say?"

I could hear Roy's stomach growling, so I was relieved when a puu-puu platter of dim sum, ribs, spring rolls, and chicken satay arrived. A cute young girl followed behind the waiter with a tray of mai-tais. The drinks were strong enough to loosen the tongue of a Green Beret, and I suppose that's what Fuji had in mind when he ordered them, but all he was gonna get for his trouble was my name, rank, and serial number.

In between sipping and noshing, me and Roy answered some more of Fuji's questions, while he wrote everything down in his little black notebook. We were just finishing the last of the pork dumplings when the kid from the torch lighting ceremony arrived, dressed in jeans and a Stanford University sweatshirt.

"One of the security guys said you wanted to see me."

"What's your name?" Fuji asked.

"Kahekili Palmer, but you can call me Kevin."

The boy's eyes slipped over to meet Lucida's, and Fuji studied the two of them for a moment before he said, "As far as you know, Mr. Palmer, had you ever met the man who attacked you on the cliff before tonight?"

"Never."

"What happened to make Mr. Hoffman angry with you?"

The boy shrugged. "I haven't a clue."

"According to all accounts, the man was trying to kill you." The security chief stood up and stuck his face in the boy's. "And I want you to tell me why."

"Leave him alone. Is not his fault." Lucida leaned forward on the edge of her seat and said earnestly, "My husband was stupid man, jealous man."

"Why should he be jealous?"

"Helmut didn't ever need a reason, that's just the way he was." I stood up.

"Now, are you done with us?"

"For now." Fuji shut his little notebook. "But I don't believe any of you have shared the entire truth with me about tonight's events, and I may have to involve the Kaanapali police."

"Why would you want to do that?" I asked. "No crime has been committed."

"Not tonight, perhaps."

The storm-driven wind was whipping rain sideways into the open windows of the lobby, and it had the palm trees around the pool bent to breaking. Dark waves were crashing on shore in spumes of white foam. The night had turned ugly, but I'd still rather have been out there than talking to Mr. Matsumoto.

"Then again," Fuji said, giving Kevin a hard look, "the police are probably too busy with a murder investigation to concern themselves with a mere tourist accident at the Sheraton Hotel."

"I guess we're done here, then," Roy said scooting forward, like he was gonna get up, "because we sure as hell don't know anything about a murder."

"The details have as yet not been released to

the press, but even a former policeman has friends who keep him in the loop." Fuji was still watching the kid. "That victim was a prominent man, a wealthy man, the scion of a family dynasty going back to the sugar cane and pineapple days. A man who, when there was a downturn in agriculture, built a furniture factory and began shipping teak in from the Orient."

If any of this meant a thing to Kevin, you couldn't tell it. He was staring down at the untied laces on his high-tops, like they were the only things he was interested in.

"This man lived in the gated community of Maui Meadows, and his name was Lawrence Palmer. He was found face down in the koi pond on his patio. At first the police thought that it too was merely an accident."

Lucida is the color of coffee with cream, but now she was as white as the foam on those crashing waves. But what bothered me most was that Kevin had gone white too.

"Might any of you have information to shed on that crime?"

"No, no, we don't," Kevin said adamantly. "And I'm catching a ride home with someone. Can I leave now?"

The security chief nodded and the boy took off at a trot.

"If you're done with us," Roy said, wiping up the last of the sweet and sour with his finger, "we can just make the luau."

"All right, but I may have some more questions for you tomorrow, so please don't leave the island." With a last probing look at Lucida, Fuji left.

"Who's this Palmer guy?" I asked Lucida when the security chief was out of sight.

"I don't know," she said. Her nose twitches when she's fibbing, and it was going like a bunny rabbit's, but Ray was already heading for the elevator, so I decided to wait and ask her more later on.

After dinner at the luau—which only Roy ate—Lucida was too upset to go back to her own room, so I went in and grabbed her clothes and stuff. Roy

agreed to pack up Helmut's things and then spend the night in there to give us girls some privacy.

My husband, bless his heart, thrashes around in his sleep like a gaffed fish, so we had two double beds in our room, and I gave Lucida mine.

After an hour or so with no rumbling snores from Roy to lull me to sleep, I was still wide awake, still trying to figure out what the hell was going on. I could hear snuffles and sobs coming from the other bed, so I got up and brought Lucida a glass of water.

"Scoot over," I said, climbing in beside her. I gave her a sip of water, then put her head down on my shoulder. "It's about time you finally came clean with your best friend, don't you think?"

"I should have told...all those poor girls...I could have saved them."

Sobs turned to wailing, and until Lucida calmed down, I was left pondering what *girls* had to do with Kevin and Helmut.

Roy went off after an early breakfast to sort out all the details involved in getting Helmut's body released to ship back to the mainland. He also got right onto organizing a funeral service. He might look like a big St. Bernard, but you can always count on my husband to show up with the brandy when it's needed.

I got Lucida to splash some water on her red eyes, then insisted we go down to the restaurant for something to eat. The Sheraton serves breakfast buffet style overlooking the pool. The rain had stopped but black clouds were still threatening and wind was lashing the patio. In good weather most folks prefer to eat outside, so there were only a few little tables inside. Lucky for us, most everybody was taking their food back up to their rooms on trays, and I found us a vacant spot tucked back in the corner.

I had a cheese omelet with Portuguese sausage and white rice—Maui's answer to hash browns, I guess—and an English muffin. Lack of sleep always makes me hungry, and I tucked in like I hadn't eaten in days, so it wasn't till I was

fishing the chewy sausage casing out of my mouth that I noticed Lucida hadn't touched a thing.

Her hands were trembling so much the poor thing couldn't even pick up her coffee cup. I held it while she took a couple sips. She hadn't eaten anything since lunch the day before, so I spoon-fed her some oatmeal like a baby. She was just getting some color back in her cheeks when I saw Fuji arrive. Jeez Louise, I thought, why can't he leave it alone? Now that I knew from Lucida's midnight confessions what she had to hide, I was even more nervous at having another round of interrogation.

Fuji got a cup of coffee from the waiter and brought it to our table. "Good morning, ladies," he said, "I hope you slept well."

I knew we both looked like we'd been drug through a hedge backwards, but I said brightly, "Oh, yes, indeed, the sound of them waves makes me sleep like a baby."

He gave me a phony smile and said, "Why don't you go check out the gift shops, Mrs. Wilson. I think it would be better if I interview Mrs. Hoffman alone this time."

Lucida grabbed my hand under the table, and I hadn't felt a grip that strong since my sister was in labor with a breech baby.

"Better? Better for who?"

Fuji musta been able to see I wasn't budging, so he didn't ask again. He dug through packets of Sweet 'n Low till he found a pure cane sugar from Hawaii. He poured it in his coffee, then said, "You are related to the young man your husband chased up the reef, aren't you, Mrs. Hoffman?"

"What makes you think that?" I asked.

"The name of the mother on his birth certificate is Lucida Macapagal. This is not a Hawaiian name and how many women are called Lucida?"

"Lots in the Philippines, I'll bet," I said.

"You are right, Mr. Matsumoto," Lucida said, "Kevin is my son."

I was sorta surprised to see the gloom lift from her face for the first time since the accident, and I

wondered how much she was gonna tell. Out of my hands now, I decided.

Fuji took a sip of his coffee, then turned his chair so he faced Lucida.

"Why don't you explain why your husband was trying to kill him."

"Our rooms are on second floor next to black lava reef. They overlook where every night a young man prepares for lighting ceremony." Lucida patted at her forehead with a napkin, then continued, "Sunday night he bends over to fill his torch with oil right below our balcony and his lava-lava slips down. That is when I see his birthmark."

She seemed to be struggling to breathe, so I picked up the story: "Kevin has one of those wine-colored birthmarks like Gorbachev, only his is on his hip and it's the shape of Florida, so there's no mistaking it."

Fuji was looking pleased he'd finally weaseled some of the truth out of us when a toddler ran past, bumping his elbow and making him slop coffee on his newly pressed khaki trousers. Instead of getting upset, he absentmindedly patted at them with a napkin and continued, "So on Monday you arranged to meet with the young man."

Lucida nodded. "The hotel manager tells me his name and phone number, and I call him, saying I have important information about his mother. Kevin goes to college in the morning, but he comes by to see me after his classes." She smiled—the first time in a week. "He wants very much to be a botanist."

"And that is when your husband saw the two of you together."

"No, I don't think Helmut sees us at all."

"Then why was your husband so angry last night?"

"I'm just guessing here," I said, "but Helmut maybe did see them exchange a hug or a kiss on the cheek on Monday, but he doesn't say anything, probably thinking he'll just bide his time to catch Lucida in something worse. Then when he

sees the two of them share a look on Friday night, he's sure there's hanky panky going on and explodes, crazy with jealousy. Macho man thinks he'll push young man off Black Rock."

Fuji kept writing in that little black notebook, not saying anything, but I couldn't help hoping that would complete his accident report, and he'd leave us alone.

"Why did you give your son up twenty years ago?"

Lucida was saved answering by Roy showing up and saying she needed to sign some papers to get the body released. As she got up to go, she said, "Wanda, you please tell Mr. Matsumoto why. Tell him everything. It has to stop."

The waitress came by to clean the table, but Fuji stopped her and dropped the teaspoon from the oatmeal in a bag he pulled out of his back pocket—he'd be surprised when he discovered only my fingerprints were on it. Come to think of it, why did he want Lucida's prints anyway?

He took a sip of coffee, then said, "Yes, Mrs. Wilson, please to explain."

"Well, Lucida and Helmut never had kids. Something wrong with her plumbing, she said, so you coulda knocked me over with a feather about her having a son."

Fuji shook his head, starting to look irritated with all my shenanigans. "You know what your friend meant. Explain why she gave up her son twenty years ago."

"One time Lucida told me something that made me think she mighta been a working girl, still it's hard to believe what she told me last night, hard to believe anybody could do that to someone else."

"Which was..."

"In 1979 she and some other girls from the Philippines were smuggled into Hawaii, hidden in containers of teak. It took a long time and even with water, food, ventilation and a chemical toilet, Lucida said they were scared they was gonna die."

Fuji scooted his chair closer to mine. "The girls were hidden in containers being delivered to a furniture company?"

I nodded. "They were supposed to get work as au pairs and housekeepers, but when they arrived with no passports or papers, they were taken to Paradise Hill. It was done up like a Japanese teahouse, and the girls were made to dress and act like geishas. Most of their clients were Asian men coming to the islands for business conferences or golf and wanting some entertainment."

"Sex slaves," Fuji said, almost in a whisper, "but didn't they try to get away?"

"They were locked in at night. And if they did escape Paradise Hill, where would they go on an island with no money or papers?"

"Why didn't they let their families back home know what had happened?"

"All their mail was censored. They were given some money each month to put in an envelope with a note to their folks."

"Ah, yes. Very difficult."

"Lucida heard that when girls got too old or weren't popular with the clients, they were made to do the cleaning and gardening, and some others, well, they just disappeared. The girls were told if they tried to run away and were caught, they'd be put in containers and dropped in the sea, and no one would miss them, no one would look for them."

Fuji's eyes welled up, and he took off his glasses and pretended to clean them on his handkerchief. "I have heard of such things in Thailand, where parents living in abject poverty sell their daughters into prostitution, but here in Maui... under my nose all those years I was a policeman..."

My goodness, I thought, he's acting almost human.

"Anyway, after about a year Lucida was taken to the factory owner's house to be his mistress. She says he wasn't cruel, and I guess it'd be better than having sex with different men every night, but..."

A clatter outside made me jump. The wind had toppled an umbrella on the patio. Maintenance men were dashing around the deserted pool area trying to put them all down before they got up to any more mischief. It looked like paradise was under siege.

"The boy...?"

"Yep, the boy—the reason we're here talking. When Lucida got pregnant, the man gave her the kid-glove treatment. She nursed the baby for six weeks, and then she was put on a plane to the mainland with twenty dollars in her pocket. She checked the phone book when she arrived in Los Angeles and called a Filipina friend from the old days, who'd married an American sailor when he was stationed there."

"I'm not particularly interested in any of the rest," Fuji said.

"But don't you want to know how she ended up back here?" Fuji nodded assent, so I continued, "Lucida never told her friend the real story, just said she lost her job on Maui. She supported herself doing fancy embroidery on dresses—like this white one she did for me—and doing alterations in a dry cleaners."

That's where she met Helmut Hoffman. I guess he needed someone to boss around at home, and he married her. Now can you see why Lucida acted guilty? She just didn't want to talk about it. So I've told you, and that's the end of it."

Fuji's raised eyebrows told me it wasn't.

"Where was Paradise Hill?"

"Oh, dear, I'm not sure I remember—near the furniture factory, I think she said. On a forested hill above a golf course. Old storage units block the place from view, and they use them as sweat boxes for punishing girls when they misbehave. There's an electrified fence all around the property."

Fuji got up from the table and walked out into the hall with his cell phone. I could hear him shouting all the way into the breakfast room. When he came back and sat down, his cheeks were all blotchy red.

Lucida returned moments later, ashen-faced with dark circles under her eyes.

"I realize you've been through much, Mrs. Hoffman, and I sympathize, but I still need to clear up a couple things for my accident report." Fuji was tapping his little notebook on his thigh and studying his shoes. "Is it possible that you and your son decided that life together would be easier with Mr. Hoffman out of the way?"

"What...what...?" I sputtered

"Let me finish, please. Why risk a long, drawn-out divorce with an uncertain outcome, when you knew that your insanely jealous husband could be prompted into a rash action that might be the death of him? After all, Mr. Hoffman's demise would make you a wealthy woman."

"No, no, I never...Kevin wouldn't..."

"All right, we will leave that incident as is, an accidental death." I was praying that we could call it a day when Fuji opened his notebook again. "Maybe you read about the rich man who was killed Thursday night, bashed over the head and left for dead in a koi pond." When neither of us answered, Fuji continued, "Well, I saw a copy of the police report that says the man was Kevin Palmer's father."

I felt my mouth drop. I didn't know anything about the murder, but I could tell from the look on Lucida's face that she did.

"In his statement Kevin said he and his father were estranged, and that he was living in Kahana with two other college students. On Thursday afternoon, he went to tell his father he was planning to go to California."

I realized I was holding my breath. They'd stopped serving breakfast, and there was nothing but silence now except for a wailing noise the ventilation duct next to us made every time there was a gust of wind. It was starting to get on my nerves.

"Lawrence Palmer told Kevin he'd better not leave if he wanted to inherit the land that had been purchased in his name—something about it only being available to those who can trace Ha-

waiian lineage. Kevin said the whole thing was a fraud because his mother was from the Philippines, and that the land should be given back to the people it belonged to. Lawrence Palmer said something like 'over my dead body' and according to the report that was the last time Kevin saw his father."

It was all starting to come into focus—too bad it looked like Lucida might be in even deeper than I'd thought.

"What if later that night, Kevin returned to his father's house?" Fuji said, holding Lucida's gaze. "He knew how the alarm system worked and broke in to help himself to some money for travel expenses. But his father came back, there was a tussle, and Kevin hit him in the back of head with the bronze statue of a Buddha."

Lucida looked ready to confess to anything to save her son

"Why don't you go arrest Kevin, then," I said, "and leave his mother alone!"

"Why don't you tell me, Mrs. Hoffman, which one of you killed Lawrence Palmer? Did you also go to the house intent on revenge for all the terrible things he had done to you? Or did Kevin decide to kill his father before he could change his will? Or did you perhaps plan the murder together?"

"Wait just a minute, Fuji, as far as I can tell your report about Helmut's accident is a done deal, and we've told you more than you needed to know. You're just head of security at a hotel, not a real cop and I can't see that this is any of your business."

"The police might like to hear about Mrs. Hoffman's former relationship with Lawrence Palmer."

"Well, you go right ahead and tell them then, and earn yourself some brownie points. But we both know this Palmer guy was involved in prostitution and who knows how many other dirty deals. Maybe some out-of-town muscle wanted to take over his territory and sent a hit man." I realized I sounded like an episode of NYPD.

"No doubt the police will be considering all possibilities."

"Well consider this, Mr. Matsumoto." I grabbed Lucida's hand and stood up. "We're going back to our room now, and don't try to follow unless you intend to call the police and have them arrest us."

Fuji rose too and said softly, "When do you plan to leave?"

"Sunday morning."

"Perhaps you'd permit me to drive you to the airport?" said the spider to the fly.

"Not on your life."

Back in our room, I coaxed Lucida into telling me the rest of the story. Of course, that only made it worse because then I worried the rest of the day that police cars were going to be waiting for us the next morning.

The storm blew like the devil all Saturday night, toppling a palm tree and flooding the flower bed under our window, but there was a rainbow over the mountains when we headed for the airport on Sunday morning.

Thank God, there were no police waiting to stop us when we checked-in, but Lucida was still as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.

We were sitting at the gate waiting for our flight and thinking we were home free when I spotted Fujikawa Matsumoto in a Hawaiian shirt walking toward us. I was thinking, "that's it, we're done for," when he walked up to Lucida and put an orchid lei around her neck. It looked real nice with the Hawaiian dress I'd bought her, but I was still afraid it was some kind of trick to soften her up.

Then he turned to Roy and me and said, "Have you seen today's paper?"

"Got it, just haven't read it," Roy answered.

We all crowded around as Fuji read the headlines: "*Prostitution Ring Broken.*"

"You've been busy," I said.

He acknowledged me with a smile and continued, "*Several girls from the Philippines, some as*

young as fifteen, are in protective custody until the INS can make a decision on how to deal with their request for permanent status. The police think the murder of Lawrence Palmer, who headed up the prostitution ring, might be connected to organized crime."

"Glad you got justice done, Mr. Matsumoto," Roy said.

"It was the only credible theory after I gave the police Lucida's oatmeal spoon." Fuji glanced over at me, either looking sly or apologetic, I couldn't tell which. "The prints didn't match those on the statue that struck Lawrence Palmer."

I didn't know if Fuji realized they must've been my prints and just didn't want to push it any further, or if he was convinced Lucida was innocent, but I took a deep breath and relaxed for the first time since Friday night.

"Thank you," Lucida said, with tears streaming down her face. She grabbed Fuji's hand in both of hers. "Thank you."

Fuji sat down and said, "I have secret to share with you. A story I've never told anyone until now. In 1868 Japanese contract workers arrived in Maui to work on sugar plantations. Many of the lonely, homesick young men sent back to Japan for mail-order brides. My grandmother was one of them. Unfortunately, when the man who had sent for her saw that she had buck teeth and wore thick glasses, he rejected her. She had no choice but to stay and earn a hard living working in the fields. Eventually, she married a brute...a man who beat her to death soon after my father was born."

"Oh, dear," I said, "how awful."

"Now you can see that I'll understand whatever happened between you and Lawrence Palmer. I have no jurisdiction in the matter and no interest in sharing my theories with the police; I am merely curious about the rest of your story."

"You're sure this ain't just a trick to get her to talk?"

"Scout's honor," Fuji said, crossing his heart.

Lucida looked at me for assurance, and then

began: "Thursday after dinner, Lawrence Palmer he calls me, and like always he is charming. He says he wants to apologize for all that happens so long ago, and to discuss Kevin's future, college and everything. I'm afraid not to go, afraid he might stop Kevin from moving to California."

I nodded encouragement.

"I leave hotel when Helmut is sleeping and take taxi to gas station down the road from Maui Meadows. Lawrence meets me there in his car. When we drive back up to his house, he says I must to lie down on backseat."

Fuji pursed his lips. "Maybe Palmer didn't want the gate guard to see you entering the estate in case he decided that you wouldn't be coming out again."

"The bastard," Roy said, "You shoulda asked me to go with you, Lucida."

"I am sorry, but Lawrence says I must come alone." Lucida gave Roy a sad smile and continued, "We go in together and are talking on patio when young Filipina comes in and says, 'So sorry, Lawrence, I don't know you are having company.'"

Lucida fingered the plumeria on her lei for a long time before she spoke. "I shout at him: *You evil man, you still do it, make girls into slaves! But I'm going to stop you! I'm going to tell police!*"

I took Lucida's hand and gave it a squeeze,

"Lawrence put his fingers around my throat. He is choking me so I can't breathe." Lucida removed her scarf to reveal the bruises still visible on her neck. "I don't know what to do. I reach behind me and grab a statue and hit him on his head. He staggers away, and I hear a splash before I run out of house."

"The bastard deserved what he got," Roy said.

"The law might consider killing someone in self-defense manslaughter, but who am I to say? After all, I am no longer a policeman." Fuji looked from me to Lucida and back again. "You are a good and loyal friend, Mrs. Wilson."

"You can call me Wanda."

"They are calling your flight, Wanda."

"I guess that's aloha till we meet again."

"I suppose it is." Fuji bowed deep from the waist. "Sayonara."

Judie Cummins has published over two dozen stories and articles, teaches Creative Writing at Palomar College, and is a book reviewer for San Diego Writers Monthly. An active member of Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America, she also writes mystery-suspense novels.

QUID PRO CROW PRESENTS PAUL D. DRAKE





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Mary O'Gara watches Mars and other planets from the high desert of northern New Mexico. Her favorite dragon, Alexei, greets visitors to Mary's website, www.iowapoet.com and she can be reached for questions or appointments at:

maryo@iowapoet.com

MARS DOMINATES THE SKIES



NATAL CHART
Mars Retrograde
 October 1, 2005
 6:04 PM
 Daylight Saving Time
 Washington, D.C.
 38°53'42" 77°40'21"
 Time Zone: 5 hours West
 Geocentric
 Tropical Porphyry

Mary O'Gara
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 Albuquerque, NM 87110
 Phone: 505-672-4690

Mars rules the skies for the last half of 2005. Even Jupiter takes second place to the red planet this year.

On August 26th, Mars was closer to the earth than it had been for at least 5000 years and closer than it will be again for many thousands of years. Except for the Moon, Mars was the most visible and colorful object in the skies.

As Mars became a major attraction in the night skies, Mercury was retrograde. People talked about how many things seemed to break down—and Mercury got more than its share of blame. When Mercury went direct, no one noticed.

Things continued to break. My husband and his daughter replaced an alternator on a car

she'd planned to trade in, a car that had just had two major repairs. Clients talked about repair bills cutting into their budgets at inconvenient times. So why now?

Astrology always gives us convenient answers, and this summer the answer is Mars.

Mars is raw energy, the kind two-year-olds have. It ignites, penetrates, breaks down barriers, motivates, stirs things up, and runs on adrenaline and testosterone. Either you focus that energy on goals and questions of your own choosing, or it drags you around by your heels cave-man style.

Mars is the surgeon's knife, but also the bludgeon and hammer. It can penetrate and heal a misunderstanding or beat you to death for a dime in a dark alley.

Mars was the God of War. In 2003, when the United States "shock and awe" attack on Baghdad began, Mars was the most elevated planet in the skies over Baghdad (and was exactly trining the natal Mars in President George W. Bush's natal chart).

Astrological researchers say wars are most likely to start shortly after Mars completes a retrograde period and goes direct. Our entry into Kuwait in 1991 and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor are notable examples.

When Mars goes direct on December 9, 2005, it will be within a degree (one or two days) from completing a trine to President Bush's natal Mars. Again. In 2003 the trine was from Mars in Capricorn to his natal Mars in Virgo. In 2005 the trine is from Mars in Taurus to his natal Mars in Virgo.

There are many possibilities. An American attack on foreign soil is strongly implied in this chart and in aspects to the president's natal chart. We as a nation need to take careful note of international at the moment Mars goes retrograde and use the two months Mars is retrograde to resolve those issues.

The president's chart affects all of us and makes a great example. The principle can be applied to each of our charts, of course, although it may be less dramatic in your chart than in his.

When Mars goes retrograde on October 1, 2005, at 6:04 PM EDT, Pluto will be the most elevated planet in the chart. Pluto will be in Sagittarius in the 9th house, which includes both religious philosophies and foreign affairs. Nuclear power or nuclear medicine could be the most important issue of the day.

The Sun-Pluto conjunction on the day Mars goes direct suggests that control and direction of nuclear power will be an important part of any presidential decision immediately after Mars goes direct.

Geodetically, Sagittarius covers the western half of the United States. Decisions could well be involving the atomic energy sites in the western part of the country, especially the laboratories at Los Alamos and Albuquerque, NM. Mars, however, will be in Taurus, and that's the geodetic region assigned to Iran and other Middle Eastern countries.

There is no fated future in astrology, although astrologers wage hot, heavy and usually friendly debates on the subject. I can tell you with certainty that issues related to both Mars and Pluto will dominate the near future of the United States and its people. The Western states may feel the impact more strongly than the Eastern. But breakthroughs in nuclear medicine or the construction of a new nuclear power plant in the United States are potentially as possible as a war over nuclear power.

Change, however, is inevitable. The symbols are there and they are the metaphorical raw material of change. What doesn't repeat itself in human history is the nature of the change and the impact it has on future generations. We go through the same cycles in new ways.

Personal transformation is, of course, the ideal way to use strong planetary aspects involving Mars and Pluto. Pick an issue you're willing to address and find a coach, mentor, therapist or support group.

Give yourself permission to move rapidly through change now while Mars is direct, to revisit old issues and punch on through them while Mars is direct.

On national television, expect less raw violence (or lower ratings for the more violent shows) while Mars is retrograde. The reality shows may become a little too real for a public that is being pushed and prodded to deal with personal and global issues. As readers and viewers, we may take it down a notch. And the authors of cozy mysteries may find bigger royalty checks in their Christmas stockings this year.

Speaking of shopping: Avoid buying anything with moving parts while Mars is retrograde. No new cars, please; they have lots of moving parts. One of my favorite business astrologers tells me she asks for the car's manufacturing record and won't buy a car that was produced while Mars was retrograde. New car sales may be sluggish this fall; the public tends to buy less during retrograde periods.

The post-Thanksgiving sale is not a time to buy presents with moving parts, either. Mars retrograde may slow sales on those days and lead to better prices and more bargains when the real holiday buying starts December 10th.

On the whole, Mars is a trigger. It lights fires that have already been laid. As it goes direct, it adds new kindling and old fires blaze up again.

Mick Callahan, flawed hero of Harry Shannon's taut thriller "Memorial Day", wants to escape his violent past. He's finally back in the game with a successful radio show, a new girlfriend and money in the bank. And then along comes Mary, the young drug addict who saved his life back in Dry Wells. Mick is the kind of man who pays his debts. When Mary is abducted from his home all hell breaks loose. Callahan gathers his eccentric friends, sets out to find her and ends up confronting a gang of vicious psychopaths at Nevada's bizarre Burning Man Festival.

"Meet Mick Callahan, a former television talk-show psychiatrist foiled by his own ego and a penchant for liquid refreshment. Let's hope he's around for a long run."
-Booklist

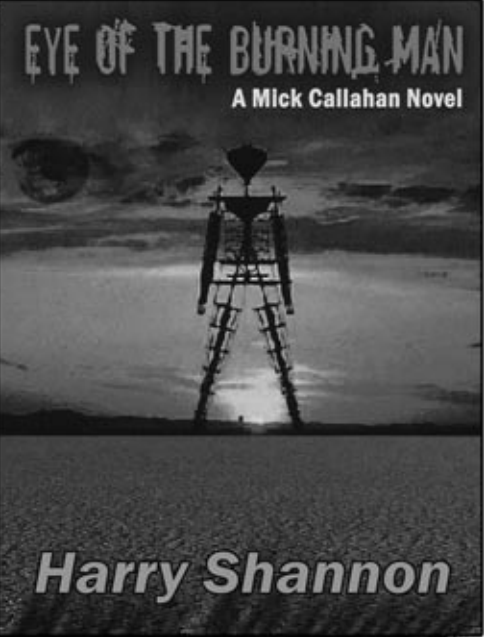
"A notable and brilliant new addition to the mystery genre. Mick is all we love to see in a fallen hero; vulnerable, insightful, and just simply a likable guy."
-New Mystery Reader

"A flawed and edgy hero. Dark wit, excellent writing and action-packed pace."
-The Rap Sheet, January Magazine

"A likeable hero. Most promising."
-Library Journal

Eye of the Burning Man (A Mick Callahan Novel)
Five Star Mysteries, November, 2005
ISBN 1-59414-381-1 Retail price: \$25.95

EYE OF THE BURNING MAN
A Mick Callahan Novel



Harry Shannon

Visit the Author at HarryShannon.com

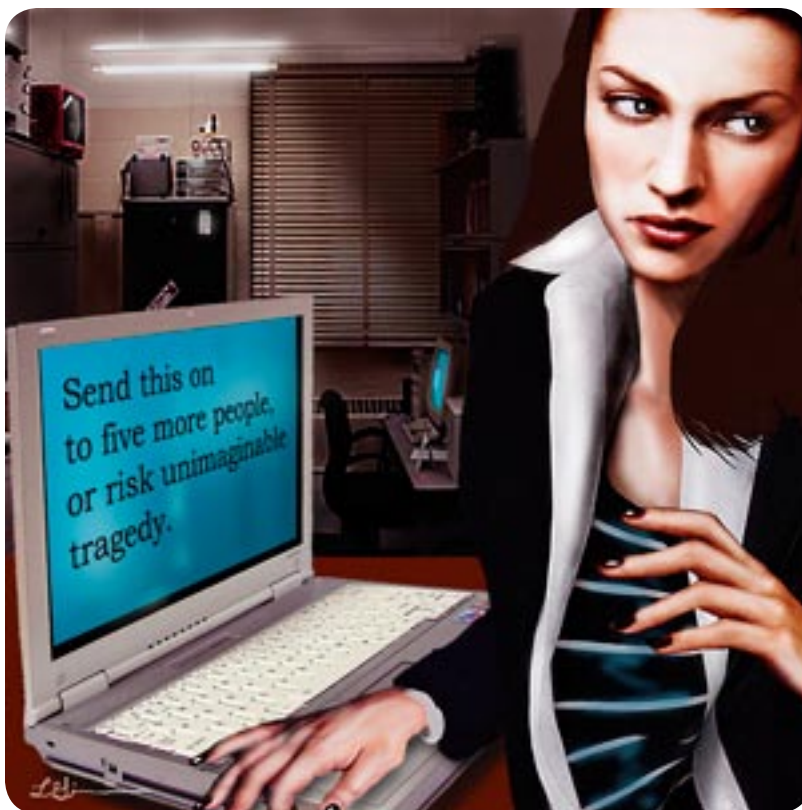
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Electronic Crimes detective Angie Powell must solve a series of heinous murders, where every one of the victims was a recipient of an email chain letter.

Chain Letter

David Sakmyster

Illustration Copyright © Laura Givens



Angie Powell backed out of the house, stepped away from her first murder scene and stumbled into the knee-high snow. A harsh wind snapped at her exposed face and stung her eyes, whipped her shoulder-length hair and momentarily threw her off balance. Then came the rush of nausea.

"Hey," said her partner, Detective Tom Shackelton. "Thought you were doing fine, and then..."

Angie shook her head, took in deep gulps of the crisp, cleansing midnight air, and felt herself relax. She *had* been fine; relatively unaffected even after hearing the shocking details of the crime scene and going over the photographs of the other victims. But after the long drive out from Rochester to Wayne County, white-knuckling it on the slick country roads, it had all just finally built up, compounding her instability when

she looked upon her first murder.

Murder. More like slaughter. A mother and her two young daughters... so much blood. Everywhere she looked: streaks and splashes, a violent last testament inscribed on the walls and furniture. "I'm... better now." She leaned away from Tom. His short blond hair, receding slightly above the temples, was speckled with snowflakes, and his ears were red as coals lifted from a bonfire.

He gripped her shoulders. "I've seen that look before. My last two partners had it at one time or another."

"Great," Angie managed. "Aren't Jones and Erlich on parking ticket detail now?"

"Yeah, but remember, they always planned on being homicide detectives, then had an abrupt change of heart. You... you're part of the Electronic Crimes division. Ever imagine yourself on a murder investigation?"

"No," she admitted. She'd always desired a career in law enforcement following her grandfather's path but just couldn't stomach dealing with death day after day. Frauds and cheats she could handle and was even eager to catch. It was simple to think like them. But catching murderers was different. To get into a killer's mind you had to set foot into Hell if only for a moment. Maybe that was why, after retirement, her grandfather had become so distant, the kindness gone from his eyes.

"I'm okay," she said after a minute. "We can go back."

"No," Tom said softly, leading her down the half-shoveled walkway sealed off by yellow caution tape. Reflections of red lights swirled off his face. "The forensics team is in there now. They'll be a few more hours, but when you're ready, come in—but don't even look to your left. Just go up the stairs. Mrs. Janson's office is the first room on the right. If she had a laptop we'd just bring it out to you—"

"I said I'm all right."

Tom squeezed her shoulder, and said: "If I'm right and this is the fifth murder by this guy,

then..."

"I can do this." Angie turned around and looked to the edge of the driveway, where the Janson's mailbox stood like a sentinel, covered in snow. She glanced at it again as she started back to the looming, shadowy house. *Ten years ago they would be chasing down postal workers, dusting envelopes, and maybe—if they had the funding—doing DNA checks on stamps.*

She stuffed her hands into the folds of her parka and followed Tom's billowing trench coat into the house.

Twenty minutes later, after logging in as herself, she entered the WinSPY network and, after a few attempts, located Mrs. Janson on the database. She contacted the server administrator to request access to a customer account. America Online was no more difficult than most ISPs, but they could be dreadfully slow and sometimes overly paranoid when dealing with legal officers. Fortunately, today was a good day. They accepted her legal codes and confirmed her identity, then provided the access information for Mrs. Janson.

"She was a little too meticulous," Angie said in a calm voice, feeling better. Up here, the air was clear, scented lightly from a small tin of potpourri on top of the monitor.

"What do you mean?" Tom asked, peering over her shoulder. Their coats were outside, hanging on the staircase railing. He wore a brown suit, slightly large for his build, and an off-color green tie that clashed with a wrinkled, striped shirt.

"Inbox's empty. And the trash bin was recycled yesterday." Angie gave him a sour look. "Some people just don't like clutter."

"So...?"

"Not a problem. I can check her message logs, at least."

"Why? We already know she sent the letter."

"Yes, but from there we can find the trail." Angie scanned the lines that scrolled down the screen. The dates backed up, last week, the week before... "There. January eighth." She double-clicked.

Tom leaned closer and pointed at the top left of the screen. "Here are the addressees. Ron Jarowski. Heather McAvoy. Roderick Ames, Kenneth Bean, Ray... Ray Edgars."

Angie felt something creep down her spine, and a clammy sweat crinkled her forehead. In her mind, black and white photos paged across her sight like slides in an animator's first draft. Each name had a body with it. One after the other, throats cut, limbs shredded, hearts exposed. And nailed to each one's back, the same printout, and the tiny words in Arial Font Number Eight: *Send this on to five more people, or risk unimaginable tragedy.*

She gripped the edge of the keyboard, then allowed her shaking fingers to trace along the keys, and strangely, she found comfort there. As if the tiny squares and their unique labels offered a certain safety beyond what the guns and Kevlar vests could ever provide. Angie clicked below, on the icon for WinSPY, and called up the tracing software.

Tom cleared his throat. He seemed to do that often, and he didn't appear to be sick. Only with him two days, and already she had cataloged distasteful habits. He asked, "Now what's happening?"

"Mrs. Janson sent the letter out after she had received it on the second of January. So, now I'm going to follow the trail backwards. Every email has a log—sender, location and time stamp, lots of other irrelevant data strings. There it is. Now, assuming that this person is sending from his own computer, logged on as himself and isn't savvy enough to route it through some other address, the problem is that we only have a user location in cyberspace, not an actual name and address."

On the screen, Angie saw the reflection as Tom stood up and adjusted his tie. He rubbed his face, and his eyes came away haggard. Angie knew he'd been working this case nonstop for over three days and nights. Ever since the big break Saturday night when he came upon what he thought was an unrelated murder, actually the

third in a row. Kenneth Bean's apartment. Bean's computer was still logged on, and that very letter was up—actually, it was the first time he had opened it. Ironically, the man had been away on business for a week, and he never even had the chance to send the letter on before its threatened tragedy occurred.

Tom had then searched for the last unchecked name on the recipient list: Heather McAvoy. She had already been dead for two days, her body dumped in a ditch, frozen solid. Next, he called on the sender, Mrs. Janson, but of course, got no answer. At first, he admitted, Mrs. Janson was the prime suspect. After all, who else knew all the victims, and who had sent them what, in some fashion, might have amounted to a death warrant?

But then the call came from Janson's neighbors, and this cycle was exhausted.

Ruling out the sheerest coincidence that six marginally-associated people could have been targeted for death by someone unrelated to the whole chain letter scheme, that left the possibility of the killer being someone else further up the email ladder. Someone who was furious with getting another one of those damn things, perhaps believing a little too much in the plausibility of supernatural retribution. It wasn't easy to locate the other participants, but if Angie could do it, then someone else could.

They were racing against time.

Angie sighed, waiting for the system to finish. She wished Mary had a T-1 connection. "There are so many permutations of this chain letter. I mean, someone initially sends this thing out to five people. If they're all superstitious—or just playing it safe—they each send it out to another five. That's twenty-five more. Those folks each send out another five..."

Tom stuffed his hands in his pocket and softly this time cleared his throat. "I know. It's given me enough migraines for a lifetime. I can't even think clearly anymore."

"Maybe you should take a rest."

"No." He leaned back against the wall under a

painting of a turbulent seascape. "Not yet. We're closing in."

Angie resisted the urge to shrug and say he just sounded like every TV detective from Andy Griffith to Columbo. "Well," she said, hearing the satisfying beep, "it's done. Got the logs and started the trail. From here I can track it to its inception." She gave him a sideways look, suddenly scared. "You think everyone up the chain might be in trouble, too?"

His shoulders sagged. "Or, more likely, one of them is the killer. I just don't know. You can go in circles with this thing. Did the original creator have it in mind to instigate a major killing spree, starting off the letter, and then tracking it on his own?" Tom straightened his tie. "I think we need more detectives."

"But you said the Lieutenant—"

"Can't spare anybody. I know, I'm just griping. And I hope you can help out a bit more. Tell you what. I'll see if any of the victims actually sent out the letter again. Maybe we'll find some clues there. You call the previous senders. How many did you find?"

The search just ended. "Twelve. It will take some doing to get their real names and phone numbers. What will I say when I reach them?"

"No more than you have to. Pretend you're selling something. Just find out if... you know."

"They're still breathing."

"Right."

Angie rubbed her temples. "But shouldn't we warn them?"

"No. Can't risk it. Not if there's a chance one of them is the killer. Get their addresses. We can set up surveillance."

Like that would've helped Mrs. Janson... Angie sighed and stared again at the lines of data address, bit sizes and message details. A killer camped out over the phone lines. Ironically, today people locked themselves in their homes, afraid of the brutality of the outside world, seeking comfort in communication over text lines on a screen; unaware that it might only provide

Death a more private invitation.

Evil came in subtle forms, she thought, as she heard Tom shuffling with his coat out in the hall. She set the pages to print, then toggled back and forth between the software menus, selecting and searching for rest of the branches on this elaborate tree, tracing all the participants, and then printing up their coded data.

"Gonna be much longer? They're wrapping up down there."

Angie glanced up. Down the stairs the flashbulbs had stopped, and the shuffling and tugging and moving had quieted. A sickening feeling floated around her belly as she thought of the body bags and their gruesome contents.

"No," she whispered, pulling the last few pages from the printer tray. "I can get the user addresses and personal profiles from any computer."

"Good," Tom said, holding out her coat. "Then let's get the hell out of here."

Angie waited until the computer shut down then followed Tom down the stairs and hurried again to get out into the night where snow-whirlwinds skittered over the frozen land. As she walked, careful of the icy, footprint-riddled walkway, a fleeting thought came to her. A question, a line of reasoning unfamiliar to her in the past six years of electronic crimes. Nothing in her history of investigating wire transfers, credit-card web forgers or bank account hackers quite prepared her for this analytical process, but it emerged nonetheless. A feeling only, an insight—

Like all the answers had been right there, back on that screen. On that first email. That was it, somehow. *Some things are complex because that's the way they are. Others are complex only because we make them so.* That was something her grandfather once said.

"What is it?" Tom asked. Three steps ahead of her, he lifted up the caution tape. An inch covering of wind-sculpted snow had draped their car, and in the cross-beams of departing vans, the snow and ice dazzled like a hypnotist's watch.

Angie hugged her shoulders and stood there

in the freezing wind while the headlights dwindled down the road, and the trees sagged like dying watchmen whose service was long since obsolete.

"I don't know." She glanced back at the dark home and up at the opaque study window. The names of the recipients flashed before her eyes, and an impulse came to her, a flash of clarity.

"Come on," Tom said. "The killer may not be done. And we shouldn't be, either. We've got calls to make."

Then, with a gust of wind, her insight faded, lost without a trace. No, Tom was right: the killer, if he could be found, was in the branches of that chain letter. Somewhere on that twisted tree. And right now, she was the only one who could climb it.

Six hours later, the piercing ring of the cell phone pulled her from a shaky dream. She was curled up on a leather couch in the Lieutenant's office with the doors closed and the blinds drawn. The rest of the station had been empty when she decided to just shut her eyes three hours ago. On her laptop, she had determined the actual names of the 12 previous senders leading to Mrs. Janson, and the system was busy poring through databases, searching for the other addressees. These weren't her primary concern for now. If they were targets, most likely it was too late for them, as the killer had already reached the bottom level—*unless he was starting there*. She thought that angle through. Didn't it make more sense that way? Much less difficult to go up the chain, rather than down. But then motive transformed dramatically—then it wouldn't be just anonymous killing, but...

She shook her head to clear the debris. At 3:00 a.m. her mind was too blurry. Besides, she couldn't very well call at this time of night; no one would believe a non-emergency story.

The phone rang again, and Angie fumbled on the floor for her blazer, felt around until she located the inside pocket, and retrieved the flip-phone. She opened it and brought it to her ear. "Angie Jacobs. Hello?"

"Angie." It was Tom. "I'm at the home of Ray Edgars."

Edgars. She closed her eyes and recalled that name under a large black and white photograph. This murder was slightly different than the others. More savage. The violence absolutely insane, with all the fury of a wounded grizzly. Using an ax, someone had just rent the man apart and kept hacking and tearing long after death.

Now, a day after seeing that picture, she had time to step back from the horror of it and wonder at the difference in brutality.

Did it mean something? Angie rubbed her eyes, and a fleeting thought of her grandfather slipped by. How did he catch these monsters?

"This is the last one," Tom said. "I went over the logs from all five of them, using the software access you gave me. None of them sent the letter on before they were killed."

Angie swallowed. "So, at least for them the threat was sincere. But not for Mrs. Janson. I wonder why."

"Don't know. That's something we'll have to ask the killer when we find him. He's got to be coming from your end, Angie. How are you doing?"

"Got the phone numbers of the twelve direct senders. The computer's still searching for the other recipients."

"Great. When you get those, why don't you start calling them... what are there, fifty or sixty?"

"Yeah, depending on who did and didn't send it out again." She sat up and pushed her hair out of her eyes.

A sudden movement outside. She gasped and saw a shape passing behind the blinds. A shuffling, then a fumbling at the door. She froze, gripping the phone like she would crush it. A man in a long black trench coat entered. He had a briefcase under one arm and a stack of files in the other. The man looked first at the laptop on the desk, the swirling screensaver—little sheep bouncing across a field, eating and peeing, over and over as they'd been doing for the past three hours. Then he seemed to notice Angie for the first time.

"Oh," he whispered, then set his files down on a chair. He had soft, sunken eyes and dark patches of hair on just the sides of his head. And it seemed like his spine was too long for his cramped frame. He stepped forward and extended his hand. "Sorry, you must be Angie Jacobs."

She exhaled, recognizing the voice she'd heard on the speakerphone in her captain's office. "Lieutenant Myers." She shook his hand. "Nice to meet you. Detective Shackelton let me in last night and said I could—"

"No problem," Myers assured her. "My office is yours as long as I'm not here, that is. Unfortunately, I have to kick you out now. How's the case going? Is that Tom on the phone?"

She blinked, then realized she was just holding the phone out, and Tom's voice was rattling on the other end. Angie nodded.

"Give him to me," Myers said, shaking off his coat and dropping his briefcase. He snatched up the phone. "Listen, Tom. You'd better be calling from your bedroom. Your health is crucial to this investigation. You're no good to me without a clear head." He rolled his eyes at Angie.

"I don't care about any of that. Listen, Tom. By all rights you should be taking a week off. Be with your mother. She needs you. No... Don't, Tom. I know work gets your mind off it, but this case will go on. You're—" He frowned. "Tom? Tom! Don't hang up—"

He held the phone at arm's length, pushed a couple buttons and then shook it slightly. "How do you turn this damn thing off?"

Angie stood up and took it from his hand; with a flick of her wrist she flipped it shut. "What's wrong with his mother?"

Myers sighed. He opened his mouth about to speak and then frowned again at the screen-saver and the roaming sheep. "Not surprised he didn't tell you. Didn't even let on to anyone but me. Terrible accident. Last Sunday. The woman's sixty-four. Driving home from her volunteer clerical job at the church, she hit an icy patch, slid off the road through a weak section of the guardrail

on Lake Avenue. Car flipped several times on the way down a fifty foot hill. Still, she managed to crawl out with busted ribs and internal bleeding. Made it back to the road... only to black out there. A passing truck swerved to avoid her—but not far enough, and ran over her legs."

Angie went pale. "Oh my God..."

"You can imagine how Tom took it. She's still touch and go. Legs are amputated, and she's hooked up to a ton of machines. I don't know why Tom still feels he has to work."

Angie shook her head, at a loss. "Maybe it's the only place he's in control. You know, if he can catch this killer... some sort of power of fate?"

Myers raised an eyebrow. "Electronic crimes, huh? Maybe you should be in Psych division."

Shrugging, Angie said: "In any criminal investigation, you have to be able to get inside a person's head."

"You're right at that." He stood and straightened his tie. "So, what does Tom have you doing?"

Angie picked up a few printouts. "Making calls. I traced the other participants in this chain letter thing. Tom will check on the direct links to the victims here, while I call on the other indirect recipients."

The Lieutenant shut his eyes. "Let's pray the body count doesn't grow."

Nodding, Angie gathered her printouts, slipped into her blazer, then took everything into her handbag. She handed a copy of one sheet to the Lieutenant. "These are the twelve names Detective Shackelton wanted to investigate. Please give them to him when he comes in."

"I will." Myers folded the sheet and placed it on the edge of his desk. "There's coffee brewing outside and help yourself to some—"

"—donuts." Angie smiled. "I will, especially if there's a powdered jelly-filled."

"Hey, those are *my* favorite." Myers grinned at her and took her hand again. "It's been a pleasure meeting you."

By 9:30 she had gone through 28 names. Four were in Rochester, 13 thirteen in upstate New York, 12 in the City, and others were in Maryland, California, and Georgia. Seven answering machines. The others were home and well.

She marked the seven no-answers for return calls or maybe even visits, if she couldn't get through. But there were ways she could access their personal history and get work records and the numbers of relatives to confirm their safety.

Sometime around the twentieth call, she was overcome by the strange feeling that she was on the wrong path. There was nothing here, and maybe she'd overlooked something obvious. Angie was seated cross-legged on the couch, a blanket over her knees, the cell phone in hand and the list of names spread over the cushions. On a mahogany mantle over a fireplace that hadn't seen heat in years rested a sole photograph of her grandfather in uniform, taken back in the fifties.

What was your secret? How did you do it? She searched his eyes for an answer, some kind of assistance perhaps, only to see them suddenly glaze over as the sun probed through the bay windows, sending angular shadows over the wall and a blinding glare off the picture frame.

She closed her eyes and pressed the back of the phone against her forehead, willing herself to think this through, trying to get into some mind-frame to shortcut the investigation. People were dying, and the only thing she had to go on was that one of the murders was more gruesome than the others.

It always came back to that: Ray Edgars.

Ray Edgars. Why was the killer so angry at him, more so than all the others?

As the sun ducked behind a lolling cloud, Angie imagined her grandfather's eyes on her. Cold, impassive, like she remembered before his quick deterioration and passing.

Still, she rocked, holding the phone tight. *Ray, Ray...*

She wanted to know more about him –wished she had gone with Detective Shackelton to comb

his house and check his email correspondence.

Her eyes opened and for an instant the flash of insight returned—but then the phone rang and banished all clarity.

She reflexively flipped open the phone.

"Angie!" Tom's voice. Hoarse. Scared.

"Yeah?"

"We're too late." Out of breath. "Three more bodies."

Oh God...

"The fourth house was on fire when I got there. Can't be sure, but I think Julie Drake's whole family was in there."

Angie clenched her eyes shut and gripped a loose printout with her free hand, crinkling it before her face. *This was useless! The killer was effortlessly going back up the chain...*

"Angie, you've got to help me. Go to the Lieutenant. Send more men to the last seven names on the list to protect them."

"The last seven? What about—"

"Just listen. I think I know who's doing this."

"Who?"

"Bredsman."

Angie frowned, trying to remember, then searched over the cushions for her copy of the list.

Tom's voice cut her search short. "I'm at his house now. I broke in. I don't know where he is, but Angie, you have to see this. He's a complete hacker. Equipment all over the place, a dozen different phones, the basement's all wired up, and he's got four laptops going, all logged in—I think as different users."

Angie swallowed. "Who is this guy?"

"Ronald Bredsman. Get this, Angie. Veteran of 'Nam and Korea. Worked a stint as special investigator with the Secret Service. Then, I think he just snapped."

"Why?"

"Who knows? Some people grab a rifle, climb a tower and start shooting, this guy selects his victims from some email database, sorts for their lo-

cations, and then hunts them down."

Angie took a deep breath, and tried to calm her racing heart. This was it—what it was all about, catching the big one, ending a murder spree and bringing someone to justice. She glanced at the mantle only to see a blazing rectangular light stabbing at her eyes.

"Don't you need backup?" she asked.

"No! Don't send anyone here. I don't want to scare him off. Have to catch him unaware."

She meant to ask about regular procedure, about how they might jeopardize the whole case with an illegal search and arrest—

"Okay, Angie? Get the Lieutenant and check out the other names. Put people there to protect them. He may be trying to finish this up today."

"But—"

"Just do it," Tom whispered. "I think I hear something. Have to go..." And the phone went dead.

"But..." Angie continued, speaking to the hollow dial tone. *Why did he start at the bottom of the chain and work backwards?* The fire today proved the sequence. He started with Heather and Ray and all the others at the bottom. The ones who never sent the letter out. *Who never...*

She blinked and the cell phone, still issuing a lonely dial tone, dropped harmlessly to the cushion. Throwing off the blanket and crawling over the loose papers, she knelt in front of the coffee table and adjusted the laptop. Ignoring the insistent dial tone and what should have been her assignment to call the Lieutenant, she instead restored her Internet connection and called up the WinSPY service.

She logged in, accessed the personal files and began a new search. *Okay Mr. Ray Edgars. Let's clear some things up.*

Fifty minutes later she was speeding toward the Bredsmen home off East Avenue, the Lieutenant in the driver's seat and three squad cars behind her.

"Can I call him?" she asked in a low voice, careful not to bring herself to the frantic level she had

been just a half hour ago in Myers' office. He almost didn't let her come along, but she convinced him that she was needed, and that she might be their only chance.

Myers expelled a deep breath, then stared at the drying streaks made by the windshield wipers as they battered away the soft falling snow. "No. We're almost there." He reached for the CB. With a tired, pained expression, he spoke into the receiver: "Cut sirens. Approaching on subject's location."

Angie held her breath as they ran through another red light, then careened around a corner. And though it was only midday, the sky had darkened just as a light snow began to fall, tiny flakes arching at her like bugs to a flame.

The house was the seventh one on the left on Clover Street. A nice Tudor, two level. Very homey. Angie swallowed hard, scanning the windows. Were they already too late?

The Lieutenant pulled right up the driveway and the squad cars made a triangle around the entrance. "Okay," Myers said, "now call him."

As she sat watching the other uniformed men walk past, she opened the phone and hit the call return sequence. She glanced at Myers, only to see him still staring straight ahead.

"Not answering," she said after the sixth ring. *God, please don't let it be too late.*

"No other cars in the driveway," Myers said while acknowledging another officer who had peeked in the garage window and was shaking his head. "You still up for it?"

Angie didn't answer but stared at the windshield and the gathering snow. She could see her eyes there reflected in the glass...but they seemed unfamiliar somehow. Changed. Tainted and dark—like they'd seen a glimpse of Hell and couldn't free themselves of the imprint.

With a slow, steady breath, she hugged her overcoat tightly, popped the door and wordlessly stepped out. Head down, she passed by the officers and went up to the front door. Surprisingly, she found her legs didn't buckle. She felt no rush

of nausea. *Funny how change happens.*

The door was unlocked. She pushed it open. *No creak, that's something at least. Don't think I could bear a creaky door at this point.* She took a step inside, then another. It was awfully dark, a closet and staircase right in front of her, nothing but shadows on the upper level. A soft light from windows to her right. She squinted—then uttered a muffled scream as someone slammed into her, dragged her sideways and slammed the door. A large hand covered her mouth.

"What are you doing here!" Tom Shackelton's wide eyes glared at her, then shifted to the door. "What are *they* doing here?"

She shook her head, gasping into his palm. Finally, he loosened up, let her catch her breath, then speak. "Sorry..."

His eyes widened. "Sorry? You could blow this whole thing! Ronald will never come back now, and we don't have enough evidence to—"

Angie twisted, then slipped out of his grasp. She stumbled, as if off balance, into the living room. Glanced around. "Sorry," she said again. "We thought you were in trouble. This guy's too much for you. The Lieutenant—"

"Get out of here!" he hissed. "And get rid of them now!"

"Wait," Angie said, raising a hand as she stepped into the kitchen. She passed through quickly, hearing his footsteps behind her. She found the light switch and flicked it, and the white cabinets, clean and dust free, shined in the brilliance that extended all the way into the den.

Shackelton bounded into the room. His tie was off center, his shirt blackened in places. Ripped on the sleeve. Dark blotches dotted his collar. And his weapon hung precariously in its shoulder-holster. Angie noted all this in a second, her senses sharpened. "Thought I'd check out his equipment. You know. The laptops. All those phones. Maybe get some leads on his next victim."

Tom opened his mouth, and just let it hang there.

Angie took a cautious step away. "Where's the

basement?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Why are you here?"

She stopped, her back to him. "Tom. There are three squad cars outside. We got hold of Ronald Bredsmen at work. Second floor of the EDS building on Henrietta Road. He was at lunch, eating day-old tuna fish and reading about the Bills' coaching changes." *With any luck, Bredsmen's wife was still out shopping, as he had told them, and his kids were in school.*

Angie turned and let her overcoat flaps open. It was unbearably hot in here, and while she felt in control, the heat might make her feel faint. She touched the thick walkie-talkie in her side pocket and knew everyone outside was listening.

"Why are you here?" he repeated, his face darkening. "Bredsmen's our man. He's fooled you..."

"No, Tom. We *were* fooled, though." She leaned back against the wall under flowery wallpaper beside a rotary phone. "And I was used."

Tom inched closer. His body tensed.

"You requested me," Angie continued. "You needed me. No one else could help you."

Shackelton nodded impatiently. He cleared his throat. "Of course. We couldn't have found him if—"

"The others are dead, aren't they, Tom?"

He blinked.

"Dead. They were all killed first. Probably early this morning. You thought it was perfect, didn't you?" She swallowed hard, feeling her throat dry up. But it was worth it: the racing pulse, the breathlessness of the moment.

"What are you talking about?" Tom took two quick steps toward her and then stopped as she skirted the center island, keeping opposite him.

"Tell me, detective. Where's the gas can? Or were you going to use the stove and furnace? Burn everything down so we'd have nothing but your word that Ronald was our man? You struggled; he tried to incinerate the evidence, but you got out just in time..."

Tom stopped. He straightened and retreated,

stepping back against the refrigerator. His mouth hung open, and Angie thought he might have some sort of excuse brewing—even as he started reaching for the gun.

"You got Ray Edgars first," Angie shouted and it had the intended effect. Tom froze.

"How did you...?"

She smiled. "At the end, I just wanted to double-check your work. Edgars' murder stood out. And when I checked his message logs, I realized why."

Tom lamely reached for the handle of his weapon even as the front door burst open and heavy footsteps bounded around the corner.

Angie leaned over the counter and stared into his eyes with her coldest expression. "Edgars did send the letter out again... immediately. And— *Mary Shackelton was second on his list.*"

Tom drew the gun, but even as it left the holster, two pairs of hands secured his wrist, aiming the weapon at the ceiling and pinning the detective to the refrigerator.

"I'm sorry for her misfortune," Angie said, blinking up at the fluorescent ceiling lights. "Sorry that Mr. Edgars randomly selected your mom's email address from the church directory. I'm sorry. But your revenge ends here..."

She turned away as Detective Shackelton howled at her, as he kicked and thrashed against his old friends, and as Lieutenant Myers finally secured the cuffs around his back. Angie walked slowly through the den, her attention caught by the series of photographs on the marble mantle above a charred fireplace. Several nice looking teenage girls. A beautiful wife. Family snapshot. And an old man standing beside Mr. Bredsmen. She looked at all their eyes, seeing a once-familiar sparkle and an envious shade of innocence.

David Sakmyster is a financial analyst living in upstate New York and has had stories accepted or published in Paradox, Would That It Were, Plot, Crimson, Frightnet, Mythos Collector, Night Terrors and Spellbound. He was a winner in the Distant Worlds 2002 short story contest, and has one published novel, Twilight of the Fifth Sun. He recently won 2nd place in L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future contest.



Illustration Copyright © Teresa Tunaley

Everybody Loves Justice

by G. Miki Hayden

Retired Lieutenant John Dove spent six years commanding the Brooklyn unit of the NYPD Cold Case Squad. Dove, who had a background in probably every unit in the department from anti-crime, to pattern robberies in the subway system, to internal affairs, to intelligence--and who now works as a consultant for CSI New York (the reason behind his impending move from New York to California--said that the job he most enjoyed at the NYPD was with the Cold Case Squad.

In the late 1980s and early '90s, New York had a great number of murders every year, leading to detectives only having two or three days to look at a case and then turn around to pick up the next. "All those unsolved cases were collecting dust in the back room of the precincts," said Dove. When he and his eight investigators began to look at those cases in Brooklyn, however, he and his team received a lot of hostility because of a rift between the Cold Case Squad and the Detective Bureau.

Every Brooklyn detective unit was supposed to give the cold case detectives two cases to look into. What they gave Dove, he said, were "body parts." One case was an arm, another case a head, yet another case a torso that washed up on the beach. Dove complained to his commander and was given leave to go into the precincts and look through the cases as he liked. He did that, would go to a precinct and pull 10 or 12 cases and pick two or three to pursue, cases he hoped would be solvable.

One case was that of a man who had

grown up in Brooklyn, become an accountant, married and moved to Long Island. Not only did Kevin, the victim, seem like a nice guy from his case file, said Dove, but the father who called quite frequently for an update on the case--which had ceased to be investigated--was a very nice man as well. Kevin had been killed one evening in the old neighborhood in what had originally seemed to be a failed robbery, but which had all the signs pointing to a conspiracy between Kevin's wife and an old boyfriend of hers, released from jail not too long before the murder. Because the detectives in the 75 Precinct couldn't prove anything, however, they had closed the case.

Now that Dove and his unit had the file, "The case wasn't one we were going to give up on." The track that the investigators then pursued was that of a thief who had been caught in the neighborhood that night, who had originally claimed to have seen the murder, but who had at the time given four different stories. Now Dove went after him with a vengeance, and based on subsequent arrests, put pressure on him that if he didn't speak about what he had seen, his jail time would escalate.

Dove also went to South Carolina to visit the widow's parents, who were elders in their Jehovah's Witness church.

Eventually, the murderous couple--Kevin's wife and her boyfriend--were arrested, and the widow, now married to her co-conspirator, confessed. "The first thing I did was get on the phone with the victim's father--probably the most satisfying moment for me in six years of cold cases," said Dove.

The convictions resulted in a 10 year sen-

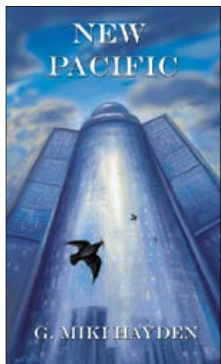
tence for the widow and 25 to life for her new husband.

Dove also spoke about a second case, one that eventually came to television on A&E's Cold Case Files. In this situation, a child had been beaten to death 20 years prior and the child's siblings finally had the wherewithal to come forward. Dove and other officers went to the mother's Brooklyn apartment where they found a footlocker in a blocked-off closet. Inside, were the child's remains. The mother, who had beaten the child to death because she had vomited at the table when the mother's boyfriend was visiting, died in prison.

When asked if DNA was the most powerful tool in solving cold cases, Dove denied it. He said that what worked was time and the change in people's situations and relationships.

G. Miki Hayden's writing style and composition book, The Naked Writer, will be out in early 2006.

The sequel to the critically-acclaimed *Pacific Empire*, *New Pacific*, gives a frighteningly possible picture of the future and of the new global order. Can one corporate underling—an investigator set to finding a missing scientist—make any difference in what happens within humanity's brave new world?



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A tip of the fedora: As a child, I fell in love with the stories of Guy de Maupassant. The following piece is very reminiscent of the work of that great of years past. I hope you are as charmed by it as I was. —Mark Orr

>>

A philanderer's fourth attempt to woo a rich widow threatens to go amiss...

Monsieur Picardy

Norman A. Rubin



Illustration Copyright © Gin E.L. Fenton (GinELF)

Madame Edythe Picardy was greatly respected by all the staff at the Clermont Spa. The manager of the watering place bowed and scraped as he attended to the bejeweled widow and saw to her comfort. When she arrived for dinner, the headwaiter rushed to arrange her seat; the sommelier was near at hand to pour her favorite red wine from the wineries of Verien of

Gascony.

Royalty, from princes to counts, all being in reduced circumstances, held Madame Edythe Picardy in great regard; the philanderers admired her collection of baubles as they complimented her; impoverished artists who spent their last franc to come to the spa looked toward this charming woman as a patron to their talents.

Yet their advances did not captivate Madame Edythe Picardy. She was still mourning for her wealthy husband, Monsieur Albert Picardy, albeit his demise had been in the past year. The devotees respected her grief and they worded their comments carefully when they paid their complimentary attention.

But Madame Picardy was infatuated with M. Alphonse, an esteemed minister in the government. The portly official was quite knowledgeable, and the staid yet humorous way he expressed himself fascinated her. In turn she gave him her arm to be escorted to the dining room during glittery functions at the spa. "A gentleman just like my dear Albert," she mused, as she tripped lightly beside the delighted official.

"*Bon jour madame,*" addressed the dapper little man to the well dressed matron seated at a fashionable cafe. "We have a rendezvous, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Monsieur Albert Picardy, a well-presented gentleman, had no fixed occupation except exploiting rich, gullible widows. He wooed them with flattery, a single token flower, and kisses of affection upon their cheeks. Three poor dears in the past had succumbed to his charming ways and accepted his proposal and the gold ring. After a year or so of blissful marriage to this delightful and caring man, each somehow met with an accidental death. And, of course, Monsieur Picardy benefited in the inheritance.

Monsieur Albert Picardy, despite his shortness of stature and slimness of form, had, for some reason or other, an attraction for rich widows. Maybe it was his Poirot-like features: a cherubic face with sparkling dark eyes, a slight patrician nose, and a twirling dark moustache above smiling lips. His dyed black hair was always slick and parted straight in the middle.

"*Non, non,* dear madame do not rise. *Pardon moi,* with your permission I would like to be seated near you." Monsieur Picardy spoke politely as he leaned on a Malacca cane and doffed his Pan-

ama hat with a flourish.. Upon the lady's consent he settled himself in a comfortable seat at the table opposite his next quarry, the widow Edythe Pountaine by name, whose husband had been, in his day, well-versed in finance.

"Edythe, my dear, what is the matter?" Monsieur Picardy addressed his wife in a quiet corner in the lobby, "I saw that you were flushed with great temper when I returned from my daily stroll. Lah, lah, lah, the magnificent day was nearly darkened as I noted that you were having a heated discussion with the hotel manager. My dear, you should leave all matters with the staff into my hands."

"Yes, dear." Edythe spoke in agreement, "but, but—"

"No buts, my dear," addressed Monsieur Picardy to his wife. As he stared at her, he admired her youthful and radiant appearance despite her later years. Yet the good man was puzzled as he stared into her cheerful features that were full of vigour and health. He had to suppress a feeling of anger as she laughingly shook her still blondish hair. "I see you are dressed for bathing in the sea. Now run along and enjoy yourself."

Monsieur Picardy watched as the trim, sportily dressed figure tripped lightly on slim legs through the lobby. Thoughts mixed with puzzlement were etched on his face. As he rumbled in his mind, he pictured his first wife Felicia, a dowdy maiden who had always doted on her collection of expensive jewelry. "Alas, in her youthful middling years, a tragic accident befell her. Yes, it was quite easy to loosen the rusty screws to that balcony rail," mused Monsieur Picardy. "Quite easy! She simply leaned on the iron bar, as was her usual habit during our holiday. It was the eighth floor of that hotel on the Riviera, an old-fashioned establishment that had an enchanting view. Ah well, it was for the best, as that terrible year of marriage to her was a bore."

Monsieur Picardy's thoughts were interrupted by the apologetic words of the manager of that reputable hotel on the Costa Brava: "My dear sir, I

would like to extend my apologies. Never in our fifty years have we experienced such a mishap. Our maintenance man attended to the matter immediately and tightened the bolts to the iron rods of your room balcony." With that notice, the hotel manager bowed and scraped and left with the words, "I trust Mrs. Picardy is having an enjoyable and restful holiday."

Monsieur Albert Picardy had been able to convince his darling Edythe to add a codicil to both their wills which stated that upon the demise of either husband or wife, all property would be left to the sole survivor. Payment into the hands of a shyster saw to the agreement, which had been officially notarized.

"You see, my dear, it was quite simple to write up this codicil. After all, we have only each other's love and trust," chirped Monsieur Picardy after they returned home from the lawyer's office. "The idea came to me after that terrible incident at the hotel during our holiday. *Cela va sans dire!*"

"Oh, you're wise and you're right that 'it goes without saying,'" Edythe spoke in agreement.

For the next hour or so, the couple made themselves comfortable in the living room of their apartment on the top floor of a seven-story building. Because, at the beginning of their union, Monsieur Picardy had to attend to his so-called affairs in Lyons, both M. Albert and Edythe had agreed to make their home in that apartment block of that city. And within time, Edythe's charms had enabled them to embrace new friends.

"Lah, lah lah, I forgot to go to the chemist to fill my prescription for my heart medicine," exclaimed Monsieur Picardy.

Monsieur Albert Picardy rejected Edythe's offer to make the errand herself. With a "No, no" on his lips, he left the comfort of his easy chair and went to the bedroom to ready himself for the walk to the chemist. Then with an "*au revoir*," Monsieur Picardy opened the door to the apartment.

Edythe heard the gentle closure of the door

with a bit of worry etched in her mind. "Oh dear, I should have insisted on my going to the chemist."

Edythe's concern was justified. Monsieur Picardy abruptly reappeared looking quite ill and thoroughly exhausted. The good woman saw his sickly condition and immediately assisted him in removing his coat and hat and helping him to his chair, which M. Picardy accepted with a note of gratitude.

"My dear Edythe, I'm sorry for all the bother. Lah, lah, what a nuisance I am! But I do need my medicine...."

"Albert, do not fret. Give me the prescription and I will hop to the chemist. It's only a few blocks, and the walk will do me good."

Upon the closing of the door, Monsieur Picardy practically jumped from the comfort of his armchair. He went to the door and patiently waited to hear expected sounds. Finally, his patience was rewarded when, within a half-hour or so, he heard the scream of sirens and the hubbub of a gathered crowd. M. Picardy rubbed his hands in satisfaction and returned to his repose.

Thoughts of an earlier time flowed through his mind: "Dear Katherine, you were such a lovely creature. For over four years you made for me a comfortable home in your spacious apartment in Lyons after we tied the bonds. You were quite understanding that the two of us would be sole beneficiaries in our wills. Yes, when you had seen the provisions I made in case of my demise, there was no question in your duty to me.

"Pity, yes, it was such a pity to lose you in such a terrible mishap. Those boorish maintenance men forgot to post notice that the lift was in repair. You weren't able to take note, as the entrance hall was dark that late afternoon. Oh, that terrible moment when the gendarmerie knocked on the door and gave me the tragic news. Yes, I wept for my loss under the sympathetic eyes of the authorities. Yes, I wept and spoke in my sorrow of being taken ill that day and not having accompanied you."

Monsieur Albert Picardy sat tensely in his arm-

chair and stared at the door to the apartment as if he were expecting a knock on the wood. But only silence greeted him. Three-quarters of an hour he waited to hear the sound, but rather than the sound he expected, he heard the slight noise of the turning of the brass door handle.

Edythe stepped into the flat. "My darling, I'm sorry I took so long to return from the chemist. I had to use the stairs as I noticed the lift was in repair. But it was such a tragedy for poor *Tante* Matilda, our elderly neighbor, as she wasn't aware of the maintenance work. It was rather dark in the hall, as the light was probably burnt out. Poor dear didn't take notice of the warning sign that had been posted at the far end of the elevator. She pressed the button and the door slid open... I'm too horrified to continue!"

Monsieur Albert Picardy stared at his beloved Edythe as though seeing a ghost. He stuttered as he tried to speak.

"My dear Albert, don't strain your heart, even though it was dreadful news. Now, my dear, I will bring you a glass of water so you can take your capsule."

Monsieur Albert Picardy was quite cheerful that evening. "My dear Edythe, I have cooled a bottle of Verien red wine, a gold bouquet, to celebrate our third wedding anniversary. Before we take of our evening repast, we will lift a glass and toast our blessed union."

Madame Edythe was flushed in the cheeks as she heard the cheerful words of her husband. She fluttered in her movements, but her spouse calmed her with soothing words. "Now, now, my dear. Please arrange the dining table while I see to the wine." Monsieur Picardy bustled about the liquor cabinet as his wife set the table for the ceremonial dinner. Finally Edythe left the dining room to attend to the preparation of the meal; the odor of fine cooking wafted from the kitchen into the dining room. "Such a delicious aroma," murmured M. Picardy as he sniffed the air.

He then busied himself in attending to the

wine. He placed two crystal goblets on the small counter and with a plunge of the corkscrew and a twist of the cork, he quickly opened the bottle of Verien red wine. He poured the wine carefully into the two glasses. As the wine trickled into the crystal goblets, his mind reverberated with thoughts of other days. "Ah, my dear Emmeline Verien, you were so lovely and graceful. Pity, pity that you fell ill in your youthful years. That elderly doctor attributed your demise to acute gastritis. There were no questions as to the cause of death. We followed the dictates of your last will and testament and cremated your body, and the ashes were scattered on your beloved vineyard in the Gascony valley.

"Lah, lah, the nurseryman at the florist had told me that a few grains of white helleborin on the leaves would rid my precious plants from the ravages of the aphids. He warned me to be careful, as it was quite poisonous. Poor Emmeline, I didn't wish to see you suffer. *Ca*, the good Lord ended your misery quickly and mercifully."

Monsieur Picardy stopped in his reverie when the glasses were filled with the red wine. Then he took a small vial, labeled with the name of a plant nursery, from a pocket of his satin lounge coat. M. Picardy turned his sight to the room and was satisfied that Edythe was not present. He opened the vial and shook a few grains into one of the filled crystal glasses. He took the poisoned glass of red wine, swirled it about till the soluble grains mixed in the fluid. M. Picardy was careful to place the poisoned crystal glass at Edythe's place at the table and a crystal glass of tasty red at his setting.

Within a few moments, Edythe took her place at the dining table to the side of her husband. A smile etched her lips as her laughing blue eyes expressed the fond attention of her husband. Suddenly she jumped from her chair. "My dear Albert, your glass is chipped! Here, take my glass and I will take another one."

Before Monsieur Albert Picardy was able to say "lah, lah, lah," Edythe placed her glass alongside

his setting. The woman graciously placed another filled crystal quickly at her place and returned to her seat. Then she gripped the stem and lifted the glass high. "To many years of happiness!"

But Monsieur Albert Picardy simply stared at his glass of red wine. Beads of sweat formed on his creased forehead. His head swirled as he looked into the clear, ruby bouquet. He saw faces in the eddy: dowdy Felicia, lovely Katherine, and graceful Emmeline. Then he felt an erratic rhythm in the heavy beat of his thumping heart. He grasped the collar of his shirt and gasped for air. Suddenly, the beat of his heart stilled, and he collapsed on the table with his head on the spilled red wine.

M. Alphonse, the astute minister, lifted his glass of Verien red. "My dear Edythe, to our lasting friendship. Too long I lived alone since the passing away of my beloved Carole...."

Norman A. Rubin is a former correspondent for the Continental News Service, and has been a freelance writer on many subjects for the past sixteen years. Now retired, he resides in Israel..



Who am I? What is my purpose? These are life's greatest mysteries. Enjoy Kristin Masterton's journey inward as she poetically explores
"Just what the heck is going on here?"

EQUALLY HOLY

**When you're standing on the edge
 That's the hardest**

**Right between heaven and hell –
 Birth or death**

**You never know what side of the line you'll end
 up on**

**The trouble is we imagine that there really is a
 line –
 A good and a bad,
 Salvation on one side – Doom and destruction
 on the other**

**Truth is, pleasure and pain won't be left out of
 the game
 No matter what we choose**

And all paths are equally holy

All paths are equally holy

So why not make your best choice and jump?

**God is with us when we fly
 When we fall**



And when we at last have the courage to

Be still
Master Joke Teller

God is a Master Joke Teller

He always saves the punch-line for last

And here you thought –
You knew just where you were going!



ILLUSION OF SECURITY

The illusion of security has its own “feel” –
Its own special scent and way of being

That hooks us into believing it is real

Of course, it is a lie

We all know that

The same as we all know we will one day die

Death is certain

We know it

But do we truly believe it?

And if we did believe
How would that change the way we live our
lives –

Right now –today – this very moment?

Could we be just a tiny bit more aware,
More loving,
Or more kind?

Could we forgive?



The Power of Love

People underestimate the power of love – But
not I

I know about love because you taught me

Love embraces everything

Every tiny stone that begs to be seen

Every single medium sized rock that feels she’s
meaningless
and wonders “What’s my purpose?
How can my lying around here all day bring joy
to the world?”

Love embraces all those tiny stones, medium
sized rocks
and the great big boulders too

Did you know those big boulders cry?

They long to be less, to melt into the whole
and return to the earth from which they came
Love heals that pain

The wanting to be more or less,
The longing to be something we’re not
That fools us into missing the beauty of who we
are

People underestimate the power of love –

But not I

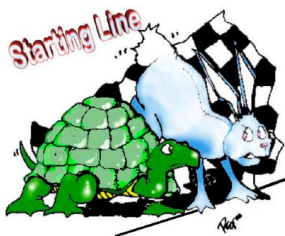


I know about love because you have loved me



*In addition to writing, FMAM’s poetry columnist,
Kristin Masterton enjoys teaching meditation,
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conversation.*

Kristin Masterton



>>

The pen may be mightier than the sword, but is it mightier than a hurricane?

Cay De Amour

Leslie Bessant

It was the perfect crime. All he had to do was let nature take its course. If a hurricane roared across the tiny island of Cay de Amor, destroying the home of best-selling author Quincilla Wooden and killing her in the process, was that his fault?

The stuttering wind plucked at his clothes. The storm was picking up. It wouldn't be long now.

He walked over to the concrete bunker that housed Quincilla's diesel generator. He loosened the screws that held the generator's control pad to the block wall and then hammered them back in, working the screws in and out until they wobbled in their holes.

He balanced the control pad against the wall and checked the gauges. The fuel tank was full and the battery held a twelve-volt charge. He popped the cover off the control pad and gently tugged at the connection that linked the starter to the battery. When the wires were barely touching, he carefully closed the box.

He turned to the propane tanks. One tank was three-quarters empty; the others were full. He kicked a small coconut out of the way, revealing a hole under the tanks. He knelt down, stuck his nose in the hole, sniffed, and coughed.

He'd done his part. Now the hurricane would finish the job.

He looked out at the Gulf. The waves were already crashing on the beach, well above the high



Illustration Copyright © Vivian Prince

tide mark. It was time to go.

It had all started innocently enough. He'd picked up Quincilla's latest bestseller on the way home from a writer's conference. He didn't usually go for romantic mysteries, but everybody at the conference had been talking about the book, and he'd wanted to see what all the fuss was about.

The first fifty pages read like a heavy-handed

parody. The villain, Robusto V. Chicory, twirled the ends of his mustache and said things like, "Aha! I have you now!" The damsel in distress, Tyler Windlass, was a blond, blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked orphan who reunited lost puppies with their "tormented, tear-stained" owners. Most readers probably missed the fact that Tyler was a 21 year old man, because he spent most of his time wringing his hands and moaning, "Heavens! What shall I do?" The plot turned on Robusto's plan to steal Tyler's kennel and build the world's largest Starbucks.

Robusto and Tyler were bad, but Quincilla's sleuth, Ptarmigan "T.D." Dejeuner, was horrible. T.D., the NFL's first female quarterback (retired), had been confined to an iron lung by a freak fishing accident. Unable to cope with the changes in her life, T.D. teetered on the edge of alcoholism. Then T.D.'s nurse/bodyguard hooked her up to the Internet, and two hours later, T.D. was happily solving mysteries by e-mail. The only believable thing about her was that her new career as a cyber sleuth hadn't reduced her taste for hard liquor.

It got worse. The next fifty pages revealed that *Ask Not for Whom the Bark Tolls* wasn't a parody at all. It was meant to be a dark, brooding romance. Not only did T.D. stop Robusto, she also fell into a steamy virtual relationship with Tyler. In the end, however, a tearful T.D. sent him away, sacrificing her happiness so the lad could pursue his dream of opening an intercontinental animal shelter and art gallery. It was so painfully trite that calling it a cliché would have been a compliment.

By the time the plane landed, he knew what he had to do. He had to stop Quincilla Wooden, no matter what the cost. The world could not survive a sequel to *Ask Not for Whom the Bark Tolls*.

Three weeks and a prodigious amount of networking later, he'd started work as Quincilla's personal assistant. His job was to help Quincilla with the final editing of her manuscripts. She might ask him to do a few things around the house, too.

He wasn't out to kill Quincilla at that point. His

goal had been to rehabilitate her. He'd wanted to do two things: to transform T.D. into a complex character who found herself caught up in an exciting, plausible chain of events; and to show Quincilla that passion came in other colors than bright purple.

He quickly learned that Quincilla's adoration for purple knew no bounds. When he tried to cut a sentence, she responded by repeating it verbatim, "to afford my readers the opportunity to ponder the complexities secreted within those words." When he offered a crisper way to say something, she added his phrase to her own overblown text, "so that my readers will careen from the simple to the sublime, and from there be catapulted into the whirling vortex of the human heart." When he pointed out that twenty-odd red herrings were probably enough false leads for T.D. to handle, Quincilla shook her head and toasted him with her ever-present glass of sherry. "Oh, to be young again, and to think the world a care-free, happy place!" Then she slipped in two more red herrings.

He tried every editing trick he knew, but nothing worked. He couldn't get through to her, and the manuscript was worse than ever. He could feel the tension mounting between them.

He was lying in bed, wondering what he'd do after Quincilla fired him, when the door to his room swung open. There stood Quincilla, her sheer purple chemise fluttering in the warm breeze.

"Little Fingers," she'd said in a husky voice – she called him Little Fingers because he used his pinkies a lot when he typed – "I can resist no longer! Your white-hot passion has melted my iron will! Take me!" Then she'd jumped on him and stuck her sherry-flavored tongue down his throat.

That was when it had hit him. Quincilla Wooden didn't just write romantic fantasies. She lived in one. She wrote what she knew, and she wasn't ever going to change.

Therefore, if he wanted to stop her, he would have to kill her.

He spent the next four years searching for a way to do in Quincilla. He dabbled with poisons, worked out serious sports injuries, and engineered automotive failures. He never put his plans into action, however, because his "accidents" were all contrived, convoluted, and unbelievable—just like Quincilla's hackneyed plots. He would not sink to her level.

Then Hurricane Charley appeared on the horizon like an avenging angel. He'd quickly weighed the possibilities. He was sure that Quincilla would never leave the island. "Let us hold fast, Little Fingers," she would say to him, "hold fast and revel in the brutish power of this craven storm. If this rogue Charles is to ravish my little Cay de Amor, then he shall have to take me as well."

Charley was poised to do more than "ravish them." The storm would smash them to bits and wash their bodies out to sea. Quincilla would never write another word, and his problems would be over.

But it was not to be. He got up early that Friday, August the 13th, so he could savor every moment of the hurricane's approach. He'd just poured himself a cup of Kenya AA coffee when Quincilla came bounding into the living room. "Little Fingers, make sail! Make sail!" she'd cried. "We must flee from this desert isle!"

"What?" he yelled. "Where are we going?"

"Miami! Our stock of fine sherry is depleted, and the timid shopkeepers of Sarasota have chosen to cower at home rather than do business with me." She flung her arm in the direction of Fort Myers. "To the marina and on to Miami!"

When they'd returned the following Monday, he was disappointed to see the house suffered no real damage. In the storm's defense, though, Quincilla's house had been designed to stand up to hurricanes. Its roof was a concrete slab, its exterior walls were steel-reinforced concrete blocks, and its stilts stood on pilings driven deep into the underlying coral.

The house hadn't been hurt, but the rest of the island was a wreck. Seaweed and trash covered

the beach, and the boat dock had been reduced to three posts and a couple of splintered boards. The generator had been washed over on its side, and the propane tanks had floated off into the Gulf.

Could Quincilla's dumb luck be more powerful than a category four hurricane? He couldn't accept that. Charley had given him a weapon. He just had to find a way to use it.

He considered what Charley had done. A messy beach was hardly fatal, and the dock was simply an inconvenience. But the overturned generator and renegade propane tanks were another matter.

If a high wind ripped the line off a propane tank, some gas could leak out. Being heavier than air, some of the gas might settle in a low spot. Then a single spark—perhaps from a storm-damaged generator—could set off an explosion.

He spent the next four weeks cleaning the beaches, burning the debris, and rebuilding the dock. Once those small tasks were finished, he was ready to start the real work.

"Quincilla, would it be all right if I did something with the generator and propane tanks? I don't like what happened to them during the hurricane."

Quincilla laughed as she ran her fingers through his hair. "Little Fingers, my heart thrills at your steely determination. Go, my young champion! Make our tiny paradise ready for the raging storm!"

"Here's my plan," he said. "I'd like to build a concrete block structure around the generator to protect it from the wind and rain. Then I'll sink a couple of posts and chain the propane tanks to them so the tanks won't float away. Does that sound all right to you?"

The whole plan was a lie. Even the smallest storm would flood the bunker and wash the posts out of the sand. The bunker was just an excuse to mount the generator's control pad on the outside wall, where wind and rain could batter it into a tangle of sparking wires. The generator would

be shut down during a storm, but the control pad—which was connected to the generator's twelve-volt battery—would still have enough juice to turn a short circuit into a shower of sparks. Setting the posts would give him the chance to dig a hole under the tanks. He'd bleed some propane into the hole later, and there the gas would sit, the proverbial accident waiting to happen.

She patted his arm and smiled. "To work, gallant knight! I shall note your progress from my little studio."

He finished up in early July, just in time for hurricane season. He waited for Quincilla to raise some complaint about what he'd done, but she had no quibbles about his work.

Four weeks later, Hurricane Buford crossed the western tip of Cuba. The storm was coming up the Gulf now, and it was acting like a bigger, meaner version of Charley. Everyone expected Buford to follow Charley's path, and Buford wasn't about to disappoint them. It was charging straight towards southwest Florida – and Cay de Amor.

The storm loomed over the tiny island. The Gulf's waters turned a dark, murky green, and the sky was black with storm clouds. Sheets of rain pounded against the jalousie windows.

He checked his watch. The bar at the marina would be closed by now, and Quincilla would return any minute. It was definitely time to go.

He took one last look around and noticed the phone machine was blinking. Without thinking, he punched the button.

"Oh, Little Fingers! 'Tis I, Quincilla, and I can only hope my frenzied words reach you in time." She hiccupped. "By odd chance, I seem to have the keys to your boat here in my purse. Oh, I do hope you haven't wasted even a single second searching for those keys, my love!"

She hiccupped again and laughed. "You will no doubt find it funny the Sheriff's Office – and particularly a strapping young deputy named Raymond —has been very worried about you. They even dared to suggest that you might need to be rescued! You, of all people! Can you imagine?

Well, I put paid to that. 'Tish-tosh,' I said! I told them that you're ready for this rascal Buford, and you intend to ride the storm out on Cay de Amor."

He swallowed. Was he hearing this right?

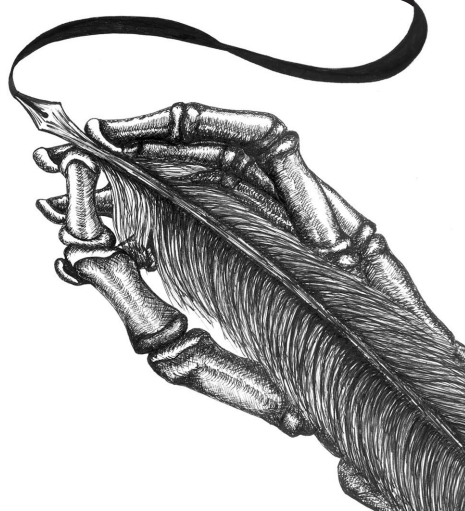
"They didn't believe me at first," Quincilla announced. "They may think I'm a bit tipsy. But I gave them all the details about everything you've done, and they finally agreed to leave you to face Buford alone." She giggled. "Oh, yes, Little Fingers, alone. I told them you adore a good storm. Oh, you and Buford shall do battle, and you shall make wondrous fireworks together! You shall light the torches and blast your way into the night."

She paused. "Did you hear me, Little Fingers?" she asked. Suddenly she sounded stone-cold sober. "I said you'll have a blast."

He looked out the window. Sparks danced in the roaring wind.

Leslie Bessant has taken a leave from teaching African history at Ripon College to indulge his passion for writing mystery stories.

FMAM MYSTERY



>>

Unable to speak, Lucy lives within the charm of silence. A fierce desert storm may change that....

The Charm of Silence

Vera Searles

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The yellow wind blew throughout her dreams. It rose out of the west, shifting the desert sand into mounds and valleys, wrinkles and rivulets. It danced and spun itself into the sky, pouring back down again like flaxen rain. From behind the haze on the mountainside sat the ancients, stirring their witchfire. Sparks flew across the quivering desert to send Lucy their message: "Be not afraid, Lucy, for you are charmed." Then sand rattled against the window, and she woke.

At the foot of her bed stood Grandma Huckapee. "You can't go to work, Lucy. Radio says a storm's coming."

"I know," Lucy signed, sitting up. She could hear, but couldn't speak. She had an affliction the doctors told her was called congenital aphonia. "But I'll be safe. I'm protected."

Grandma Huckapee shook her head. "Fool girl," she muttered, taking a blanket from a drawer. With a small hammer and some brads, she tacked it over the window, shutting out the morning and the sand. "Just because the yellow wind didn't get you last time don't mean it won't try again."

Lucy watched the old woman's knotty fingers at work. When she was finished, and turned, Lucy signed, "You know the ancients protect me,

Grandma. Besides, Frank will need me at the store in case the other girls don't show up."

"Another fool, that Frank," her grandmother said. "Store ought to stay closed." She took out more blankets, went to seal other windows.

Lucy was saddened when Grandma talked that way about Frank. She didn't know him the way Lucy did. He was kind, and very good-looking for a man of forty, twice Lucy's age. Last year after the diner where Lucy worked was blown down by the yellow wind, Frank was the first to come out and offer everyone a job at his convenience store. Lucy accepted. She was in love with him, but nobody knew that—except the ancients. They watched and whispered. They knew everything.

Lucy pulled on her jeans and combed her hair that was the color of the yellow wind. From her childhood dreams she recalled the words of the ancients: "Lucy Huckapee, you were conceived in the yellow wind, and it left the mark of its color on your hair. Your mother died giving you birth, but at that moment, we placed upon you the charm of silence, so those who question you can never learn who you truly are. You are the charmed child of the ancients."

Lucy pulled up the corner of the blanket from the window. Sand slashed against the glass, and she made the sign for "away."

The wind calmed and the sand tumbled aside so she could see. As she gazed up at the mountain, she was sure the raven's eye of the Elder looked back at her. "Charmed child of the ancients," he chanted into her mind, "do not be annoyed with your grandmother. She has wrapped you in the bosom of her heart ever since you were born."

"Oh, ancient Elder," Lucy replied with her mind, "why won't you tell me who my father is? Is he dead, like my mother?"

"He rides upon the yellow wind," said the ancient. He always gave her the same answer. A great gust then came from the sky, whirling a sea of sand out of the desert to shake the small frame house, filling the cracks and chinks with golden granules.

Grandma Huckapee came back into the bedroom. "It's getting real bad, Lucy. You shouldn't go."

"I'm going," Lucy signed, pulling on an old slicker that was pockmarked by years of sandstorms.

She shoved the door open and stepped out. Amber grit pelted her coat and jeans, but never touched any part of her skin. With the wind at her back she ran the two blocks to the convenience store. She felt herself propelled across the driveway, past the gas pumps, and up against the door with the bell that tinkled as she pushed inside, breathless. The smell of fresh coffee permeated the entire store, and she heard the little radio on the shelf behind the counter crackling and staticking.

Frank came out from the stockroom in back, a roll of duct tape in his hands. "Lucy! I didn't think anyone would come to work today."

She smiled, nodded, and pointed to herself. Frank was learning how to sign, but he couldn't seem to get the hang of it too well.

"Help yourself to coffee," he said. "I have to get this window taped up."

She sipped her coffee and watched him work. He was tall and thin, his thick hair a blend of salt and pepper. With the duct tape he made a big X across the front window, then ran more from top to bottom and across the middle from side to side. Lucy thought it looked like a great big gray star. "That held it last time," he said. "Let's hope it does again."

He returned to the little room in back, while outside the yellow wind screeched like a wounded animal.

A car pulled up by the pumps, and Lucy flipped the switch to turn them on. The driver braced himself against the wind as he filled his tank, then came inside to pay. He was a stranger; Lucy knew everyone in town. She took his twenty, gave him his change just as Frank came from the stockroom. "Anything else you need, mister?" Frank asked.

The stranger shook his head. "No. I'm getting

out as soon as I can. I was visiting my sister, but she won't come with me, says she's used to these desert blows." He looked Lucy up and down. His eyes were like melted tar. "You want a ride out of town, kid?"

She shook her head no as Frank came up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "She's safe here," he said. She felt the warmth of his palms through her tee shirt.

The man shrugged and pushed out into the blowing sand. Only then did Frank take his hands away. Lucy wished she could throw her arms around him and show him how she felt, but he was already moving toward the stockroom to get cans of soda to fill the machine. Lucy went to the window and looked through the gray star, watching the man drive away. She wondered who he was, and who his sister was. Maybe some day her father would come into the store, and not know she was his daughter. Even her grandmother didn't know, for her mother had never told anyone. But Lucy would know -- she'd get a message from the ancients, who always said her father rode upon the yellow wind. She was sure that meant he would come during a storm. Maybe he might come in today, driving his car, or truck, and take her out of town with him.

She heard Frank filling the machine. *Clunk clunk* went the cans. Suddenly the radio rasped, stuttered, and died. "Electric's gone," Frank said above the rhythm of the cans.

Usually the high school kids stopped on their way home to get a soda or a bag of pretzels or to gas up their sporty cars. Lucy liked it when they hung around. It was fun listening to them. But today the road was empty. Across the way, the bank and the pharmacy were closed. The sign above Millie's Beauty Parlor had blown down and was skidding along the sidewalk. Mounds of ecru grit heaped against the storefronts, then blew away, only to pile up quickly again. Tumbleweeds and pieces of paper balled together, rolling across the road and back again. The desert lifted itself into a frenzy, slamming the small town with furious

shrieks. Lucy always felt that the desert was angry at the town for building itself too close, for hemming the desert in at this end.

She was about to turn from the window when she saw a man weaving across the parking lot, pushing against the wind, holding his cap onto his head.

Frank came from the soda machine to stand next to Lucy. "That's the guy who was just in here," he said. "Wonder why he left his car in the street?"

The stranger finally made it to the door and shouldered it aside, a rush of amber grit swirling in with him. Frank pushed the door shut. "What's wrong with your car?" he asked.

The man took off his cap and slapped it on his hip, raising sandy dust. His hair was gray, and Lucy realized he was past middle-age. "She quit on me," he puffed. "Friggin' sand got in the engine, or maybe the gas tank—I don't know." He glared at Frank. "Maybe there was sand in the gas I just bought here."

Frank said, "The tanks are below ground."

The stranger slapped his hat on his hip again. "Yeah, well—funny she never quit before." He stared at Lucy with his tarry eyes. They had become bottomless black pits, and she sensed that beneath the surface was an entrance to another world. If she looked into them long enough, she'd be able to see back to the beginning of time, where the ancients lived.

The man said, "You should get out of this town, kid. That wind's a killer." Then he asked, "What's your name?"

She signed, "My name is Lucy."

His brow furrowed as he glanced at Frank. "What's the matter with her? Can't she give me a decent answer? What is she, a witch, putting hex signs on me?"

Calmly Frank said, "She can't speak."

"Oh. A retard, huh?"

"She's not retarded, she's just not able to speak. She was signing her name. It's Lucy."

"Yeah, okay. Got any beer? Or something stron-

ger?" He seemed on edge, kept fidgeting with his cap.

Lucy turned toward the refrigerator where the beer was kept, but Frank put his hand on her arm. "Have a coffee on the house," he said, taking a paper cup from the stack and filling it from the coffee maker.

"Thanks." The stranger stirred two sugars into the cup. "Where's a garage open? I need a mechanic."

"Pete might be open. I'll give him a call." Frank picked up the phone, put it back again. "Dead."

"Damn. And I left my cell phone in the car. I've got to get home. My old lady will kill me." He drank down some coffee and kept staring at Lucy.

Outside, the mood of the wind changed. The sky darkened into a cauldron of boiling madness, whipping tumbleweeds and Millie's Beauty Parlor sign high into the air.

The grocery shelves shuddered. Cans and packages jumped and slid. Lucy saw Frank steady the coffee maker. She felt the stranger's bottomless eyes on her as the wind screamed.

In the parking lot, the beauty parlor sign bounced along wildly on its corners. It did cartwheels, end over end, heading this way. Lucy saw it coming, but she couldn't move. She was standing in tarry ooze that sucked her down deeper and deeper.

"Lucy! Get away from that window!" Frank yelled.

From somewhere far away, she heard the crash. Splinters of glass sprinkled down on her as the sign flew over her head into a shelf of groceries. She was surrounded by melted tar. She fought, but darkness claimed her.

The witchfire warmed Lucy's weary bones. She had been climbing the mountain for endless days and nights, and now lay on a bed of amber dust that soothed her frayed body. The night stars drifted nearby as the Elder tied a stick to a rag and made a witch-doll, then tossed it into the

fire. Grandma Huckapee stepped from the flames, carrying a bowl of soup. "This will make you feel better," she said.

Lucy nodded and sat up to drink it. Behind her, the circle of ancients chanted their litanies as the Elder stepped forward. "Lucy Huckapee," he intoned, "within the yellow wind are many voices. I now remove the charm of silence and grant you speech." He plucked a passing zephyr and mixed it into her soup. She felt it going down, soft and warm, alive with the music of the spheres.

Her first words came out gnarled and tangled. She tumbled them around on her tongue until they discovered their own passageway through the yellow wind. "Thank you, Elder," Lucy said. "I love the feel of words." The music of the wind lived within her now. But the savage part of it was going to wreck Frank's store. "Elder, would you take away the desert wind before it does more damage?"

She was aware of something that lay heavy upon her chest, that pushed on her and sucked at her breath. It was the stranger with tarry eyes. Was he trying to steal the zephyr that she had swallowed? "No! Get away!" she shouted. "It's mine! The Elder gave it to me." She struggled, but his melted eyes engulfed her, possessed her, until she felt the zephyr escape and the warmth of her own breath renewed within her chest. Her gift of speech was gone. The charm of silence was restored.

Lucy opened her eyes. The yellow wind had died down to a gentle sigh coming from the gaping hole in the window. She was on the floor, covered by Frank's jacket. The stranger knelt nearby, smiling. "You'll be okay now, kid. You just had the wind knocked out of you, is all." In his eyes she saw the reflection of the witchfire within the melted tar, and knew he had been sent by the ancients to save her.

He wasn't her father. Perhaps she would never know who was. She could accept that, if the ancients so decreed.

The man said, "I'll go get my cell phone." He put on his cap, smiled again, and left

Everything was quiet. Millie's sign rested against the shelves. The tumbleweeds rolled limply along the edge of the sidewalk. Lucy had given up speech for this, but it was worth it. Everyone and everything—Frank and his store—were now safe. Some day the ancients would send a love for her into his heart, but for now she was content.

"What a sudden change in the wind that was," Frank said, helping her to her feet. "You okay?"

She nodded, watching the stranger walk to his car. When he got in, he started the engine, waved his cap out the window, and was gone.

"It wasn't sand in his tank after all," Frank said. He took a broom and started to sweep up the glass. "I never saw the yellow wind die down that fast. It was like someone took a magic wand and waved it over the desert to make it stop. You be-

lieve in magic, Lucy?"

She simply smiled and picked up the other broom to help.

Vera Searles has authored over three hundred published short stories. She recently completed a fantasy novel.



Twilight Times Books is pleased to announce a new imprint, Paladin Timeless Books. We will be open to submissions from February 15 to March 5, 2006.

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Enero Rice is a gorgeous woman who doesn't seem surprised by her husband's 'accidental' death. Is she a cold-hearted murderess or merely the victim of unbalanced and unbiased Detective Snickey's personal obsessions? It's up to the department's golden boy, Detective Aguilera, to discover the truth.

Uno Dinero

Daniel R. Robichaux II

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polka dot blouse hung loose off her shoulders and firm around her bust. The black skirt was tight enough to show off the clasps of the garters clipped to her smoky thigh-high stockings. Her lips were most stunning; the candy apple shade made them sweet enough to inspire a sugar buzz from across the room. Only her eye shadow was not right, just a shade too dark. It made her eyes heavy.

She sat at the table inside like a funhouse mirror reflection of Snickey—if a

Detective Aguilera walked into Observation, got a whiff of fresh smoke, coughed and tugged the door shut behind him.

Detective Snickey sat in a thinly-cushioned folding chair; tie undone, shirt untucked, hair mussed and his belly resting on his thighs. He lit a fresh cigarette off the smoldering butt of his last one and then smudged the old butt in his make-shift ashtray, the plastic lid from some fast food beverage. The detective's tan jacket hung behind him, inches from a NO SMOKING sign.

The raven-tressed beauty sitting on the other side of the one-way mirror, in Interview Room Seven, held Snickey's attention.

Her curves were perfect, and the outfit she wore emphasized her miraculous figure. A black

funhouse mirror could magically transform a sweaty, overweight, twenty-year veteran police detective into a twenty-something Latina beauty. They both ignored No Smoking signs, while staring through the wall separating them.

"She seems unphased," Aguilera said.

"She's cracking," Snickey replied. "You can see it. It's only been 40 minutes between this and the last cigarette. Before that, it was an hour and a half..."

"So that puts her in there what, two hours?"

"Three. She didn't light up straight away," Snickey said, "She waited."

Aguilera looked down at the folder in his hand. "I can't help but notice she hasn't been charged."

"Not yet," Snickey said, "she's covered her trail,

pretty good. I'm just letting her sit a spell."

Aguilera sat in a seat next to Snickey. He opened the folder. "Enero Rice," he read. "Lives on Hayes Boulevard... Not a bad neighborhood. Married?" He glanced up. "Lucky bastard whoever comes home to that every night."

"Not so lucky. He's dead," Snickey said. "A pool-side slip and fall. Very convenient."

"Coroner's report says accidental?" Aguilera asked, but he already knew the answer.

The coroner was a good man, knew the difference between accident and murder. This was why the shift lieutenant asked Aguilera to render a verdict as to Snickey's involvement. Why? Because the captain requested him to. Authority rolled down the hill from captain to lieutenant to Aguilera. "Checks and balances," the loot explained. "You check to see if Snickey's balanced." IA Investigation remained unspoken but implied.

Aguilera couldn't help but wonder why the Rice case was garnering so much attention. What kind of pull did this babe have?

Aguilera was squeaky clean as far as the department was concerned - he had done nothing to prompt any internal investigations. Still, if IA poked into Snickey, who knew what else they might turn up. Aguilera knew he wasn't as clean as his rep, thus, he agreed to check on Snickey.

"Look at her," Snickey said. "She's just dripping with it."

Aguilera looked up. The suspect appeared dry as a bone, albeit a well-shaped bone. "It?"

"Guilt." Snickey stubbed out his cigarette. "Sin."

As though hearing him, Enero stood up. Never taking her eyes off the mirror, she turned until she stood in profile. Luscious from every angle.

The suspect dangled her cigarette from her lips, slid up the hem of her skirt and adjusted the tops of her lace stockings. Smiling, she turned her leg slowly, showing off. She had plenty to show.

"Why's she here, Len?" Aguilera asked.

"I know she's guilty."

"Evidence. Why's she being held here?"

"Dammit, Aguilera," Snickey snapped, "I've been

on this job long enough to know a criminal when I see it."

"And you've been on this job long enough to know you can't get emotionally involved."

Snickey turned to Aguilera. "We got nothing."

"Release her."

"Loot sent you, didn't he?" Snickey asked. "To see if I'm staying 'impartial'?"

Aguilera cocked his head, "Aren't you?"

"Son of a bitch," Snickey said though Aguilera wasn't sure at whom it was directed.

In Room 7, the woman sat and crossed her legs. Aguilera hoped for a Basic Instinct peek. No luck.

Aguilera escorted Enero Rice to the front lobby and gave her the release forms. He said, "I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

"I'm sorry for a lot of things," she replied. "I want to file a complaint about Detective Louis Snickey."

"Complaint?"

"Harassment. Abuse of authority. Dragging me down here today. Leaving me. I thought you people had forgotten my existence."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, but regulations had to be followed. There's been a death--"

"The cause of death is officially *Accidental*. There's no case to follow up on. Now get me a *form*, so I can file my complaint."

"Is there any way I can sway your opinion?" he asked, adopting his best boy scout smile. A real heart warmer. His smile had swayed plenty of people in the past.

She glanced at him suspiciously. Finally, she asked, "You off duty soon?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "Another ten minutes or so."

"Don't ma'am me. I'm not even twenty-eight yet." Her eyes ran down and then up his body again, evaluating the package, then she glanced at her watch. "Buy a lady a drink?"

"Is this a quid pro quo situation?" he asked.

"Buy me a drink, and I'll reconsider my complaint."

"Done," he said. "You like Sticks?" It was a pool

hall and bar just a block away. Unofficially a cop bar, Aguilera knew he could get a discount.

"Not particularly," she said. "The place's a dive."

"Where, then?"

"How about Tenors?" she asked.

"Don't know it," he said.

"It's not too far. Just over in Roseville. I'll lead," she said. "Think you can keep an eye on my tail-lights?" She didn't wait for an answer, just started walking to the door.

"You bet I'll keep an eye on them," Aguilera whispered.

She paused, hands on the door bar, glanced back over her shoulder and laughed - a harsh sound - before she pushed through the door.

Tenors was a hole in the wall not quite big enough for six tables, two dozen chairs and nine barstools. The walls were the color of soot. A pair of antique ceiling fans spun lazily, doing nothing to disperse the thick fog of cigarette smoke near the ceiling.

"I love this place," she said. "You know, they used to have all sorts of porno clippings on the walls. Gave the place quite an atmosphere."

Not impressed, Aguilera asked. "Atmosphere of what?"

"Desperate desire," she replied and slid into a seat. She produced a new cigarette and then lit up. "So, are you fulfilled?"

"Excuse me?"

The smile around her cigarette was predatory. "I mean—"

"Drinks?" A guy in leathers with a shaved head, sunglasses and four earrings asked.

Her eyes never left Aguilera. "Scotch and soda," she said.

"You have Corona?"

"Sure." A shark smile lit up the guy's features. Lots of teeth. "In a glass?"

"Sounds good," Aguilera said.

"Be right back with those," he said.

As soon as he was gone, Enero picked the conversation back up as though there had been no interruption. "Do you have everything you want

out of life?"

"Nope," Aguilera said.

"What's missing?"

"Retirement," he replied.

"Oh, Mr. Excitement." This time her smile was a placation. "So, what should I call you?"

"Aguilera," he said.

"I caught that at the station." Like his surname was a venereal disease. "You got anything shorter?"

"Hops," he replied.

"Like a bunny rabbit?" she snickered.

"It's what they call me."

"And are you a bunny rabbit?" she continued.

"Maybe."

"Maybe," she repeated. She tapped her cigarette's ashes and stood up. When Aguilera's eyes asked where she was going, she said, "I have to use the little girl's room."

Their drinks came just moments before she returned. With booze and beer, conversation shotgunned topics. Chitchat passed fast, developed into real dialogue.

At first, Aguilera thought Enero was relentlessly critical. After a while, he read it as something else: she was trying to figure out his core. She felt something about him. Lust, love... What had she called it?

Desperate desire?

Snickey was out of his mind, Aguilera decided, this woman's not evil, just... Totally in sync with her wants and needs.

Completely comfortable, he found himself opening up as he'd never done before.

So when she leaned in close, pursed her lips and breathily asked, "Alright, officer, what's the worst thing you've ever done?" he answered her honestly.

"Stole my pension," he said.

Her mouth opened, her eyes flashed, her lips curled. Surprise and excitement radiated.

Memory made him quiet. "I was on a raid," he said. "Our Detective Bureau is small. I got picked to be first team on a narcotics bust. I found the

cash store. Don't know why, but I stuck some rubber-banded bundles in my socks, under my pant legs. While the rest of the cash went to the evidence locker, I buried my stash in Rotary Park.

"God, I sweated over it for days. I sat up nights, pleading with the man upstairs. 'If you don't want me to have it, just make it go away.' When I went back and dug, my hands wouldn't keep still. I shook, thinking, 'It won't be here. It won't be.' But it was. I took it home.

"I tell myself I won't touch it until I retire. Then, I'll use it for something good..." he said. "Cop's pension is so-so, but that cushion makes it pretty nice."

"Is it still buried?" she asked. "Or is it someplace safer?"

"Buried in my back yard," he said, "In the garden, under an el cheapo touristy copy of the Plymouth Rock I picked up when I took a vacation in Massachusetts."

Why am I telling this to a stranger? Then he realized the world was a little fuzzy—not drunk fuzzy, but something else. "What's in this?" he asked, touching the bottle.

His head hit the table before she replied.

"*Maybe,*" Enero repeated. She tapped her cigarette's ashes and stood up. When Aguilera's eyes asked where she was going, she said. "I have to use the little girl's room."

She walked past the bar and into the hallway with the restrooms. She passed the doors and entered one marked Employees Only. Inside, Billy Tenor, the skinhead leather boy, sat at a card table. Recording gear made the middle sag. He tugged off a pair of earphones as she came in. "What the hell, Eny?" he whined. "I thought you said this guy was a two-hundred and forty pound sack named Snickey-Snick."

"Snickey's the cop who's been bothering me," she said. "This is another one altogether."

"I thought the deal was to get stuff on the cop who's been snooping on you?"

"One cop's dirt is just as good as another's, isn't it?"

"Well, Vic told me to—"

"Vic told you to help *me* out," she said. Though she wasn't aware of it, she said the name Vic with just a little reverence as though it were the name of a saint she might still believe in.

Billy caught this and wondered how good a lay a guy would have to be to make a girl still feel that way years after they'd split up. He asked, "Is this some random cop out of the blue?"

"No," she said, "this is a cop covering for the one who's snooping. Who knows why, but he was ready to give me anything to keep me from complaining."

"So you think he's hiding something for this Snickey-Snick?"

"I want to find out."

"Fine, *Uno Dinero,*" Billy said with a smirk.

"Shut up." She delivered that with whip-crack sharp curtness.

"Sorry," he said.

"Go serve the drinks."

"One jumped Corona coming right up," Billy said.

"What are you slipping him?"

"Trade secret. A little cocktail of sodium Penthotal, some trunk sedatives and a little something else for kicks."

Enero rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Be sure to give me more soda than scotch, if you please." Then, she headed for the women's room.

As she sat in the stall, counting off sixty seconds, she ran her palms across her knees, remembered old boyfriends, the love of her life who'd gotten away and hoped this stupid cop would give her something useful.

Enero's surprise was quite real.

Her pleasure was profoundly acute.

By the time the cop realized he wasn't just drunk, he was heartbeats away from unconsciousness. The man had been pounding back the brews. Since each mug contained Billy's Trade Secret cocktail, well, it was only a matter of time before Big Bad Detective Aguilera hit the sleepy trail. As she slid past him, heading once more for

the back room, she snagged Aguilera's wallet and eyed the address on his license. One look was enough. Her memory was eidetic.

When Enero got to the back room, Billy's shades dangled on a cord around his neck, and dollar signs danced in his eyes. "You've got a live one," he said. "What's the plan now?"

"You put him somewhere he can sleep this off. Keep an eye on him. I dig up the booty, we split it fifty-five thirty."

"Whoa, whoa," Billy said, suspicion replaced dollar signs. "Why do I baby-sit and you collect the goods? And fifty-five thirty? That don't even add up to one hundred percent!"

"Fifteen percent for Vic, or did you forget him?" Enero said. Billy got really quiet. "You stay here because the cop doesn't know you - doesn't know I know you."

"What's to keep you from sticking me with sleepy boy and taking the money for yourself?"

"Wow, I never thought of that," she said. "You watch too many movies."

"No, I've been screwed over too many times."

"If you get left behind, then Vic will probably get left behind, too. I might be able to hide from you, but not... Him."

There it was again. Reverence for Vic. A thug, thief and player Billy had never met but had spoken with five times - five jobs that netted Billy a nice bundle. Billy said, "So, what am I supposed to do if Mr. Policeman wakes up?"

"Keep him entertained and occupied until I call."

"Oh, you're calling me?" Billy asked. "From where, the airport?"

"You think I can come back while he's here? Look time's wasting. You in or not. I can always split it sixty forty with Vic."

Billy nodded without any more thought. "Do it. You got a cell?"

"No," she said.

"Take this one," he passed her one of the pay-by-the-minute cell phones he'd registered to a phony address credit card. "You call me as soon as

you collect."

"And, you call me if anything happens?"

"Nope," Billy said. "The battery don't last too long on that thing, and it doesn't receive calls unless you have it turned on."

"Make sure he gets this back," Enero said and tossed the wallet to Billy. She clipped the phone onto the waistline of her skirt and walked out Billy Tenor's back door.

A few of the customers giggled at the drunk sitting with his face on the table and his knuckles on the floor. Billy tapped Aguilera on the shoulder. "Hey, buddy, you okay?"

Billy looked around, a wide smile on his face. "Another one for the Padded Room," he said and the regulars chuckled.

The Padded Room was a small enclosure where the drunks could sleep. It was separated from the bar by a twice-padded door, which Billy sealed after last call. The drunks could wake up and wander out the back alley at their leisure. The floor and walls were covered with old mattresses and cushions. The place could fit as many as seven, packed in like sardines. If they flailed, bruised or ralphed on one another it was their own business.

The Padded Room was part of Tenor's reputation.

Jonas, the big bruiser of a bartender, helped Billy carry Aguilera into the Padded Room. "Thanks," Billy said, wiping off his forehead. The sweat there was not from carrying the cop but waiting. Waiting for the payoff or to get screwed.

If Enero screwed him, well, Billy wouldn't need some ex-boytoy like Vic to settle the score. He'd do it himself.

"You dropped this," Billy said and tossed the cop's wallet onto his belly.

On the ride to Aguilera's house, Enero couldn't get a stupid song out of her head. It was Billy's fault. It was the song about Cinco de Mayo, a song her father used to sing, every May 5th.

Uno de Enero

Dos de Febrero

Tres de Marzo
Cuatro de Abril
Cinco de Mayo
Seis de Junio
Siete de Julio
San Fermín.

Her name figured into the first stanza: Enero, Spanish for January. Basically, the song was a counting thing: first of January, second of February, up to the seventh of July, and then a town's name. What San Fermin had to do anything and how the rest of the song went was anybody's guess; Enero had long forgotten. The beginning part was all she knew. That's what got stuck.

Billy had slaughtered the beginning changing *uno de Enero*, "first of January," to *uno dinero*, "first money" but the effect was the same: a stupid fragment of a song was trapped on repeat in her mental radio. She caught herself whistling it. She slammed her fist against the steering wheel, like that would help.

Detective 'Hops' Aguilera lived in a large ranch, in a nice suburban neighborhood full of ranches, surrounded by neighbors who'd all installed privacy fences. Perfect. Enero smiled as she turned her car into the cop's driveway.

A waist-high chain link gate led to the strip of lawn which ran between the house's attached garage and the neighbor's unpainted wood plank privacy fence, connecting the driveway to a patio at the back of the house. A sliding glass door connected the rear of the house with a small burgundy painted deck, three plank steps above the cement patio. All Aguilera's house windows had matching white fabric vertical blinds, all closed. If someone was inside, they could not see her.

Three sides of the square shaped backyard were enclosed by different colored privacy fences - beige next to her, brilliant white along the rear of the yard, and dark brown on the final side.

Along the stretch of brilliant white planks, Enero saw a small rose and vegetable garden. The flowers were in full bloom, the plants ripe. As she

approached, she smelled homegrown spices. A cop with a green thumb. Too precious for words, so cute it made her want to barf.

Something tugged at Enero's shoes.

The meticulously groomed lawn was still moist from watering. The cop had in-ground sprinklers, and they must've just finished their business an hour earlier. On a timer or was someone home?

She slipped out of her shoes altogether. Let the stockings get damp.

She crossed to the garden without any more surprises. Three smooth-faced stones lay tucked between the plants. Each was dated: 1492, 1580, and 1620. They were spread out far enough that there would be no chance of her accidentally stumbling on treasure buried under any of the others.

Pick the wrong one, she realized, you dig twice or three times as long.

What did he say it was under?

Plymouth rock...

That was the Pilgrims, wasn't it? Escaping from England to America.

1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue, so that couldn't be it.

Two to go, time's a wasting. Even if no one could see her right now, someone might notice the car sitting in the driveway. *Why didn't I bring his wheels?*

1580, 1620? Plymouth rock, Plymouth... Massachusetts...

Wait a second. She had the vague impression the year was a low number in the tens digit. Memory bubbled up from elementary school and the Thanksgiving Day decorations she made in second grade.

Thank Christ for eidetic memory!

1620. Definitely 1620.

Forget your mind games, Officer 'Hops'.

She looked around. No trowel. I should have brought a shovel, she thought. *Oh well.* She used the rock itself to dig through the dirt.

After nearly a foot, the rock hit steel. *Jackpot.*

Clearing away dirt revealed the front door of a

tiny safe. *Crap.*

Pulling the safe free, it became a steel cigar box shaped to *look* like a safe. *Tricky bastard.*

She tucked the box under an arm and turned to leave.

The vertical blinds inside the sliding glass door swayed slightly. No visible compressor, probably no central air conditioning. *Someone else is here.*

Escape routes...

A short jaunt up that path out the gate and to her car. The attached garage was nestled along two thirds of this wall. The closest third held a rectangular window above a vent. Drier. She remembered all the lint in the grass. Laundry room window?

The fences were high, but she might be able to climb them... If she wasn't wearing the damned skirt. She could hike it if she didn't mind panty flashing the neighborhood - modesty was not an issue, but nothing would work better to make her memorable.

Path it is.

Enero moved fast. She crouched as she passed the window, holding the steel box at waist level under her shoes.

The pane of glass did not suddenly slide up to reveal an attacker.

She smiled until she cleared the garage wall.

Someone leaned against the front bumper of her car.

Waiting for her.

Billy packed up the recording equipment and silently cursed Enero.

The phone was silent.

Revenge scenarios were so absorbing he didn't hear the door open or Jonas enter until the bartender said, "Boss!"

Billy startled, "What?"

"The drunk's making a ruckus!"

Fresh sweat. She hadn't called yet and the cop was awake? What was Billy supposed to do now? "I forget to unlock the outside door, huh?" Billy said quickly, using his lower lip to wipe the upper.

"He want out?"

"Uh-uh," Jonas replied. "Sounds like some kind of seizures."

Cold dread filled Billy's shorts. "Show me."

You could hear Aguilera inside the bar. Not screaming, just thrashing around - had to be a lot of thrashing to make that much noise on a load of mattresses. And, there was something else. Gurgling of some sort.

Half of Tenor's crowd had cleared out. The others stared at the locked door, faces a mix of terror and ghoulish enchantment.

As soon as Billy opened the door, he had to turn away from the acrid stench.

The cop had vomited on himself. Crapped, too, it smelled like. Peed his pants. It was a full-scale evacuation.

Worst of all, it wasn't helping his condition.

The cop writhed. He'd twisted between two of the mattresses, and his feet banged against the wooden floor beneath. The guy's hair was slick with chunks of half digested beer nuts in a whitish yellow crème.

"Come on," Billy called to Jonas before he stepped into the room.

"No way, Jose," Jonas replied. "Who knows what that guy's got..."

"Yellow bellied bastard," Billy said.

Billy leaned down, turned the cop over, and tried to clean out his breathing ways. "Man, this is nasty," he whispered.

A pair of yellow rubber gloves landed in a pool of vomit nearby.

"Use those, Boss!" Jonas called.

Billy's hands were already caked. "Too little, too late," Billy said. "Schmuck."

The cop coughed up a mouthful and wheezed pitifully. *He saved himself!* Billy smiled until he saw brilliant crimson in the stuff. The bastard barfed blood.

Aguilera thrashed a little more, and then fell still. *Scary* still. *Dead* still.

"Oh nuts," Billy whispered.

"You want me to call an ambulance?" Jonas asked.

"No!" Billy shot back, and then looked at the bartender, "No, he's fine. Worst is done. He's... Done."

The smile that came to Jonas' face was one of pure thankfulness.

"Let him sleep," Billy said.

"Might want to crack open the back door, huh?" Jonas suggested.

"Why?"

"So he can breathe. I don't know if this stinky air's so good for him."

Billy's lower lip swiped the upper again, "Fug-getit," he said, laughing nervously, "He's probably used to this, huh?"

"You're probably right."

Billy stood up, trying not to shake. He walked out the room and locked the door wondering, *What the hell am I gonna do with a dead cop?*

Jonas shouted, "Yo, B!" When Billy turned around, Jonas had the phone in his hand and was waving him over.

"I told you not to call nobody!" Billy hissed after storming over into whispering distance.

Jonas looked struck. "I didn't," he said. "It's some chick, says she knows you."

Billy snatched the phone. "This better be you, Uno Dinero!"

It was. Billy took the cordless toward the back room, pausing long enough to wipe his hands.

"What the hell's taking you so long?" he snarled. "Get back here, double quick. Something's come up."

Enero's voice was cool when she said, "Something came up at the cop's place, too."

A girl leaned over the hood of Enero's car balanced on a pair of crutches; both of her legs were in braces. The girl was dark haired, maybe fourteen, and had Aguilera's nose.

Daughter?

"Who're you?" the girl asked.

"Dolores," Enero answered.

"Why were you digging in my back yard, Dolores?" She emphasized the name, showing she

didn't buy the lie. The girl looked down at the metal box in Enero's hands. "You after Dad's stash?"

Enero didn't move.

"Does he know you're here?"

Enero thought she might be able to get away with lying but decided, *Why bother?* "No."

The girl nodded, as though satisfied with the answer. A strangely mature motion for such a young girl. There was something about her: a weight she carried, a wisdom she should still be innocent of.

"You his kid?" Enero asked.

The girl nodded again. "Casey."

"Well, Casey, is your mom home?" Enero asked. Damage control was important.

Casey just laughed. "Hell, you don't even *know* him then. Mom died in the wreck that did *this*." The teenager indicated her legs. "Do you even know my Dad's a *policeman*?"

"I know that much," Enero said.

"And that's his dirty secret, huh?" Casey said, pointing at the box.

"He tell you about this?"

"Nope, and I don't want to know. The way he avoids the garden, now... It can't be good. I mean that was the bonding space for the whole fam, back when we *were* a whole fam..." Casey shook her head. "No, I saw him bury it out in the flowers one night. Now, he just avoids the area. I have to tend it alone. I don't want to know what's in that box, and I'm glad it's going."

"Can I leave, then?"

"After you tell me one thing," Casey said.

Enero paused.

"Tell me your real name."

No hesitation. "Enero Rice."

Casey nodded again and crutched away from the front of Enero's car.

Enero took it as a sign she could leave. As she pulled out of the driveway, she saw the girl craning her neck, catching the license plate number. No matter. If Enero could help it, she would give the girl no reason to use it.

As she pulled away, she reveled in how smoothly things were going.

It was like doing away with her husband. She'd married the fat swine Joshua Singer Rice for his family money, unaware he had more debts than revenue. She'd had plans all set, a murder schedule with two back up plans. And the jerk didn't let her follow through. No, he slipped on a puddle on the white tiles around the pool deck, a puddle he made just minutes before, while trying splash her. He cracked his neck. Ironical twist of fate: a real live accidental death.

That cop Snickey, though, he could see that she wasn't half as broken up as she should be. Oh well, you can't jail a person for not caring when someone dies. He kept pressuring her. Sticking his nose into things. Giving her grief. So, she called up her former heartthrob Vic who worked up the plan to get dirt on the cop, dirt both of them could use. If that hadn't happened, she wouldn't be sitting pretty in a car with a tin full of cash.

The seatbelt caught on the cell phone. "Might as well call that weasel Billy."

Then, the offal hit the whirling blades. To top things off, that damn song came back.

Tenors was empty; Billy had closed up shop early. Enero and Billy both looked at the corpse.

"What the hell happened?" Enero asked.

"One of two things," Billy replied. "Overdose, possibly. I was expecting a guy a hundred pounds heavier, and I had to compensate for body mass difference on the quick. Or, he was allergic to something. No way I coulda known that."

"What the hell are we going to do?" Enero asked.

"I was thinking," Billy said. "Could Adonis handle it?"

Enero gave him a baleful glare.

"You know," Billy smirked, "your knight in shining armor. The Vic-ster."

She said, "He's already done me a favor setting up the whole thing."

"So, he should help with the clean up," Billy said.

"He wanted a cop in his pocket," Enero scowled. "Not in the meat locker."

"Hey, this was not my fault," Billy said, holding up his hands like he didn't want to touch the matter.

She thought about it for a moment and then nodded once. "I can call him, but your share just dropped."

"What for?"

"You want Vic to take the risk of disposal, then you got to pay the man."

Billy frowned but muttered, "Fine. Just get it done ASAP."

"I'll see what I can do."

Vic's voice was like the smell of fresh baked bread. Warm, delicious with promise, and it filled Enero with the most wonderful tingles. "Calling so soon?" There was a little pleasantries in his voice which was usually only business on the phone.

"Yes, Vic," she said. "There's a problem with the acting job."

Vic waited silently.

"The dialogue part went great, but that extra writer introduced a stiff in act two."

She could hear the debate in Vic's silence: *to dump it back in her lap or not. That was the question.*

"There's something else," she said. "I know there wasn't supposed to be an audience for this, but we've got a bit of a blockbuster on our hands!"

"And the split is 55 for the house, 30 for the writer and 15 for the producer?" Vic's pleasantries were gone.

"Not in stone," she said.

"Any other royalties?"

Enero's throat dried. Vic's voice grew firm like he'd sounded once before, just before Enero watched him slam a guy's face into a Venetian statue until blood came out the victim's eyes.

"What do you mean?" Her voice cracked.

"Any royalties need to be netted out for the actor playing the stiff?"

But he's dead, she thought and then realized he

meant Aguilera's family.

"Well, he's got a daughter," Enero said, confusion evident in her voice. *Is he going to kill that kid on crutches?*

"How old?" Vic demanded.

"I don't know. Fourteen, maybe?"

"Wife?"

"Gone."

"Kid's alone, huh?"

Enero tried to smile. "Uh, yeah."

"Twenty for the producer; thirty for the estate. The other fifty's for house and the writer. Split it up how you want," Vic said, curtly. "Now, I'll call a janitor. She'll arrive in a couple of hours.

"Have the writer stick around to meet her. You deliver the complication's percentage and provide a nice explanation."

"What?" Enero said. "But I—"

"That's the agreement," Vic said, all civility gone. "You had a chance to clean things up. You failed. You called me. So, you pay the price.

"Don't let me find out you didn't do what I said."

"Yes, sir," she said and hated that she sounded like some kid in trouble.

"You got something else to say?"

"No, sir. I mean, yes, sir. Why?"

She took his silence to mean he wanted clarification.

"Why the thirty for the girl?"

"For a reason you'll never understand," Vic said. "Suffice with this cause this is all you'll get. I've got enough sins; I don't need more crawling after me when I'm not expecting them.

"One more thing. You've used up your privileges. Never call me again."

That was the hardest blow of them all. It was those last four words that made Enero Rice cry. Somehow she found the strength to say, "Yes, sir." But Vic had already hung up.

She wiped the tears away before leaving the back room. At least Billy had given her some privacy.

"So," Billy said when he saw her. "What'd big man say?"

"He said someone will be by. You won't have to worry about the stiff."

"That's a relief," Billy said.

"But your cut's now forty grand."

Billy's eyes bulged, "What? But there's three hundred in that box! That's not even—" his eyes came alive with mathematics. "That's not even fifteen percent!"

"Take it or leave it," she said.

"Fine," he snapped. "But I'm keeping the goddamn recording equipment."

"You can talk that over with the janitor when she gets here," Enero said and opened the tin box.

She halfway expected it to be filled with pot or toy soldiers or Bible pages cut to the size of money. Instead, she found rubber-banded bundles of thousand-dollar bills in sealed Ziploc baggies.

She counted off 41 and handed them to Billy.

"I threw an extra one on there," she said, "out of my cut. Just to say thanks."

Billy cocked his head and looked at her. "Yeah, well. You know. Whatever."

"I have to go," she said. "Deliver the rest."

"You mean I gotta sit around with a corpse?" the skinhead shouted.

"I've got a harder job to do." She wondered how she could possibly explain the situation to the crutch girl and avoid her calling the cops. Briefly, Enero entertained just slipping the money into the mailbox or between the front door and the storm door, then Vic's promise— not a *threat*, a *promise*— returned to her.

But what was she going to say?

Enero would have preferred to wait with the corpse.

Born in southeastern Michigan, Daniel R. Robichaud currently lives in central Massachusetts, where he works as a research engineer by day and a freelance fictioneer by night. His work is appearing in several magazines and anthologies, including Red Scream issue 2 and Provocative Notes, edited by Nancy Jackson.

A Stepford man learns that even with a beautiful robot wife, life isn't so perfect after all.

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Those Stepford Guys

Winifred Seery

how's the new wife working out? Custom job, wasn't she?"

Rex grinned. "Like clockwork, pal." He made a circle with his thumb and forefinger. "She's incredible."

"That's good to hear. Those cerebral cortex modifications can be darn tricky." Looking at Rex, the engineer waxed sympathetic. "Every guy wants a perfect wife, hmm? And you put up with the old one long enough, my friend."

Rex's blue eyes hardened. "It *was* rough toward the end—the beds went unmade for a week, the mashed potatoes were lumpy—"

"You don't have to spell it out. I understand, old buddy. We're all the same. But now you've got yourself the ideal woman. Thirty-six, twenty-four, thirty-six, wasn't she?"

Rex shook his head. "You're off by a tad. Thirty-eight, twenty-four, thirty-six."

"You're sure?" The engineer pulled a notebook from his back pocket, flipped pages till he found the one he wanted, and ran his scraggly fingernail over a column of numbers.

"Must have confused her with one of the others," he mumbled as he snapped his notebook shut. "Main thing is, you're happy now, right? Immaculate house, gourmet meals, a sex kitten who worships you and demands zilch? You could buy yourself that little sports car you've been itching for. It's the real thing, isn't it, Rex boy?"

"You bet," Rex agreed heartily. "There's only one problem—I hate to sound picky—but she keeps calling me 'sir.'"

"Oh, you didn't want that?"

"I don't mind really. It's just that she confuses the kids."

The engineer folded his arms over his chest. "Most of the fellows think it sets a good example for them."

The day seemed flawless—the air pristine, the traffic well-regulated, the store windows playfully decorated with cardboard witches and crepe paper pumpkins. Rex Midas whistled as he strolled down Main Street on his way home from the office. Two nights before, the guys from the Men's Association had fixed him up with a perfect living doll.

So absorbed was Rex in contemplating his recent good fortune that right in front of the hardware store he smacked into one of the Association's engineers.

"Are you okay?" Rex blurted. The man had landed on his bottom, missing by an inch a line of new snowblowers set out on the sidewalk for a pre-winter sale. Rex offered him a hand up. He owed much to the Association's middle-aged geniuses.

"Not to worry; it'll take more than a little fall to damage this old guy." The engineer brushed himself off. "By the way,

"Well, yeah, but there's my image to consider, too. Suppose she starts talking like that in a restaurant outside of Stepford? I'd look stuffy. Feel embarrassed. Know what I mean?"

The technician gave some thought to the problem as he scratched the top of his head. "Okay, Rex. She's *your* wife." He jotted a few words in the front of the notebook and replaced it in his back pocket. "Bring her to the Association meeting tonight, and I'll modify her conversation tape."

"Sounds good. Oh, wait—I can't manage it this evening. The boss is coming to dinner. How about tomorrow night?"

The other man frowned. He seemed to find Rex's words difficult to digest. "You mean you won't be there at all?"

Rex felt miffed. Cheez! What did they want from him? He attended all the semiweekly meetings, participated in a heck of a lot of kidnappings, and he always paid his dues on time.

"Come on, Werner. I don't have to prove my loyalty to the Men's Association. But job security has gotta be my bottom line, especially these days. You know that."

The engineer smiled. "You want me to back off, huh?"

"I'll bring 'er in tomorrow night."

"Sure, that'll be fine," patting Rex's arm. "Meantime, make a note if anything else goes wrong. She's still under warranty."

The Midases' suburban home with the green shutters and matching lawn seemed quieter than usual. Even Rusty, their Irish setter, had been restrained somewhere. As Rex closed the front door, the smell of air fresheners greeted him. But the kitchen was empty, the table unset.

"What is the meaning of this?" he wanted to shout. His chest constricted as visions of the old days crowded his brain. "Barbie?"

No answer.

Only one payment and already.... He marched into the den where the twins were watching their late-afternoon TV cartoon show.

"Gene! Jean!" he barked.

Two halibuts would have manifested greater response. He strode to the TV set and placed himself in front of it, blocking their view. "Where is your mother?"

They blinked. "Our real mother or our play mother?"

"Your new mother!"

"Oh—her," Gene said. "She got stuck in the broom closet as she was putting away the vacuum cleaner."

"She just stopped moving, Dad," Jean whined.

"And didn't you even try to help her?" Rex started down the hall, the children at his heels.

The door to the broom closet was open. True enough, Barbie stood pulsing in the space next to the Upright, her back to the hallway.

Rex looked down at the twins and frowned. "I expected greater cooperation from you two," he growled.

The children defended themselves:

"We tried our darndest to pull her out—honest."

"But she was too heavy."

"And we couldn't get her feet to work."

"Yeah, all we could hear was a whirring noise."

Rex turned away. Dropping to his haunches, he attempted to move Barbie's right leg, then her left, to no avail.

"We did that," Jean said from behind him.

"Okay!" He stood up, knuckles on hips, scowling. "Did you try to rock her from side to side and bump her out backwards?"

"We told you—she's too heavy," Gene said. "Could we go back to our cartoon show now?"

"Hold on. Did she say what she was planning for dinner?"

"She has something stuffed in the refrigerator," Jean answered. "A huge roast, I think. She took all the bottles off the top shelf and put them in the door to make room for it."

The children edged toward the TV room.

"Stuffed, eh?" Suddenly optimistic, Rex gathered himself together, wrested his new wife from her closet prison, whirled her around to face him,

and discovered that despite her ordeal Barbie hadn't lost her toothpaste smile. Perhaps her malfunction could be remedied with simple measures. Like—um—oil. He steadied her against the wall, went to the garage, and got a can of WD-40 off the shelf. He lubricated her joints.

No reaction.

Maybe the battery? He checked it out. Barbie still didn't budge. The perfect wife—bah! What a time for a breakdown! In a fit of pique he brought his knee up under her seat and let her have it. A second later something started up inside. Her feet began to move and she turned to greet him. She was still smiling.

"Rex—sir. You're home."

"Don't call me 'sir,' Barbie. What happened?"

"It was so-o-o dark in there," she said dreamily. "Did I fall asleep?"

She was lovely. Despite his frustration, resentment, and the suspicion that he'd been sold a lemon, Rex still couldn't help marveling at what the engineers had achieved: her shining baby-blue eyes—just like his; her blonde hair—the same shade; an identical roguish tilt to her nose. What he'd felt for her the night he'd brought her home from the Men's Association clicked into place again.

"Barbie," he breathed, "you don't have to kneel."

He helped her to her feet, led her into the living room, and sat her down on the sofa. Then he sank into his recliner. Unwrapping a cigar from the box on the end table, he cast a fond eye on his beautiful robot. Hands folded, she returned his glance with a look of puppylike expectation.

"Are we all set for dinner then?" he asked.

"We couldn't be more readier, sir."

Rex lit the cigar. Tomorrow evening he'd talk with the programmers about Barbie's choice of adverbs.

Unaware, of course, of any defects in her system, Barbie went on to boast of her domestic achievements. "This morning I baked bread and mowed the lawn," she said in her bell-tone voice.

"Then I cleaned the gasket around the dishwasher door."

"You actually cleaned the gasket?" What a woman!

"Oh sure, it was simple. You wrap a table knife in a wet rag and push it along inside the ridges. I read about how to do it in *Kitchen Cleanliness*."

"Barbie," Rex said sternly, "you've been—reading?"

She smoothed her dress. "Yes, dear. *Kitchen Cleanliness* is a magazine we all subscribe to."

"Oh, I see. It's like a manual, eh? Then that would be all right. Go on."

"I scrubbed the plastic cushions on the kitchen chairs with mild detergent, being careful not to wet the threads, of course." She began to talk faster. "Thirty minutes in the backyard making mud pies with Jean but she grew tired of that—" The syllables started to rush together, higher and faster, till her speech became nothing but a high-pitched whine. Still her face retained its calm smile.

Rex stubbed out the cigar and flew to the sofa, where he shook her till her teeth rattled. "Barbie! Come back!" It was an entreaty, not an order.

The voice decelerated. "Then I took—the dirty dishes out of the dishwasher."

"You what?" "I cleaned—each window—with cold cream."

"No!"

Her smile was fading and her voice was barely audible. "I scrubbed the bathroom floors—with soy sauce." The glimmer of a smile appeared once more, then disappeared. "After that—I stuffed—the dog—for dinner."

Rex screamed. Alarmed, the twins ran from the den. "What's wrong?" they said in unison.

He put it to them gently. "I believe your mother has completely broken down, children."

"Into the ashcan with her." Gene moved determinedly in Barbie's direction.

"Gene! That's not nice! It's not even economical!" Rex ran a hand over the threatening pain in his right eye. "Go back to the TV," he said weakly.

"I've gotta make a call."

His friend the engineer hadn't arrived at the Club yet, and the repairman who answered the phone didn't sound terribly sympathetic.

"Is your model wife a pre-fab?" he asked in a bored voice.

"Custom."

"Are you sure her switch is turned on?"

"Of course!"

"Are the smile batteries facing in the right direction?"

"They must be. She's had no trouble with that. But her voice keeps speeding up and slowing down, and she's mixed up the housework at an inappropriate time."

"Mm. Sounds like a glitch in the tape reader. She may need a complete overhaul. I'm all out of loaners right now. You'll have to make do for a few days."

"Well, that's just great. I might as well have kept the old one. At least *she* used to keep going when she got mad enough. Maybe I should try to get this one ticked off. Think it would work?"

"Lemme see." A pause. "Nope. She wasn't programmed for anger. In fact, no negative emotions whatsoever."

"Well, I'm riled enough for the two of us. The boss and his wife are coming to dinner and I'm not prepared."

"Look, bring her in; and as soon as I get a minute I'll check her out—batteries, microprocessors, tapes, everything. Ask for Lou."

Just as the repairman hung up, the doorbell rang. Rex looked at his watch. Too early for the boss and his wife to arrive. He opened the door. The woman standing on the porch had brown hair and brown eyes, and her measurements looked to be about thirty-two, twenty-six, thirty-six.

"What is it?" Rex said gruffly.

"Hi! I know it's a bad time to be calling. You must be sitting down to dinner. I'm from the Welcome Wagon. I'll only take a few minutes—"

No wedding ring. An insidious temptation en-

tered Rex's brain. The Welcome Wagon woman probably ate alone most evenings. Bet she could cook up a storm if she were sufficiently motivated. He grinned boyishly at her.

"You haven't interrupted anything at all. Won't you come in?"

"I thought your wife—" the woman began as she stepped through the door. "Ah, there she is!" She took a step forward.

Barbie sat motionless on the sofa. Plaid, shirt-waist dress; hair exquisitely coiffed; hands still raised in elation over having successfully stuffed the family pet.

The Welcome Wagon woman stopped in her tracks. "Oh, I see. It's one of them. Having a bad day, is she?" She gave Rex the once-over. "I have to get home to dinner myself," she said hurriedly. "But I'll leave you some gifts and materials—"

"That's awfully nice of you. Do you have to run off?" He tried to look real. "No sense in your eating alone. I've got some things in the refrigerator—"

The Welcome Wagon woman gave him a canny look.

"Uh-uh. If I *do* get involved, it won't be with a Stepford man. Look, why don't you work things out with your so-called 'spouse' over there? After all, you signed a contract, didn't you?"

"Yes, but not with her. She's only a robot."

"And you're tired of her already. I can see that."

The Welcome Wagon woman had told the truth. He'd even become bored with himself, believe it or not. In the few days since he'd owned Barbie, he'd also begun to realize that he'd planned his big purchase poorly, and now life—life wasn't as perfect as they'd promised in the brochure. But this new woman seemed different from the people he knew. Why not try her out, see what develops?

Her fingers were on the doorknob. She'd turned to say good-bye. How to convince her he was sincere?

Trying to recall the expression in his late setter's eyes, Rex stepped toward the door. "Then how about coffee some evening? A cup of java

wouldn't compromise you, would it?"

The woman let go of the doorknob and turned slightly. She glanced at Barbie, then at Rex.

"I will if you think about setting her free." Color rose in her cheeks. "In fact, they should *all* go free," she said heatedly.

He looked at her, considering. Maybe her seemingly airy notion wasn't beyond the crafty resources of those techies at the Men's Association. But who would dare suggest that any of them deprive themselves of their glamorous toys? Good thing the Welcome Wagon woman hadn't mentioned women's liberation during her interview with Ed at the Chamber of Commerce, or he'd have replaced her with a Welcome Wagon Barbie.

It wouldn't be smart to clobber her with the awful truth right now though. "That's an interesting idea—retrofitting the wives for spontaneity," he said with a disingenuous grin. "If I ask them to

work on it, then will you go out with me?"

"I'll think about it." She took her car keys from her purse. The sincerity ploy had worked. Rex felt a smidgin of guilt about using it, but he had to see her again. Somehow she made him want to be authentic.

But could he chance it? The messy tears? Sickness? And if the Men's Association found out he was seeing someone they disapproved of, his own life would be in danger. He knew too much.

What the heck. He could fool 'em. Maybe she'd even cooperate. He turned on her his most angelic smile.

"Say, can you turn at right angles?"

Winifred Seery earned her M. A. in journalism at Penn State University and later taught composition at the University of Hartford. She has written three novels and several short stories, and is a member of Mystery Writers of America and Sisters in Crime



"SIR, BESIDE THE USUAL TWO WEEK VACATION, DO YOU GRANT TIME OFF FOR GOOD BEHAVIOR?"



>>

Can vain Richard Gilden turn his seventh wedding anniversary tragic and get away with murder?

On The Rocks

Lawrence P. McGuire

The cry-drowning wind, the Pacific-salted beach, the wave-struck boulders—all these made this wild spur of Oregon coast ideal for tragedy. Richard Gilden, his wife trailing, left the driver's side of her roadster unlocked. He mounted a headland 15 feet above the beach, crocodile-skin loafers crushing weeds.

A May morning gust battered his overcoat, suit, and spa-softened face. He hoisted the Coos Bay picnic basket (key to his alibi). Then he turned to his wife. "Won't you venture to the rocks, darling?"

Twenty years his senior, Violet Gilden hung back from the edge. "Breakfast by the sea?" The collar of a wool fisherman's sweater sagged around her turkey neck. "I can't."

"A seventh wedding anniversary happens once."

Wind twisted her hair into silvery snakes. She fidgeted, eyes as gray as the clouds above and the ocean below. "Richard...let's divorce."

He stiffened, clay-cold and marble-hearted. Divorce (no matter his legal skills) had bankrupted too many clients. Besides, Violet owned him. Her death—for 11 months, he had considered ways to get rid of the crone—he favored to his ruin.

"We'll talk there." He pointed across 50 yards of sand to a line of three black boulders, perpendicular to the beach, like an ancient jetty in the thundering surf.

"You deserve a young wife," she said.

He stepped crab-like down a broad, storm-cut

trench that led to the beach. Pebbles, loosened by spring rains, unsteadied him. He slid, locked his knees, regained his balance.

Violet hurried to his side. "Wear sensible shoes next time."

You won't catch me dead in boondockers." He frowned at her hiking boots.

"My dear peacock." She hugged him, and her arms noosed his throat.

The sweater's wool sleeves itched his neck. Was she dating a younger man? No. A traditionalist, Violet believed every guy wanted a fertile wife and two sons of his own blood. For her, impossible at 57.

Today he planned to lure her onto that third boulder. Perhaps he might dupe her...yes, he could use her wish for divorce to his advantage.

"Catch me, darling."

"I've got you."

Knowing how she competed at play, he ducked under her arms. He sped toward the breakers swashing against the beach. She soon outran him. He let her win by three paces.

A hole she heeled in the sand. "We're celebrating too late."

"It's still our anniversary." He cataloged the bait in the basket: French champagne, Irish crystal, Russian caviar, Tuscan crackers.

Violet lunged to within kissing distance. "A wealthy breakfast."

"After breakfast, we'll talk." He flashed his best courtroom smile. "On your terms."

"Never argue with your lawyer." She pecked him on the lips.

He seized her hand, a hand more bone than flesh, and tugged Violet over dead crabs and vacant seashells until they reached the first boulder. He then tore into the basket.

They breakfasted on caviar, mounded on crackers, washed down with champagne. Four sweet glasses later, Violet's eyes appeared bland. "I don't want to hurt you, Richard."

He smiled into an empty glass. Broke, homeless, but not hurt, eh, darling? He wavered to his feet.

"Where you going?" she asked.

"For a better view." He scaled the eight-foot-tall boulder.

"You'll make me a widow."

Ignoring her, he summited the boulder's glassy top. Waves crashed. Stones trembled. He estimated each boulder's length at ten feet—thirty feet of running room. "How can I live without you?"

Rock-shredded waves hissed, and Violet ascended the boulder and clamped her arms around his chest. He gripped her mist-damp wool sleeves, easing her back a step.

"Richard, don't."

"Don't what?" Arms out for balance, he pirouetted seaward.

Waves exploded on the third stone. Drizzle salted his face.

He crossed to the second boulder.

She shouted, "I'll leave you here."

Richard halted. Under his loafers the second boulder abutted the third. Would she go back to the roadster? They had left its key in the ignition. He looked over his shoulder. "Without you, life ends."

"This divorce is for the best." She goat-footed toward him.

He sloshed onto the third boulder.

"Look at me, Richard."

Facing her, he pouted. All around them waves boomed into the rocks. The third boulder seemed their own barren island.

Violet said, "You're free to marry whomever you

wish."

"I already did."

"Hold me, my dearest," she said, her eyes the color of wet dust.

One last hug he stomached. "Wait here, darling. I'll get the champagne and glasses."

By the time he set foot on the first boulder, a wave drenched the third stone—and Violet. She squealed. The bottle and glasses he abandoned on the beach. He aimed his gaze at her spine.

If he struck as the next wave hit, its force might pulp her against the boulder.

His heart pounding like the surf, he charged down the stone runway.

Violet wheeled around as if she sensed his rush toward her. A drenched sea hag, she clawed at him.

He dodged her grasp. The boulder, slick from the previous wave, was black ice under his feet. Hoping to stop his momentum, he locked his knees. But his crocodile-skin loafers failed to anchor him on the rock. His feet arced out from under him. Violet screamed. Upside down, he flew through the sea mist.

A wet hammer slammed into him, and then he plunged into a world cold, dark, and silent.

"Blame me," Violet told two female detectives later. "I thought by giving him his free—why did I drive him to suicide?"

"You certain it was suicide?" the maternal-looking cop asked.

Violet squished a borrowed pink tissue in her fist. "What are you implying?"

The other investigator spoke up. "Your husband wasn't dressed for...a seaside excursion."

"That was Richard." Violet blew her nose. "Vain to the end. He never appreciated sensible shoes."

Lawrence P. McGuire is a former U.S. Army journalist. His nonfiction has appeared in The Writer, The Scream Factory and Midnight Zoo. The Saturday Evening Post has published some of his short humor in "Post Scripts." He is a graduate of The Writer's Digest Novel Writing Workshop.

Excerpt from TERLINGUA ALE, A MRS. MILLET & MRS. HARK MYSTERY.

Del Morechurch, a local entrepreneur, is felled with an axe. Del wanted to “develop” Big Bend, and his enemy list was long, but he had lived in Big Bend all his life, and his neighbors “buried him proper.”

Terlingua Ale

Margaret Searles

Chapter 23

Mrs. Hark: NOTHING BECAME HIM SO MUCH

Even a Californian would admit the weather was beautiful on the day chosen for Del Morechurch’s funeral, Judy Hark told herself. The sun did its thing, the wind did not, the sky was a vault of cerulean blue. There could hardly be greater contrast, as to weather, to the day poor Tassy Glover’s remains were laid away, though the rock-bound cemetery looked the same. Its rows of stony graves ignored the open pit, new-quarried in a prominent spot, that would receive Del Morechurch’s remains.

The weather wasn’t the only difference. Del Morechurch’s burial had no preacher, no sanctimonious undertaker, only half as many women attendees, and no Mexicans. The latter had boycotted the ceremony, en masse.

The local men seemed in high spirits, and when Crawdad Townley and his sons opened the back of their van and called for the pall bearers, the coffin caused general laughter. A framework of 2x4’s, stoutly constructed and lined with heavy canvas, bulged with Del’s body. The 2x4’s on top had been left long, for handles. Four men used these, and two others supported the sides as they carried the coffin to a spot beside the open grave.

Del’s sister, Amy Velasco, came forward and laid a bouquet of poinsettias on the sagging canvas. Nearly everyone carried something, and those who had flowers followed her lead. The others

stood back and watched Crawdad expectantly. He took up the position a preacher might have occupied, had there been one, at the head of the grave.

Judy would rather have stood in the background with the other RV park residents, but Del’s daughter Carla insisted that she and Margaret Millet should stay with the family. Carla needed their moral support.

Judy nudged Margaret and nodded toward the open van. With the coffin removed, she could see cases and cases of Terlingua Ale stacked inside. Margaret raised her eyebrows. Judy nodded. This funeral was going to be different.

“Friends, we are here to bury Del Morechurch.” Crawdad’s voice rang among the tombstones and carried effortlessly through the crowd.

“Amy asked me to give Del a funeral he would appreciate—a funeral he would enjoy if he could be here himself. He is here, when you come to think about it, and I hope he’s having a good time!

“We made Del’s coffin with our own hands, and made it out of canvas, so he could be close to the land he loved. You gotta admit he loved Big Bend, no matter what else you might say about him. He loved good beer, too, and the boys are gonna pass some out right now, so you can drink to ol’ Del as we lay him away. You each get two cans, one to drink, and one to put in the grave, so Del

won't go thirsty to where he's goin'. We've got other things to send along with Del, and we'll all pass by the grave purty soon and put 'em in."

The Townley boys opened the cases of beer, willing hands passed them around, and each mourner took the two cans specified.

Crawdad made another comment about the beer. "Terlingua Ale's not what Del's been drinkin' lately, but it's what we like around here, and I hope, wherever he winds up, Del leaves his hard feelings behind. He used to like it well enough, didn't he Tom?"

Tom Glover, well back in the crowd, raised a hand in acknowledgement.

"Besides, Tom donated all this beer, and we thank him." Crawdad accepted two cans of beer. He opened one, drank deeply and, by way of eulogy, told this story:

"Del and me were just kids when we decided to explore the old mercury mine one day, and we managed to get as lost as you'd expect. We had flashlights and a couple of candles, and we went down this tunnel where the rocks crumbled and sifted down and the old wood shoring lay around in rotten pieces. Del said he knew the way, he'd been down in the mine lots of times, but I could tell he was just as scared as me. My flashlight burned out and his was gettin' dim, so he turned it off to save it and we felt around in the dark for hours, it seemed like, before we felt a little breeze of fresh air from a side tunnel and headed into it.

"We came to a hole no bigger'n your fist with air comin' through it, but it had got dark outside and we couldn't tell if it was a place to get out or not. Well, we lit a candle and had light until it burned out, and then we lit the other one, hoping somebody'd be lookin' for us and see it. Used up both our candles and sat by that hole in the dark until morning.

It was a good thing we waited, cause the hole went to the outside all right—about fifty feet up the side of a cliff. If we'd dug out in the dark, we'd have broke our necks! We both caught hell when we got home, I can tell you."

Crawdad finished his beer and threw both the empty can and the full one into the grave. "Good-bye, Del. We're puttin' your body in another hole in the ground, but I hope it's only your body, and you've passed on to a better place."

Several others told stories about Del's youth, and Eric Linderson related his more recent commercial endeavors. Linderson sounded a lot like a Chamber of Commerce speaker and got black looks and antagonistic mutters from the crowd.

Betty Swift, the Postmistress, stood close to Carla and Amy Velasco, apparently on the best of terms with both. She stepped up, announced she had written a poem for the occasion, and proceeded to read it.

"Some men pile up a fortune.
And some only sow their wild oats.
They all meet the same old grim reaper,
Alike, they abandon their boats.
"Some men are full of ambition
They prosper or fall by the way.
No matter—their final condition
Is still a return to the clay."

Judy Hark, amazed to hear these words in Betty Swift's snail-paced tones, felt that for once, Betty's dramatic delivery suited her material.

Amy Velasco's contribution was even more pointed. She didn't cite the author, but afterward Margaret said the poem sounded familiar:

"Freed from toil and temptation,
Freed from all fears, all trials,
All hopes, all expectation,
He's off to the Fairy Isles.

"If a man be great or diminished,
Give thanks to the powers that be,
It's final; the whole thing is finished.
No sailor comes back from that sea."

A small round of applause began and quickly died. Judy looked around at the "mourners," and

suddenly realized that she was not attending a funeral at all; this was a celebration! Crawdad wore a long, lugubrious face, but inside he was dancing on Del's grave, and so were many of the others!

"Let's sing one of Del's favorite songs," Crawdad said. "The Streets of Laredo ... All join in!"

They sang. Oh, how they sang.

With much grunting and heaving, the pallbearers lowered the canvas coffin into the hole. The celebrants passed by the grave, and threw in their full and empty beer cans—and such other items as they had chosen for Del's journey to the other side. (Crawdad announced that no hard liquor was to be contributed, as everyone knew Del got mean on hard liquor.)

As Judy flipped in her cans, she wondered what some future archaeologist would make of a large pipe wrench, a hub cap, a cowboy hat, and a plastic toilet seat, as funeral artifacts.

The Townley boys and their helpers quickly filled the grave from the mound of rock beside it, and Crawdad said, "He's all yours, God! There's food at the Bandido, folks, so let's go!"

The Bandido Restaurant swarmed with angry reporters. It seemed that Sheriff Nolan had scheduled a press conference at the Flagstone Motel that morning and no one had told them the funeral would happen at the same time. One man, more enterprising than his fellows, had asked directions to the cemetery—and been sent the other way. He returned in great frustration to find that the Mexicans had lost their English, and nobody else would talk to him, either.

Except Betty Swift who, as always, was willing to talk to reporters. She drove them crazy with her rambling drawl, but they had to listen and make of it what they could. Nobody else would give them the time of day.

The beer was on the house. The buffet counter was loaded with casseroles, cakes and pies. Judy wondered where it all came from—so soon after Susy Tate's Christmas party! Truly, the supply of

portable food in Brewster County seemed bottomless.

Carla led them to their usual places at the center table, where Amy Velasco and Crawdad Townley joined them. On all sides, the party began. It exploded. By the time Judy Hark and Margaret Millet eased themselves out of the crowd, the old Bandido held a state of whoopee that would go down in local history. "Remember Del Morechurch's Funeral?" Big Bend would remember.

Eric Linderson did not linger at the Bandido. The locals turned away and ignored him. Their talk at the bar made him exceedingly nervous. He finished his drink and hurried to the Flagstone Motel to pack his bag. Then he told his manager to carry on, pointed his Cadillac toward Dallas and stepped on the gas.

A former chemist, teacher and bookstore owner, Margaret Searles writes (and loves) the traditional mystery. Her short stories and articles have been published in FMAM (Publisher's Choice Award), MYSTERY READERS JOURNAL, the SLO DEATH anthologies, and other publications.

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What were the odds that a cheating wife would help her cop husband crack a serial murder case?

Your Ad Here

Brandon Hebert



Illustration Copyright © Teresa Tunaley

She was sitting close to him now on the sofa. God, she smelled good. He'd only done this once before and it was difficult. He was goofy about it, not knowing where to put his arms or how to position himself, not knowing how to feel about it. All that made it even harder.

It was hard to kill somebody you'd just had sex with.

Randall Orr started this time like he started last time. Find the ad (he preferred trolling the *(New Times)*), meet the girl, go on and on about her looks, not saying much about himself. Keep the conversation about her. Drop his line about being a part-time photographer. Could he take some pictures? Man, they really went for that.

He closed the window and the shade, cranked up the air conditioner, got it working real hard, not

wanting passers-by on Collins to overhear anything when that time came. Turn the overhead light off, turn the bedside lamp on. For effect.

"What about light?" she said. "For the pictures." "I'll use my flash."

He kept glancing at her, her legs a turn-on, following her hand resting on her left thigh, liking her long fingers and toned arms, especially the one with the chain-link tattoo around the right bicep, the one that was next to him a second ago. All the way up to her South Beach trappings: oversized sunglasses and hoop earrings and maroon tank top showing a deep canal between her breasts.

She said her name was Georgiana and she was from New Jersey. She said more but that was all Orr could, or cared to, remember. He fumbled

around with the camera bag, turning to see her sitting back in the sofa, catching her hair flip. Ready for her close-up. So was Charmaine, his other one.

There he was, giving direction, Georgiana taking the direction, posing this way and that. He got a little nervous the further it went, not wanting to think about it or think at all, trying to act natural, let her put the moves on him.

She disappeared into the bathroom and came out a couple minutes later looking a lot like she did going in, except now she was barefoot. Orr gave more direction, fluffing the sofa pillows as he went along, trying to keep the mood.

He cracked open the wine, a cheapie he picked up at the corner store on the way over. He sweated that one, whether he could afford enough to keep the appearance of a highfalutin independent photog considering his room wouldn't be much to look at.

Didn't seem to matter much, though. Pouring her a glass, then him, leaving the bottle on the table. He saw that look in her eye, that gleam before they could cozy up to each other. He'd seen that same look in Charmaine's eyes. Especially when he talked about showing the shots to his magazine buddies.

Man, they really went for that one, too.

They were out until she said she had to go home. Orr looked at his watch. Eight fifty-one. Home? The night hadn't even started. She was his first from the *Herald* personals, the first one he saw that used the word "discreet" in her ad. Maybe discreet meant being home by 9:00.

He didn't fuss, just escorted her through the crowd along Lincoln until they came to Pennsylvania and her car, parked curbside. There, he said it.

"When can I see you again?"

Oh, yes, definitely. This was the kind you saw again. He liked Beverly: a little older, in her 40s, maybe pushing 50, refined, well kept. Not like those others, those little girls, Spice Girl holdovers. He could see himself taking his time with her, him

seeing a wild streak there, not afraid to hit the clubs, maybe she had access to some coke, then maybe back to her place.

She was fine with him asking to see her again. He was good for a few evenings, take the boredom out. In no hurry to go further.

"I'll call you," she said, getting in her Mercedes sedan.

Couple nights later they came out of Touch, that pulsating noise in the background now. Orr checked his watch. Two o'clock. That was better, him knowing she had that in her. Now she wanted to stop for a nightcap and an omelet at Cafeteria, on her dime. Most of the night was on her dime—but she looked like she could afford it—and that was good. One drawback to dragging this one out was the result on the pocketbook.

They found a table on the sidewalk snug against the building. Her choice. He was okay with it. It was relaxed. The glass from the window threw a shadow on her face, the angle from the tabletop candle giving her a bit of mystery. Exotic even. God, she looked good, that candle giving her peach skin a glow.

Orr didn't reach across the table, take her hand, like he wanted. Not her style, anyhow. Bit of an ice princess, she was. He sat back instead, not minding the silence, taking his time to look her up and down while she fooled with her compact.

One night of drinks and now this and she hadn't really talked about herself. It was strange for Orr, him wanting to talk. The others, hell, he could barely remember their names much less anything else they said. And then they usually volunteered most of their life stories, eager to tell anybody anything, like they just got off the bus. Most of the conversation with this one was about him. How she liked his butt and wanted to see him in a pair of Levi's one day; how she liked the way his face looked with stubble, weathered; how his hair, straight, shoulder-length, reminded her of Brad Pitt ten years ago. He was okay with all that, but....

"What d'you do for a living?"

She did a double-take from her Louis Vuitton

bag, just long enough for Orr to see that it caught her off guard.

"For work?" he said, eyebrows arched. "What do you do?" Slower this time.

"I marry."

Now she could see he was off guard.

Recovering, he said, "Pay well?"

"Some better than others," she arranged her bag under their table, "but I left my entry-level position long ago."

Oh, man. Orr felt himself staring, being creepy. And, what position would that be?

"What about now?" he said.

"Between engagements."

Orr pursed his lips.

"What about you?" she said, cocking her head when she said it.

This was it. Baiting him, practically. It had always come so easy, him bringing it up in passing to the others. Now, stage fright. But he'd wanted to take his time with Beverly, maybe work her for some much-needed cash, enjoy her sexually for a while; an older woman's experience, her confidence, a welcome change.

Orr mentioned his photographer's story. Hell, he didn't have anything else prepared, any alternate story for if he ever got put on the spot like this. He named a couple of magazines, smaller ones, ones he figured she'd never read or heard of, made up names for a couple others he wasn't sure existed or not, sounding good enough to be for real. He said *National Geographic*—"a piece about a Maori fishing village"—figuring she'd never even picked one up. He threw in some stuff about adventure travel for *Travel & Leisure*, maybe that title being something she could relate to.

Finally, "I'm not in the habit of doing portraits..."

She sipped her martini and moved in closer, her profile highlighted in candlelight.

"...but I'd love to do some body shots of you sometime."

In her vanity Beverly labored over her reflection. She liked the way she looked in the mirror. Liked

her short haircut, the style taking years off. Liked looking at her flat stomach, following her body's profile down to her backside. No problem there. She checked out her legs, going up on her toes so her calves would flex. Nothing to be ashamed of. *You'd look good in pictures, girl.* She was 99 percent sure a body shot meant she'd eventually be naked. *Show this young buck a thing or two, what they're missing chasing after twentysomethings.*

He was in the bedroom before she saw his reflection in the mirror.

Or had a chance to put her ring on.

"Mike," she said, bringing a towel up around her chest, "you scared me."

She couldn't hear what he said, if he said anything. Not that she cared, turning back to examine her face.

Mike sidled up to her then, running his hands across her shoulders, then down her arms.

Beverly turned, kissing him and feeling it hard against her hip.

"Mike, if you wanna do it," she said, "you're gonna have to take your gun off."

It was tough going with this one, Brittany, this sorority girl new in town from Athens, Georgia, that he found on Craigslist, his single bed not taking to all the thrashing around.

All she kept saying was his name, or the name he gave her, saying, "Chris," over and over. Saying it louder until she stopped saying anything at all.

The sound of surf coming from the open window broke Orr from his concentration. The surf. The window. Thinking about it he went limp.

She turned on her back, a look coming over her face. "What's wrong?" she said.

He couldn't say anything, couldn't hear himself telling her what was going through his mind at that moment. It's when she brought herself up to touch him, in a place between his thighs, he pushed the pillow down on her face.

The body of Georgiana Santos had floated across Government Cut, but the tide bringing it back. It ended up on the jetty adjacent to South Pointe

Park. Special Agent Michael Canavan, Florida Department of Law Enforcement, stood over it, staring at the face, reflecting gray against the sun; then the body, bloated, no longer a body a mother would recognize. He'd been called in by a buddy from Metro-Dade when they found the first body, four days ago—positively identified as Charmaine Winthrop of High Point, North Carolina—the thinking that FDLE forensics could link her to a string of unsolved kidnappings going back 18 months.

"That's a shame, ain't it," Dan Hicks, Miami Beach Police Department detective, said.

"Yeah, young like that," Canavan said, staring at the legs, bulging from the water the body had taken in, the denim shorts tearing at the hip, moving up to her chest, tits he was sure she was proud of at one time, the skin there sagging now.

"Got some personal effects, what little there was." Hicks thumbed in a direction past Canavan.

"Well," Canavan said, getting down on his haunches, "we'll get her over to the M.E.'s office, get her autopsied and ID'd."

Hicks, stepping soft over the outcropping, waddled down to the body, motioning for Canavan to follow. "Take a look here."

Canavan saw the bungee chord, green rope with red hooks, clasped around the ankles.

"Marks on the wrists—" Hicks pointed to a faint circle, purple now—"say they were prob'ly tied, too." He stopped, looking out over the water, across to Fisher Island. "Might've come off with the bloating, though."

"This's the same binding we found on a girl washed up at Wainwright Park last week."

"Yep," was all Dan Hicks said. He didn't want to say more. He didn't want to think more. He didn't want Canavan to say more, either.

But Canavan did say more. "This isn't what the Metro-Dade boys were looking for at all."

He stopped before going on, not sure about what he was thinking. Hell, cases had been profiled on less, the old instinct telling him he was on the right track.

"Looks like we got a new perpetrator on our hands."

She didn't say anything on the elevator ride up. Quiet in the hallway, too. She didn't say anything before he heard her talking to room service, ordering up a fifth of Bombay Sapphire and lime juice, Rose's if they had it, if not then the closest thing. She hung up and said it would take about ten minutes. Orr said, "Really," and settled back onto the sofa.

He got back up when Beverly disappeared into the bathroom, knowing she'd be in there for some time, turning on lamps and fluffing pillows on the sofa, standing around, pretty sure the room service guy would show up before he saw her again.

Beverly came out, dressed in a slinky red teddy, a number Orr approved of, his face giving away a little surprise.

"Don't mind me, dear," she said, "I change for everything."

He grinned, shaking his head, laughing to himself at how she didn't want to give too much away, make it look like a big deal.

Orr gave a Beverly a slight wave of his hand, his arm not moving off the arm of the sofa, letting her know he didn't think it was a big deal, either—*Sure, it happens all the time with the ladies I see*—as he watched her inspect the room service tray, like she was deciding whether to make her drink or open the peanuts. She opened the shaker, pouring four parts gin, one part lime juice, Orr not sure if it was Rose's because it came in a carafe. She watched him as she handled the shaker, looking for some sign he was impressed. He was and he made a face, his eyes opening wide, forehead crinkling, letting her know it.

She passed Orr a glass, then took her seat on the sofa, sliding out of her shoes and bringing her legs underneath her in one motion. They were sitting now, alone in a hotel room, making small talk, letting nature take over; Orr making comments on how good his gimlet was—"Whaddya

call this?"—and Beverly eyeing the camera bag on the floor at the end of the sofa.

Orr watched Beverly slip a strap off her left shoulder and say, "Is this what you came here for?" He watched her get up, watched her strip down to her panties, then come over to him, taking his hand and leading him to the bed.

He was thinking how he wanted to get some pictures of her, his mementoes. He could see she'd been into it and by the looks of her it would've been his best yet. It was the kind of body he'd seen in magazines before—and without any of the airbrushing. He asked her if she wanted the pictures but didn't insist on it.

Beverly shook her head, taking him by the shirt-sleeve, touching him, kissing him. She took the strap of the camera bag off his right shoulder.

"That can wait 'til next time."

At ten in the morning, Mike Canavan stood in the mirror straightening his tie, talking to his wife. "These late nights're getting to be a real pain. In at two in the morning, turn around and back out at eight—" he shook his head—"almost impossible."

"Makes it hard on your sex life," Beverly Canavan said, still looking at her *Vogue*, visualizing her layout, "Fabulous and Fifty in Florida," complete with those sexy pictures she wanted to take the next time she saw him.

Mike looped the Windsor knot. "Not affecting yours too bad, though, huh?"

Beverly put the magazine down, the color draining from her face.

"For your own edification," flashing his teeth in the mirror, picking cereal out, "case I'm working now, guy's put two down already. Rapes 'em, then tosses them in the bay. Young girls, though," he said, glancing up at his wife's reflection, "but you can never tell."

She couldn't say anything, the first time since creation she may have been speechless, thinking about any tracks she had to cover up, with that *Who, me?* look on her face now.

"So," Mike said, "watch that young fella you've been seeing."

Canavan sat in the LeSabre and watched his wife walk up through the front door at the Delano, wondering what had made her do it in the first place. He could go through it all, but what the hell. What good would that do? It was all wrong to begin with, boredom talking when he first asked her out, alcohol talking the night he proposed, guilt talking on their wedding day—his third, her fourth.

He didn't tell Beverly he'd do this: pull himself off the detail to watch over her like this. He had enough to profile it by now, anyway. The victims: young girls, the one washed up on Wainwright Park, the second off South Pointe, a third making it all the way down by Kendall. Then the AB positive blood type from a semen specimen taken off the second girl, the Santos girl from Parsippany, New Jersey. Now he was just waiting for his perpetrator to screw up, or for himself to get lucky.

He liked Beverly's gait, watching her from behind like this, her backside sashaying in that little sequined cocktail dress. Now he was glad he'd come alone; his partner could've made some bonehead remark that really would've got his blood up. He didn't sweat it too much, backup being a walkie-talkie away.

Canavan checked his radio, tucking it into his belt loop. He had to think about it for a minute. *Mike, you go in there, what're you gonna do? Start shooting up the place? Her boyfriend isn't the guy you're looking for. What're the odds?* He smoothed his hip holster under his jacket and made his way to the hotel lobby, ready to flash his credentials should the help give him static. Didn't happen, though, and he stuck his head in the Blue Door but didn't see her.

He went up to the desk, putting on a show for the manager, whipping out his badge, making sure he saw the words "Special Agent" on it, and asked for Beverly Canavan's room. The manager came back with a "Sorry, no one by that name,"

throwing in a “sir” when the Special Agent leaned across the desktop. Canavan saw the guy’s eyes open wide; then he began tapping on the keyboard to find some sign of a Beverly something anywhere in the hotel. Special Agent Canavan stopped him short when he remembered sneaking a peek at one of his wife’s credit cards—one from a previous life, in her former married name—remembering Lars the commercial real estate guy from Stockholm.

He said, “How about Beverly Totten?”

The light, a pitiful spotlight Orr found at a local flea market, lit up the space over Beverly. They deemed the bedroom too cliché. It was Orr who decided on the sitting room floor; Beverly okaying it, thinking it was more sexual like she liked doing it on the floor. He even brought some music, noticing a CD player in the suite the last time they were here, trying to find stuff in his collection that sounded like what they might play in a photo shoot, something upbeat that you could dance to. Closest thing he had was some newer U2.

Canavan had his hand on the knob of room 315, cupping his ear to the door. When he heard the man’s voice telling his wife how good she looked—especially naked, goddamn him—he turned it both ways as soft as he could.

Locked.

Well, they could bill him for it.

Jesus, now his palms were sweating. It was not knowing; not knowing what was on the other side of this door. It was always this way, the adrenaline pumping fast. Sure, anybody’d be jumpy. *C’mon, settle down. At worst, you’re gonna send this pantywaist packing*—Canavan thought of him as a CPA or something similar, someone that would shit his pants with a badge in his face—and *embarrass your wife into a separation, then probably a divorce. This is nothing, Mike*. Canavan felt the hair on his neck stand up, jumping back as he felt the doorknob turning in his hand. Turning from the

inside, though. He jumped back, straightening his arm, his pistol ready.

All Beverly saw was Randall Orr’s black mane fly backwards from the door, coming down on the footstool between the two wingback chairs near the door. The ice bucket he was going out with—to chill the champagne—ended up at her feet.

She pulled up the blanket next to her, letting out a scream as she did it before she recognized the face. Then ... panic. Then ... calm. Trying to talk sense into her husband, it wasn’t a big deal, it was just pictures. “For you,” she said.

Canavan gave her a look but didn’t put much behind it, just enough to let her know he’d deal with her later. First things first.

He stayed with his back to the door, sizing up her boyfriend, watching him recuperate, tuck his white dress oxford into his pants, then zip his pants up, then stumble back against the doorframe leading into the bedroom when Canavan moved away from the door.

Special Agent Canavan stood there, no longer sizing up his man but just looking. He slid the end of his jacket around his hip holster. Casually. Letting him see the gun. Just enough to let everyone know who was calling the shots. There was silence now, a silence he could tell was awkward for Beverly from the look on her face, broken only by the music in the background, playing like some movie soundtrack.

Canavan moved, measuring his steps, into the doorway where her boyfriend was, watching him stumble back and sit on the edge of the bed. It was quiet. It was the way Canavan wanted it, wanted this guy wondering who he was. He knew his wife didn’t wear her ring out with her boyfriend and was almost positive she told him she was single.

Canavan told the boyfriend to throw his wallet over to him. He looked through it, finding several drivers’ licenses.

Brendan Carr. Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Justin Theriot. Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Randall Orr. Gainesville, Florida.

"Which one is you?" Canavan said.

Orr said the Florida one was his, his head hanging low, his voice low, too.

Canavan thought about dressing him down for it, giving him a line about multiple IDs post-September 11, throw in that the feds could detain him as a person of interest for as long as they wanted. Maybe tell him about it, bust his chops for it, then saying he'd let him off with a warning, like he was doing him some kind of favor. Thumbing through the rest of the wallet was a small order. There was nothing in it.

Circling the bed, Canavan saw the camera bag on one side. He kicked it, keeping one eye on Orr, making sure he was behaving himself. He propped it open with his foot, moving his head in and out of the light to see to the bottom. Finally, he picked it up and threw it on the bed with an order to Orr to empty it.

Two rolls of film. Thirty-five millimeter.

Extra camera strap.

Rolled-up porno mag.

Two bungee chords. Green rope with red hooks.

Canavan backed away quickly, unholstering his pistol.

Beverly pulled her cocktail dress on, hearing a lot of yelling from the other room. She recognized her husband's voice, that bark telling her boyfriend to get down, get his nose on the floor, get his hands behind his back.

She walked in, saying, "Mike, what are you doing?" It just came out, natural, the first thing going through her mind when she saw her husband overreacting like this.

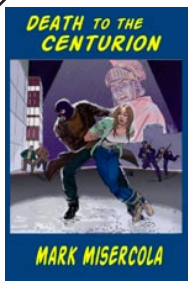
She watched him going through the motions, cuffing her boyfriend and the rest of it when somebody gets arrested. She opened her mouth to ask the same question again, but stopped when she heard her husband get on the radio and say, "I have a suspect here ..." pause for a couple deep breaths ... "may be the guy we've been looking for."

The guy we've been looking for. "The guy you told me about who rapes and kills young girls?"

Canavan got up, satisfied that Randall Orr from Gainesville was secured. He grabbed Beverly, holding her, keeping her close to stop her from charging Orr, maybe getting in a kick because she was pissed now. Canavan could see Orr saying he'd done it, his sure-to-be-slimy lawyer try to pander to a judge about police brutality and the rampant abuse of power.

It was after she had calmed down, stopped edging towards Orr, that Canavan was just holding her.

Brandon Hebert's fiction has been published in magazines such as Plots With Guns, Hardluck Stories, Without A Clue, and The 3rd Degree. He is a member of Mystery Writers of America.



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A dive-bar barmaid turns amateur sleuth when her sleazy boss is found dead and it's clear one of the barmaids is the killer.

Drop-Dead Gorgeous

Clay Waters

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Redheads saloon had just shut down for the night. We'd pushed the last drunk out the door at 4:15 a.m.—Gabby had, actually, with relish—and now we were putting up chairs and restocking liquor racks in yet another vain attempt to get home by dawn. Soon the bar would be ready for the janitorial service which would drag some rags across three years of encrusted vomit

and beer spew.

Darryl was in his corner office, putting his fat fingers to his clunker of an adding machine. When the clacking suddenly stopped, we all waited for him to creak open the noisy wooden door. Sure enough, he lumbered out, holding up a time card.

"Erin, you came in late on Tuesday."

"Yeah," I barked. "I was at the store getting your limes."

"Oh, yeah. That's right." Darryl waddled back. His little office opened to behind the bar, and sometimes on slow nights he'd sit there like a dirty Buddha, supervising our breasts in profile. But now he was counting the money, so the door was shut.

I glanced over at Gabby, who rolled her eyes in sympathy. She was still in work clothes—lingerie, boots, cowboy hat and shot belt. Redheads takes the sexy barmaid concept and gives it a quasi—Irish twist: We're all redheads, most of us naturals. Big boobs and a slutty persona are plusses.

Gabby is a crab and a codeine addict, but she can clomp like a mother when it's time to dance on the bar. She's a gym rat, too, and offers up her toned stomach for tequila shots.

Sloane is a stalwart shot girl soon to be moving up to barmaid, if her new boyfriend Darryl has any pull. I'm not as curvy as some, but some guys like to talk to a girl with a college degree while they're drinking \$1.50 cans of Pabst.

Kaleen has her Southern accent and big breasts going for her and maximizes the advantages of all three. She survived a childhood in an adoptive Arkansas family full of creeps, so we didn't begrudge her flaunting her 40Ds, the biggest pair in a big bunch.

Lori is a strawberry blonde, about average attractiveness among us, but probably the smartest of the bunch. She's also my girlfriend.

The six of us on the Saturday night shift—plus Clarissa, the bar's co-owner, pushing the broom in the corner—make a pretty good team. Together, we're challenging Hogs & Heifers for the hearts and behinds of Manhattan's meatpacking district.

Darryl came out of the back room again, stalked a few paces, plowing through Clarissa's broom path without acknowledging her or anyone else. He muttered something obscene and went back in the office, trying to shut the warped wooden door behind him.

He'd been in a lousy mood all night: Clarissa had taken him to court and had just won a cash settlement for two years' back pay. The handover of the money was scheduled at 6 a.m., hopefully without pistols or lawyers.

I noted our moose head had been festooned with yet another voluminous Kaleen bra. The antlers were quilted with bras from customers and bartenders, some yellow with age and smoke. Poor Mr. Moose.

"Kaleen, shouldn't you be stockpiling those?" Sloane said. "They may stop making them in your size."

"I reckon I'll go without, like Gabby." Kaleen hefted her breasts, juicy in a ripe red Victoria's Secret bustier. Darryl got us lingerie on our birthdays and darn if the perv didn't know our sizes just looking at us. Creepy.

Lori crawled up on a barstool and pulled down her schoolgirl sock to scratch her chafed ankle, like a Catholic schoolgirl cruising for detention. "My feet stink." She lit up a cigarette—strictly verboten in Manhattan bars.

"Do you really think the money's in the safe?" I asked Clarissa.

"I do, actually. Darryl's dumb but he's not stupid," Clarissa said in her Dublin accent. "In small bills, probably, just to spite me."

"Maybe you can buy him out, Clarissa," Gabby said hopefully.

"Nahh," Clarissa said. "He'd just start pissing on us from across the street." Darryl had full ownership of the rodeo-themed bar across the block. "Starting rumors. Sicking the health department on us."

"Suggesting where Kaleen bought her breasts," Lori whispered.

"Not so loud! He got flayed alive just for hinting."

"Oh, they are so fake," Lori said.

"Please don't let her hear you," I said.

Kaleen knocked on Darryl's door, tugging hard on it and shutting it behind her.

"Going to whack him with that dishrag?" Gabby asked.

Clarissa shrugged. "He swiped her shift pay." That's what a barmaid earns just by showing up for work, not including tips. It's not a ton of money—barely minimum wage—but it's demoralizing to lose it.

Kaleen came back, twisting the rag around in her hands. Judging from her body language, she'd lost the argument.

"What's he doing, Kaleen?" Clarissa asked.

"Putting dirty pictures up on the Web." Darryl was industrious about updating the bar's web site, which featured the barmaids in all stages of undress and bad behavior, from PG—13 to Triple—X.

"Ice?" I asked Lori. She nodded.

The instant I opened the door to the basement the lights went out. One more step and we'd have fallen down the stairs.

Turning around in the dark, we heard Gabby laugh. "Darryl, ya dork!"

Someone—probably Darryl—had set the timer on the lights wrong. They could be set to shut off automatically, but usually we just did it manually before clearing out. I found Lori's hand and waited for the lights to come back on.

"Someone turn on the lights, please?" came Kaleen's nervous twang from the other end of the bar, nearest the front door.

"Where are you guys?" Clarissa said from somewhere around Darryl's office. "I'm afraid to move."

"Still here." Gabby said, from near the taps.

A bottle shattered against the back wall, in the vicinity of Darryl's office, and someone yelped—probably Clarissa since she was closest. Sloane had been sweeping somewhere behind me, near the front door, but now I had no idea where she was.

I knew exactly where Lori was, though.

We heard Darryl's door open, the warped wooden parts chafing against each other.

"Shit!" Gabby yelped.

"You okay?" Clarissa asked.

"Yeah, I tripped."

"Darryl?" I called. "You okay? Speak."

"Hold on, I can't see." Gabby lit a match. "Darryl, come on out."

Kaleen came up behind Gabby. She grabbed the doorknob and twisted it until it squeaked. "Darryl, you in there? Wake up!" Sometimes Darryl would fall asleep late at night, usually on the pool table.

"Sloane, you're by the front door, yes?" Clarissa said. "Get the lights, please. The switchbox is on the wall there."

Seconds passed with the sound of ineffectual fumbling in the closet. Finally the lights came back on. We all looked at each other, blinking. Everyone was accounted for except Darryl, who'd remained quiet in his office, the door ajar.

Clarissa shrugged. "Darryl?" She peered in to his office as if afraid she'd get her head bitten off. "Darryl?"

Clarissa was a good screamer. The sound was still ringing in Darryl's office by the time the rest of us got there.

Surprisingly, Gabby had the most emotional reaction—she turned away, biting her hand. Sloane was stunned. Clarissa was a ghost. Kaleen towered behind us all, catching her breath.

Darryl lay on the floor, his neck pierced by the shard of a broken bottle of Budweiser. The back of his black T—shirt was soaked in blood. Whoever had stabbed Darryl knew what she was doing, getting him in the carotid artery. He was good and dead.

Sloane touched Darryl's slack face, then withdrew her hand, leaving the room to retch.

"How long were the lights out?" I asked, finally.

"Two minutes, maybe." Sloane sounded sedated.

Clarissa recovered somewhat. "Let's get him up on the pool table. Sloane, would you take his head, please?"

"Should we?" Lori said. "The police might need to see him like this."

"We'll have to, to check the safe." Clarissa nod-

ded toward the open door of Darryl's tiny new safe.

Like distaff pallbearers, we lifted Darryl off the floor. I got his left hand, Lori his right. Clarissa and Gabby each grabbed a leg. Sloane kept his head from flopping backward.

It was only 20 feet to the pool table, but getting the wide body around the door jamb was a trial, and we were sweating not just from fear by the time we'd put him down, face up, the Bud shard still protruding from his neck. His poor heart had a hard life, pumping blood through all that blubber.

"Take that out," Gabby said. "It's making me sick."

"No," Lori said. "It's evidence."

I looked from Lori to Clarissa to Kaleen to Gabby to Sloane.

I didn't stab Darryl. Lori didn't either.

Did Clarissa? For the money? But she was getting it in an hour anyway.

Sloane? She was the only one who'd even liked Darryl—if that's what sleeping with him meant.

Kaleen despised him, but she'd been at the opposite end of the bar the whole time the lights were out.

And Gabby—well, I figured her as most likely, but we'd heard her trip behind the bar seconds after one of us had wrenched open the door and killed him. There just wasn't enough time. Sloane had been near the front door. And Clarissa had been right in front of me. It seemed that no one could have opened the door.

Which meant, logically, that no one had killed Darryl.

"Pull the gate down," Clarissa said. Good idea. Sometimes the cops came to check up on us at the end of the night. I let the gate clang down, like a castle portcullis shut against a threatening plague.

The inside of the small safe contained a dozen stacks of bundled bills. "Clarissa's money," I noted.

"Anything else?" Lori asked.

"Just a sticker on the back. They typed in the

combination he picked."

"Let me guess: 36—24—36?"

"You've got the right idea. It's actually 32—26—36."

"Sounds too anorexic for Darryl."

"Just trying to keep us out, I guess. Who'd have thought he'd pick anything below 42?"

We came out to hear Kaleen saying, "Gabby, you did some jail time, right? You'd know how to ice someone."

Kaleen lit a cigarette and laid it in a brimming ashtray. Clarissa instantly unhorsed the bar's soda gun and doused it with a jet of water. "We don't need a health violation as well."

Kaleen shrugged.

We heard Gabby pawing around in Darryl's office. Kaleen went in, too, then quickly came back out. Sloane went over to pick up the broken bottle shards, but after a glare from Clarissa thought better of it.

We all gave the pool table a wide berth.

When Darryl's office was empty Lori and I looked in the safe again.

"Shit!" Lori exclaimed.

"What?"

"Someone just swiped some of the money," Lori said.

Sure enough, there were fewer stacks of bills than there had been before.

"The same person who killed Darryl?" I wondered.

Lori kept staring at the combination. "Hmm."

"Lori, you have an idea?"

"Give me a minute."

Someone put a green tarp over Darryl's body so that he looked like a pup tent. I motioned Clarissa over. "Can we get everyone together, in the corner by the front door? Lori has something to say."

Clarissa gaped. "You know what happened?"

Kaleen and Sloane snapped to attention.

"I think so."

"Good. Because it's been almost an hour and this is getting illegal." Clarissa gestured toward

the green blob on the pool table. "At 6 a.m. I call the police."

Gabby came out of the bathroom in jeans and a t-shirt, her bra strap showing. She walked by us, looking straight ahead.

Lori was staring hard at Gabby. "Since when did you start wearing a bra?"

Gabby cut her eyes at Lori. "Huh?"

Lori did something strange—she grabbed Gabby's shoulder and jiggled the bra strap. Gabby jerked away, but Lori held on and the bra ripped, shaking bundles of money out onto the floor. For a minute we all just stared at the cash.

"I saw her pluck a big bra from the wall," Sloane said, finally. "I wondered what the hell she was doing."

For once Gabby was without her omnipresent audacity. "Okay, I took it. But I didn't do that," she said shakily. "It has nothing to do with him. I just need money."

"You need drug money, Gabby," Clarissa said. "By the way, you're sacked."

"I'm a thief, okay? But I didn't do that." Gabby's hard face had gone rubbery—she was about to cry. "I didn't kill him."

"It's alright, Gabby," Lori said. "Just sit down."

Clarissa looked surprised, then shrugged. Lori cleared her throat. The pool table wasn't available so she sat up on the bar corner nearest the front door. I stood closest. The others sat on stools in front of me: Gabby subdued, Clarissa anxious, Kaleen nervous, Sloane stunned.

"Whoever did this planned it beforehand," Lori began. "These lights are on automatic timer. Someone set them to go out at 4:45 a.m. to make us think Darryl was killed while the lights went out. But that was just to throw us off. Darryl was already dead."

"But, we heard the bottle break across the back wall," Sloane said. "And, then it was sticking out of his neck."

"You heard a bottle break," Lori emphasized. "But that wasn't the bottle that killed him."

"Then when did it happen?" Sloane asked.

"When Kaleen went back there, right before the lights went out."

Kaleen fiddled with an empty cigarette box.

"Kaleen had another glass shard hidden in the dishrag she carried into his office—remember, Gabby? She stabs him, keeps him quiet somehow—maybe smothers him with her breasts"—Kaleen gaped in insult or surprise—"then she slips a bit of rope on the doorknob and comes back out, trailing the rope. We couldn't see it in the dark.

"The lights go out. In the dark, Kaleen hurls a bottle of the same brand of beer—a good shot, strong enough to hit the wall and break while not hitting any of us—so that we would think Darryl died right after that."

Lori pointed to the wall where the broken bottle faintly glittered. "Kaleen would have swept that away eventually, to cover her tracks. After we hear the bottle, Kaleen yanks on the rope, making it seem like someone was going into Darryl's office. Naturally, we figured that was the killer going in. Later, she yanks on the knob to get the rope off."

"Yeah, Kaleen!" Gabby exclaimed. "That's why you twisted the doorknob when I was at the door."

Lori nodded. "That's probably what you tripped over, Gabby—the rope on the floor."

Gabby nodded. "It was too low for a box."

Kaleen had yet to react.

"So, where's this rope?" Sloane asked.

Lori peered into the cubbyhole where the barmaids stashed their purses. Clarissa tossed over a flashlight and soon Lori had fished out a length of dark rope and held it up by the looped end.

They all looked over at Kaleen. "So? It's a jump rope," Kaleen said, tapping her fingernails on the bar like someone who could use a cigarette. "It don't mean nothing." She sounded even more hickish than usual—perhaps testing out a slow Southern—girl persona for the cops.

"So what's the motive?" Clarissa still sounded only half—convinced.

"This, I think." Lori held up the ashtray. "What Kaleen tried to burn. She doesn't smoke, so it was strange to see her lighting up."

"I'd start smoking, too, if my boss had just been killed."

"There's a torn—up photo in here, which if put back together would show Kaleen before her breast implants. Great ass, thin little waist, but nothing on top. A photo that Darryl doubtless had placed in his safe for safekeeping."

"But how would Kaleen know the combination?" Sloane said. "Darryl wouldn't have told her."

"Darryl knew how much her breasts mattered to her self—esteem. Kaleen guessed, correctly, that Darryl would enjoy having fun at her expense by using her original measurements for his safe combination. Say, 32—26—36."

There was a collective gasp of sympathy.

"Darryl was an idiot savant when it came to scoping out our measurements. I'm sure he could figure out Kaleen's old measurements from a picture."

"Kaleen, you don't have to admit anything," Clarissa said.

Kaleen looked bitter. "Some asshole from my high school gave him the picture. Me in eleventh grade with my 32B—ant bites." Kaleen touched her breasts protectively. "Darryl said he was going to put it on the Web. As a joke, he said. Then he said maybe if I started, uh, dating him, he'd think it over." She glanced at Sloane, who was stoic. "Then two days ago he was in a foul mood. I guess over Clarissa. He said he was going to put it on the front page."

"What an ass," Clarissa said, glancing at the tarp monster on the pool table as she moved toward Kaleen.

"I couldn't let him do that. I didn't even care about the money. I left it alone." Kaleen was breaking down.

Clarissa put her hand on Kaleen's shoulder. "Dearie, I'm going to have to call the cops."

It was past noon before we got out of there. Clarissa rolled up the gate. "It could be a while before we're ready to resume business. I'll telephone. Right now I'm going downtown with this officer here." Clarissa winked at the baby-faced cop. "I'll do what I can for Kaleen."

"Just don't tell him you're illegal," Sloane said. "He'll put the cuffs on you."

"Never on the first date." Clarissa climbed into the police car.

Lori and I went for a late breakfast at the pancake place across the street. I piled on the butter; I didn't have to wear lingerie to work for a while, so I could indulge.

"I could almost root for Kaleen," I said. "I didn't think she was smart enough to pull off something like that."

"Absolutely," Lori replied. "We can be character witnesses. Extenuating circumstances and all that."

I applied blueberry syrup to a stack of blueberry pancakes. "I'd have loved to see Kaleen's pre—op picture."

"Yep." Lori gave me a look. "Just be glad we didn't have to give alibis for what we were doing when the lights went out."

"You're so bad."

Clay Waters has had short stories published in The Santa Barbara Review, Abyss & Apex, Black Petals and Lullaby Hearse. He works and writes in Hoboken, N.J.

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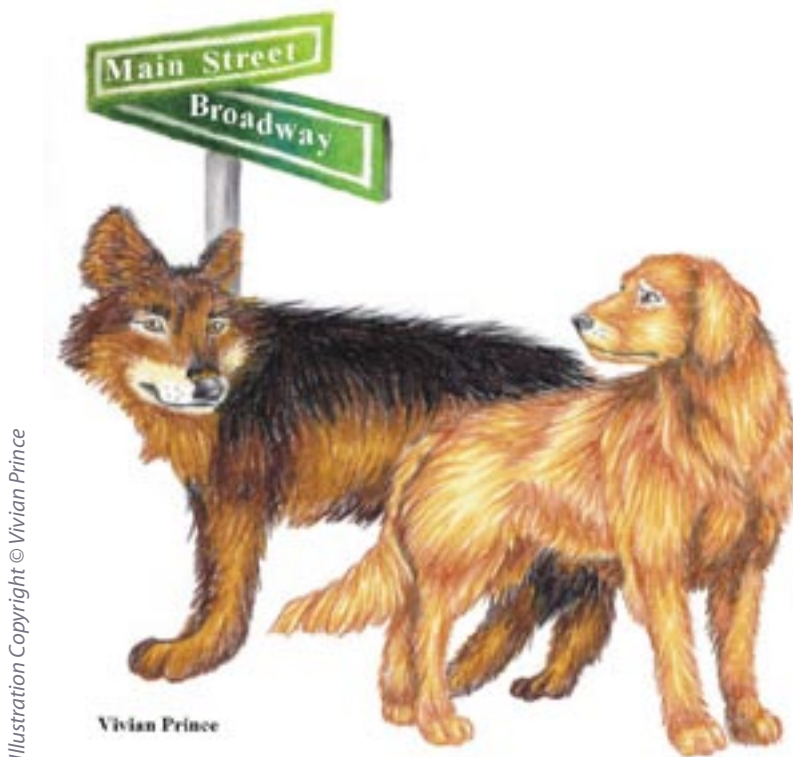


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I'm a big believer in karma. I believe you reap what you sow, what goes around comes around, do unto others and in all other life lessons that have become cute one-liners. Why, then, was I surprised my neighbor, Mr. Grayson, a meat packer with a beefy body and bad attitude, had finally gotten payback?

I prodded Mr. Grayson's shredded body with my muzzle and inhaled a harsh scent strong enough to burn my nose hairs. My hind leg itched, but I ignored the fleas and focused on the body before me.

The gouges and tears left in his pockmarked face made him less attractive than he usually was. His scalp gaped open, exposing an unnatural hairline, while his underarms bore deep gashes which could only be defensive wounds. I had heard of incidents like this but had never seen one firsthand. Mr. Grayson had been mauled.

Maulings and murders were not an everyday occurrence in my small town, just outside Montreal, where crime was limited to graffiti and employees nabbing donuts from the local Tim Horton's. I wondered what sort of animal would have

the power and anger to do something so heinous. Something inside me whispered Bull's name, but I shrugged it off. Bull could be a force, but he was loyal.

The room shifted as I took in the fifty-two-inch television and four-foot speakers that adorned one wall of the wood-paneled living room. The green shag carpet was covered in newspapers, while file folders spilled out of overturned cabinets. Men lounging by the kitchen doorway discussed last night's baseball game, while a woman with her hair pulled back painted black powder onto a doorknob.

"*Qui a permis ce chien dedans ici?*" a female voice shouted nearby. I felt a tug at my neck and turned to face two men and a woman. The woman, dressed in a white jumpsuit, let go of my collar long enough to take out a long swab.

"*Ouvre la bouche,*" she said firmly, then shoved a ball of lint into my mouth, scraping all the moisture out. "*Bon.*" She placed the swab into a container and fumbled for a pen to label it.

"Is it the dog?" the tall thin man asked of the stockier one.

He flipped through the pages of his note pad. "*Mais, non. C'est....*" not the breed," the brawny man finished in English as he knelt beside me. "He has a bulldog, not a Labrador. Missing for some time if we go by the food dish."

I looked into the man's eyes, level with mine, expecting to find a certain coldness reserved for cops and killers. Instead, I found clear gray eyes lined with years of experience, mixed with dark looks and a gentleness that calmed me.

"*Mon amie, pourquoi vous etes ici? Savez-vous quelque chose? Qui?*" Who did this to your friend?"

"The day we start questioning dogs about a crime scene is the day I retire, Richileau." The lanky man shifted his weight, exposing his gun harness.

"I would trust this dog to identify a killer more than a human. Humans sacrifice to their ego, while animals rely on instinct. The lack of instinct can kill you, *n'est pas?*" Richileau turned to his co-

worker, who regarded him with caution.

"You spend too much time with your dogs. Explains a lot about your personal life." He looked down at me, pointing at my chest with the end of his pen. "Got an address on that tag?"

I let the man called Richileau touch my collar and felt him caress me behind the ears. "*Votre nom est Char, oui?*" He rubbed the bridge of my nose. "Just down the street. *C'est tout?*" he asked, turning to the woman who had given me a bad case of dry mouth.

"*Un moment,*" she mumbled as she took out a spiked glove that provoked a growl. I felt a gentle tug as my hairs were pulled. "*C'est bon,*" she said as she collected the golden blonde hairs and put them into a plastic bag.

Men in various uniforms strode through the open door and out onto Mr. Grayson's lawn where people crammed between patrol cars and overgrown shrubs, eager to catch a glimpse of the crime scene. A white van with its back doors open was parked in the driveway. Nothing suspicious about it, except for the cage and dog pole lying inside. Alarm shot through me.

Richileau's fingers loosened from my collar when an officer called him over. I made my escape at break neck speed, not daring to look back.

It wasn't until I had hidden behind cedar hedges some ten houses away that I remembered that Richileau had read my collar. It was only a matter of time before he caught up with me, but until then I had questions that needed answering, and the only one who could answer them was Sergeant.

I camouflaged myself behind bushes and shrubs lining the neighborhood leading to Sergeant's house, stopping at a squat, one story house to catch my breath. At least that's what I told myself.

Usually, I considered myself to be an exceptional communicator. I could read dogs, cats and humans, although humans were verbally archaic. I was a bi-species communicator and was often

brought in by Bull's underdog organization to read difficult cases. I didn't ask a lot of questions, which made me valuable in that line of work. But then there was Manheim. He was the new guy in town sporting a major alpha male complex. It was rumored he was from a broken home, and maybe that's what drew me to him. I was a sucker for the emotionally detached and damaged.

I caught a glimpse of him between the hedges. His silhouette was ramrod straight, while his ears were pulled back at attention. He was midnight black, with shots of camel-brown hair indicative of a pure Doberman blood line, a nice contrast to my toast-blonde coloring. He was the kind of guy that invoked thoughts of puppies and frolicking in tall grass. In other words, he was trouble.

It was rare occurrence when I wasn't able to get a flash of thought, but Manheim was a blank. No ideas of where his favorite ball had gone to, or wondering if his master was going to bring home the cheap dog chow that night. Most dog thoughts ran to the mundane.

Manheim cocked his head and looked straight through me. I didn't want to be a mind predator, so I shifted my attention away from the frustrating male and continued to Sergeant's house. The thought of bribing Manheim with my T-bone steak chew toy crossed my mind, but he wasn't the bribing type.

Sergeant's house was situated between a colonial and a bungalow with more trash than grass growing. His owner, Polwiski, was a retired RCMP officer who had taken in the German shepherd police dog after a drug bust went awry. Although a Kevlar vest had taken the bullet, Sergeant had never been the same. Now, instead of busting cocaine dealers, he took five-hour naps in the hot sun, claiming it healed his arthritis. Considering it was close to high noon and balmy, I knew Sergeant would be doing his physical therapy passed out in his backyard.

My heart stopped as I took in the still body lying lifeless in the overgrown grass. I waited until I saw the rise of his chest fall, then gave a hard bark

that startled Sergeant awake. His lax body shot up, ears back, nose taut, baring teeth. It took him a moment to realize it was just me. I had surprised him, an unforgivable thing to do to a fading police dog. I hastily informed him of the mauling, the SQ at Grayson's house, and Bull's disappearance, to avoid any uncomfortable moments.

"It was only a matter of time before he did something like this." His thoughts came in a gruff tone.

"Bull could never have done that. Not to Grayson, not unless he had cause to." I crossed over the cracked cement tiles and sat across from Sergeant, who had been tied to an anchor. The rope was useless, considering his collar was twice as big as his neck, but he liked to humor his fellow officer.

"There was always something off about Grayson. Never liked his scent."

"Are you kidding me? He was a meat packer. I could smell him every time he walked to his door. It took every ounce of my will power not to knock him down and salivate all over him."

"Besides the meat, he smelled fishy. He had beady eyes." Sergeant scratched his nose with his paw.

"Allergies again?"

"I hate this time of year. I can't stop sneezing, but I love being outside. And those damn cats don't help. I swear I'm allergic to them." Sergeant nodded his head towards the neighbor's colonial house. Two cats, one a gray tiger and the other a manx mix, glared down at us from an outstretched tree branch.

"Where would Bull go if he wanted to disappear?"

"Why do you have to get involved? Let the police do their jobs; they know what they're doing." Sergeant turned towards the sliding door leading into his house. The smell of bacon drifted through the air. I knew it was only a matter of time before I lost him to temptation.

"Because I don't think Bull did this. Something's not right, but I can't put my paw on it. I'm not ask-

ing you to get involved; I just need to know where Bull would have gone." Sergeant gave me a glare that used to stop armed dealers in their tracks. I knew the minute I backed down the case would be over for Bull. I didn't know why it was so important for me to find out what happened. It just was. I met his stare and didn't look away.

"Le Grotto. Ten minutes past the packing plant behind Stan's." He had broken, and he wasn't happy about it. "I don't agree with what you're doing, but I can tell there's no use in trying to talk you out of it. Polwiski was right, females are a breed of their own." Considering Polwiski was on his fourth divorce, I didn't take this remark to heart.

I heard the swish of the sliding door and Polwiski calling Sergeant's name. Within seconds, Sergeant had leapt across the yard and up the five stairs leading to the back door. Sergeant should forget the healing elements of the sun on his arthritis and concentrate on the invigorating aspects of bacon grease. Arthritis didn't stand a chance against pork fat.

I headed home, but not before scoping out the crime scene. Yellow tape was still strewn throughout the bushes and doorway, but the activity had slowed to one police cruiser parked in Grayson's driveway. I hoped Merivale, my best friend, had picked up some new dog food instead of the generic store brand. I had been on a hunger strike for more than a week now, eating only the bread left on the kitchen counters and cookies Merivale hid in her bedside basket. Dog cannot live on bread and biscuits alone.

I sprinted across the street into the neighbors' back yard linked to mine. I squeezed underneath the fence where a hole had been dug and shook off the dirt. After searching the yard for my orange ball, I headed for the doggy door which led to an empty kitchen. I checked my food bowl, only to see week-old food being salvaged by ants, and a water bowl that had some sort of debris floating on top. This was not going to do.

I heard Merivale, a semi-retired seamstress who abhorred the current mayor, polyester and

plaid—who has been known to wear both—on the phone. The words *mayor* and *conspiracy* clued me in that she was talking to her friend and co-conspirator, Alma.

I went into the living room in search of Merivale and noticed the shutters had been closed. The lights were off, and she was sitting on the floor with her back against the couch.

"I'm telling you, Alma, it was a message. Ever since I've been campaigning against Mayor Tibideau, strange things have been happening. Midnight calls with heavy breathing, newspapers that are accidentally delivered to the wrong house, and *TV Guides* that aren't being delivered at all. And now my neighbor has been killed. I just know it was a hit gone wrong."

I sniffed her feet, knowing she hated when I did this. She had a phobia that I would bite her toes as she slept. I didn't care; I just wanted some food.

"Yes, I have my blinds closed, and I'm thinking of rearranging my furniture to make more of a blockade at the doors." I was getting desperate, so I used the whine, the one I resorted to when my ball rolled too far underneath the bed for me to reach. "I've gotta go, Alma," she said as I let out a woof. "Char is starting to froth at the mouth." I did a two-step towards the kitchen, just in case she didn't get the clues I was throwing her way.

"Do you need to go outside? Is your ball trapped?" Merivale asked in a concerned tone that let me know she feared another "accident" on her carpet. I went over to my bowl and stuck my nose into the dry, stale pellets.

"Ever since I got you that canned dog food, you've refused to eat like a normal dog. I swear, I will never buy that stuff again." She shuffled towards the cabinet, only to pull out the same generic dog food with the picture of the overly hyper puppy on it, and began to pour more into my bowl. I wondered if I could talk Felix, my neighbor's cat, into sucking the breath out of Merivale while she slept. Better not. I had enough problems on my empty plate as was.

"You eat that like a good girl, and maybe I'll get you a new chew toy." She patted my head, then zigzagged across the kitchen tile to avoid the window overlooking the neighborhood. I thought about Bull being on his own, living behind a restaurant with his friends, wanted for murdering his owner. Some dogs had all the luck.

I waited until nightfall to make my move. Merivale had taken her herbal sleep medication and was out like a light. I walked towards Le Grotto but couldn't get over the feeling that someone was watching me. I put it down to nerves and crossed the streets, weaving between the oncoming cars. I passed several corners leading to dead ends and dark doorways of bars that should have been condemned.

It didn't take long to reach the alley behind Stan's Fine Italian Dining. I could sense dark thoughts and knew I was getting closer. A small ash-gray Scottish terrier jumped out behind two beat-up trash bins. He was short in stature but big on attitude.

"Well, aren't you a bit of lass?" I hadn't smelled his scent, which could only mean that he had been neutered. He barely reached my chest, and I knew I could take him if need be.

"I'm looking for Bull. I'm a friend from his neighborhood, and I need to talk to him." I looked into the Scottie's eyes, which wasn't as easy as it sounded, considering I had to hunch my head down below my shoulders to do so.

"Bull likes his bitches sterile. He ain't into the family plan." I loved being called a bitch. It ranked right up there with *cat killer* and *ho*. The fact that Scottie hadn't picked up on my thoughts said a lot about his communication ability.

"I'm not that kind of friend." I leaned forward, bringing my nose close to his muzzle. I felt my upper mouth twitch. I wanted to show some canines badly, but before I could, more communication filtered through. I was being allowed in.

I followed the Scottie down the dark alley and readjusted my eyes. We passed various mutts that I was sure didn't have any outstanding vet bills.

Ripped ears and white, hairless scars that had never healed properly were badges of courage worn with pride. I continued to the back of the alley, which was enclosed by a barbed-wire fence. The Scottie let out two shrill barks, paused, two whimpers, then three shrill barks. I caught sight of Bull exiting a building boarded up by a single plank of wood.

The Scottie went back to patrol duty when Bull neared. His normally cold-blooded eyes were filled with fear, something I had never seen before.

"How'd you find me?" He hadn't asked about Grayson, which said a lot.

"Sergeant."

"Oh great, now everyone's gonna know where I am. Were you followed?" he asked as he looked over his shoulder.

"Who's going to follow me?"

"You'd be surprise how many mongrels would want to see me put down for this." Bull edged closer, and I noticed his normally white coat was smudged with grime, while his face was smudged with rust-colored flecks that I guessed were dried blood.

"You were there."

"Yes. But Grayson was dead when I got there. I knew something was wrong as soon as I entered the house. There was an awful smell..." A shudder went through him.

"Like sulfur and ammonia," I said, remembering how my eyes had watered.

"Exactly. I knew another animal had been there, one I didn't know. Grayson was on the floor, but I didn't know if he was breathing or not, so I licked his face. I tasted the blood and knew it was too late when he didn't respond to me. I'd seen wounds like that before at training school. There was a pit bull that had anger management problems and attacked one of the instructors. The wounds on the arms were similar, and if there hadn't been someone else there to control the pit bull, he would have lunged for the neck, just like this animal did to Grayson."

"Did you notice another scent, or anything that seemed out of place?"

"All I could smell was that other animal." Bull thought for a moment, then continued. "But there was something not right. Things were overturned, newspapers on the floor, files out of the cabinet. Grayson had his bad points, but being careless wasn't one of them."

"You think it was a deliberate murder?" I had my own theories, but Bull would know more. My ears perked up as a high-pitched yelp echoed throughout the alley. My shoulders twitched, but Bull continued, unconcerned over the outburst.

"Absolutely. In the last few months, Grayson had changed. He broke up with Michelle, his long-time girlfriend, and started gambling again. I knew Grayson wasn't rich, but he was living the high life buying anything with a button or subwoofer. Then he stopped bringing home scraps from work, saying, 'That stuff will kill ya.' I couldn't believe the same guy who guzzled down extra-large meat lovers' pizzas was worried about my cholesterol level." Bull's eyes had a lost look about them. I felt his anger at being cut off from his meat scrap supply, but there was a sadness there, too.

"Why? What happened?"

"I don't know, but I have a feeling that's why he was killed." I relaxed my shoulders as silence surrounded us. I was getting more like Merivale every day. If I didn't watch it, paranoia was going to have me zigzagging down alleyways. I asked the question I had been wondering since discovering Grayson. "Why did you run?"

"Did you really think the SQ was going to look further than me? I'm not exactly the dormant breed. Besides, I have a record. It was a while ago, but I've bitten before. It was a little girl. She was pulling my tail, and I warned her to stop but she wouldn't. Before I knew it, I had nipped her ear. I got a warning and was sentenced to training school. No one was gonna believe I didn't attack Grayson." Just then a light spotlighted us. A leather ring looped around Bull's neck and tightened

with a click. The light shifted, and a shadow crept forward.

"I knew you would lead me to your friend, *mon amie*." Richileau clicked off his flashlight and placed it in his jacket pocket. Bull was strangling himself as he tried to get out of the constraint, while Richileau dragged him towards the street. I had been betrayed and, worst of all, I had been a traitor. If I had listened to my instincts I never would have led Richileau to Bull. Someone had been watching me, but I had excused it as nerves and paranoia.

I looked behind me and saw the barbed-wire fence. Not an option. I wondered what had happened to all of Bull's friends and remembered the yelp. No telling where they had gone. I inched towards the street and spotted Bull by a van, being forced into a cage.

Richileau was preoccupied, and I knew this would be my last chance to escape, but I couldn't help but feel I would be abandoning Bull.

"*Dans le camion, maintenant.*" Richileau still had his back to me, securing the cage, but I understood his command perfectly. I thought of dashing to the street corner until he barked "*Maintenant!*"

Really, some people were so rude. I jumped through the open door to the passenger's side seat, waiting while Richileau secured Bull into the back of the van. I cringed when Bull's whimpers were cut off by the slamming of the doors.

We drove in silence until we reached neighborhoods that were lit by street lamps.

"Your owner is *Anglais*? I will speak with you in English. I don't believe your *ami* did this," Richileau said as he flicked his left blinker and swerved to make the light.

So that's why you nearly choked him to death and put him in doggy prison? It would have been nice if Richileau was an open communicator so he could understand me. Instead, I gave a quick bark and rolled my eyes at him.

"You do not believe me, *n'est pas*? Dogs do not turn over file cabinets. *Non*. The house was **re-**

cherché. My gut says *non, mais* we have to be sure." I suppose discussing the case with a dog was like confessing to a priest. It wasn't as if I was ever going to repeat what he told me.

"For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Newton's Third Law. *Quoi?* What did *Monsieur* Grayson threaten to equal the force that was put upon him? I do not believe he abused his *chien*. He was a violent man, *mais* not in that pattern. It would take a lot for a dog to turn on his master. *Non*, he was involved with something not right."

The van swerved to the right, and I recognized the houses and scents of the street. Richileau was taking me home. "We called the journals he circled. He was contacting reporters about doing an expose, *mais* no one was told the content and had more questions than answers." He stopped the van in front of Merivale's house and turned to me. "We will know more tomorrow when we conduct more interviews."

I wanted to nudge him a thanks for the lift and information. He really wasn't that bad, especially considering he was French. Forget that he had followed me and imprisoned one of my best friends, all of which made me wonder what kind of guy would follow a dog. But I digress. He was going to help us solve this case, and Bull would soon be free.

Richileau opened my door, and I jumped out, taking off for the back yard when I felt a tug on my collar. "I think it is time I met your owner." Never mind that it was somewhere between bedtime and dawn, never mind that Merivale would find out I had gotten out to spend time with an accused killer. No, much worse than being wakened at this hour was being wakened to find your dog keeping company with the mayor's hired gun.

It went better than expected. After rousing Merivale from her herbal-induced coma, Richileau explained how I had led him to the prime suspect in a suspicious death.

"How do I know you didn't kidnap my dog in an attempt to drag me through your investigation?

Are you saying my Char did this? That I ordered my dog to maul my neighbor? Huh. You wouldn't happen to be on Mayor Tibideau's payroll, would you? Oh, I forgot, you're the SQ, of course you're on the payroll." I took in Richileau's confused expression, wanting to convey sympathy, but I had lived with Merivale for most of my life and reserved my sympathy for myself.

Richileau barely got in his request for an interview with Merivale before she slammed the door in his face. "You can tell the mayor his threats won't work." Her shout echoed off the floor tile. Merivale had been edgier than usual, and I wondered if some sort of intervention wasn't needed here.

"What have you been up to?" She turned on her slippered foot to face me. I figured the best path to take would be one of ignorance. I perked up my ears, tilted my head to one side, and opened my mouth a quarter of the way to show my tongue rolling in and out. If need be, I would roll onto my back in total submission. This was not a time to show my dominance.

"Of course you haven't done anything, have you, my good girl?" She bent forward, scratching behind my ears, which caused my tail to wag back and forth. An involuntary reaction. "Well, I can hardly go back to bed now, not with all the excitement." Merivale straightened the lapels on her robes and headed into the kitchen.

"Come on, Char. Two orders of bacon and eggs." My paws barely touched the ground as I scrambled after her. I waited patiently by the refrigerator as Merivale opened the bottom drawer and took out the package of bacon. I could already taste the salty meat and runny eggs.

"Oh no, would you look at this?" Merivale asked, showing me the bacon package. I nearly snatched it out of her outstretched hand until I saw what she was referring to. The meat was discolored, and mold had begun to spread on the fat.

"I just bought this, too. Well, extra scrambled eggs. Lord, if that doesn't kill you then the rotten meat will." She opened the cabinet where the

trash bin was hidden and tossed the package inside. Something Merivale said bothered me. I tried to get over the disappointment of no bacon when the words returned to me. "That stuff will kill ya," Mr. Grayson had told Bull, referring to the meat scraps he used to bring home from work.

What if Mr. Grayson hadn't been concerned about Bull's cholesterol level, but of tainted meat? I applied Richileau's third law theory. What had Mr. Grayson done to equal the reaction of murder? Was it possible that Grayson was taking pay-offs—hence the electronics bonanza—to keep quiet about bad meat being sold at work? Could he have had a change of heart and decided to turn evidence over to reporters?

It was a nice and neat theory, but where, as they say, was the beef? I would have to check out the meat-packing plant, but this time I would not go alone. I waited until Merivale was yet again deep in slumber before venturing out.

The meat-packing plant was fifteen minutes by car or five minutes by paw. It helped to have Sergeant along, who knew all the short cuts. It had been easier than I thought to convince him to break into a meat-packing plant to sniff out tainted meat.

"I'm going in the name of justice," he repeated for the upteenth time. Of course, it had nothing to do with the possibility that we might find some scraps lying about. I went around the building to the back fence where the gate had been held together with a broken padlock. Security was obviously not their foremost concern. The gate gave with a few thrusts, and Sergeant and I continued on our inspection of a possible entry point. It didn't take long for him to find a broken window leading to the basement.

My mouth watered at the scent drifting through the broken window screen. Sergeant backed away then ran towards the hole and busted through the screen. It was very canine 911 stuff that he must have learned at police school. I chose a less dramatic entrance, easing myself

through the window and jumping down boxes piled along the window. I was anxious to search the place, but first followed my nose to the scent that filled my head and made my stomach growl.

A group of freezers lined one wall of the basement, leading to a stairwell. Sergeant and I took a moment to press our faces against the glass doors to drool over the raw meat hanging from metal hooks. I shook myself from fantasies of prime rib and blackened steak.

"We should split up and search the plant," I prodded Sergeant, reminding him why we were there.

"I'll take north to west, you take east to south," Sergeant commanded, then, with one last glance at the freezer, headed off. Okay. A compass would have been handy at this point.

I climbed the stairs one at a time, careful not to make any noise while Sergeant bounded ahead of me taking the stairs four at a time. He really was going to have to look into the healing properties of meat on arthritis. I reached the top of the stairs and noticed Sergeant heading in the opposite direction. I walked down an aisle filled with several steel machines and cutting devices that made my tail curl inward. I didn't want anything chopped off that wasn't meant to be chopped off.

A whiff of a familiar odor floated my way. I neared a dark corridor and could make out the shape of a door bearing a crude circular cutout, large enough for a dog but too small for a man. I headed down the corridor, slithered through the door, and was hit with the strong scent of *eau d'ammonia et sulfur*. The room was dark, except for the window, which spilled in light from the parking lot.

I noticed a bite suit hanging from a hook. Next to it was a metal contraption designed to lock the jaw shut, and lastly an inverted spike collar devised to puncture a dog's neck. Toys for torture. I swore then and there not to be picky about my fake T-bone chew toy any more.

Off to the side was a file cabinet adjacent to a

metal desk and chair. I walked over to the corner and found a ripped cushion reeking of offensive odors. I thought I heard Sergeant, but the communication was too faint to be interpreted. My eyes were tearing, and I turned to wipe my face onto my shoulder but stopped when I spotted the bull mastiff.

He was the ugliest species to ever grace the earth, weighing at least 120 pounds—give or take a few ounces. His teeth were bared and he was frothing at the mouth. The mastiff was excited to see me, but not for the reasons males usually got excited about. His dark eyes never wavered from his target, which unfortunately was me. A trickle of dread hit my stomach as I watched his tongue whip out to savor his froth.

I knew the only way out was the way I had come in. However, the massive dog was blocking the door's crude opening. I had to warn Sergeant, but the angry mastiff had at least fifty pounds on him, and what with his arthritis, he would never survive a one-on-one attack.

I let out a whimper as my hind legs struck the cinder block wall. The only way out was to move left when he charged, leaving the hole unprotected and allowing for my escape. I made the mistake of taking my eyes off him when a shadow flickered across the door.

And then he was on me. Sharpened claws ripped through my belly as teeth gnashed at my neck. It was Grayson all over again. Pain shot down my side to my right hock. I was down.

The warmth flowed out of my body along with blood. The mastiff's mouth overflowed with foam, and his gums were bleeding. I knew he was getting ready to go in for the kill, but the pressure on my swollen hind leg wouldn't support my footing. I didn't have to be a great communicator to read the mastiff's mind. The boss would be proud of his kill.

He neared and I closed my eyes, sending a prayer for a quick death. Tears rolled off my muzzle onto the floor to mix with blood. Bravery was overrated. A howl filled the room and hung in the

air. It took me a moment to realize it hadn't come from me. I cracked open an eye, blinking away the wetness. Standing over the mastiff with his gleaming white teeth clamped on his exposed neck was Manheim. The mastiff lay on his back, not daring to move.

A voice, clear and strong, entered my thoughts. "It's all right. Don't move and you'll be fine." Then, as quickly as it was raised, the curtain of communication had closed and Manheim was, yet again, the untouchable.

I blacked out, but awoke when I heard voices echoing throughout the meat plant. Sergeant's communication was strong as he explained his discovery of the tainted meat and fetching Pol-wiski. I didn't understand how Manheim had gotten involved, but exhaustion dampened my curiosity. I wanted to imprint the image of my hero, teeth clamped on the killer's neck, before giving in to the darkness. Not exactly the most romantic gesture, but I'd take deliverance from death over Keats any day of the week.

In the end, the papers got their story and Richil-eau got his killer. After ripping up Grayson's shag carpet and destroying several thousands of dollars worth of electronics, the police found the invoices he had hidden underneath Bull's dog food bag. Invoices that proved his boss was buying and alternating dead stock to sell to the public. Turned out Grayson's boss got suspicious after a reporter traced him through Grayson. It didn't take a genius to put two and two together and figure out Grayson was double-crossing him. The mastiff had entered Bull's doggy door while the boss ambushed Mr. Grayson inside his house. He never stood a chance.

The mastiff was taken into custody and was matched to DNA found at the crime scene, as well as a set of canines found on Grayson's body. The SQ discovered a cocktail of red dyes, sulfites and synthetic anti-oxidants used in a mixture of tainted beef, bones, grease and floor sweepings at the meat-packing plant. It was enough to put a dog

off her bone. Mr. Grayson's boss was charged with murder and selling adulterated meat products. The mastiff, currently being held in doggy prison, was ordered to be destroyed.

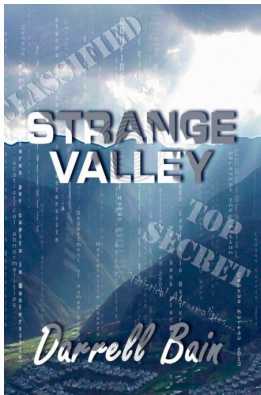
Bull, recently released on his own recognizance, decided to make his new home in Le Grotto and seemed content there. Meanwhile, Sergeant was commended on his good detective skills and was honored with another medal.

As for me, I am recovering quite nicely with painkillers to ease my throbbing hock and eight stitches. A stylish black splint allows me to hobble from my food dish—containing canned dog food—to my bed. Under the guise of checking on me (yes, believe it or not, Merivale allowed him

into her house), Richileau delivered a lecture on how I could have avoided all this if I had left it to the SQ. *No merci beaucoup*. Typical male.

The only one not happy with the outcome was Merivale, given the fact that Mayor Tibideau was not involved with Grayson's murder or the meat-packing plant debacle. Hope was not lost, however; elections were only a month away.

Manheim has yet to communicate again but has left a real T-bone with bits of meat left on the bone for me. Every time I sink my teeth into it I smell him. I can only hope that after all of this, my next bout with karma will involve a tall, dark stranger with an alpha male complex.



STRANGE VALLEY

by *Darrell Bain*

"Strange Valley" is a thrilling adventure that you will be hard-pressed to put down.

~ Annette Gisby, editor of Twisted Tales.

A Census clerk discovers a series of anomalies in the population of Masterville, a small city in the Ozark Mountains. The people of the valley are not even aware that they are different, but after the National Security Agency starts investigating, the whole world will know--and the persecution will begin.

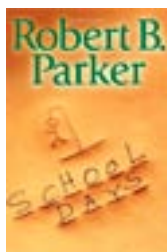
"Strange Valley," SF Suspense (\$15.50 paperback) is a *World Wide eBook Best Seller!* and is now available in trade paperback from Midpoint Trade Books, your favorite bookstore and online booksellers. Copies can also be ordered from the publisher:

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murder-
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by harriet klausner

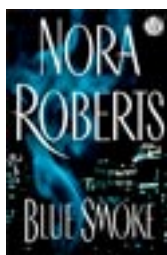


School Days
Robert B. Parker
Putnam, Sept 2005,
\$24.95, 304 pp.
ISBN 0399153333

In the upscale affluent Boston suburb of Dowling at the local prep school, two teens that attended the education facility took their nine millimeter handguns and opened fire. Five studies and two teachers were killed a six students and two teachers were injured. They then holed up in the library until a hostage negotiator persuaded Wendell Grant to give up. The other killer disappeared but Dell later told them it was Jared Cark who later confessed to the crimes.

Jared's grandmother hires Spenser to prove her grandson is innocent but when he gets to Dowling, he finds Jared is represented by an incompetent lawyer who believes his client is guilty and Jared's parents feel the same way. By the time Spenser questions everyone there is no question in his mind that Jared is guilty. However, Spencer goes one step further and sets out to find why this tragedy happened and what the private investigator learns turns out to be a bigger tragedy that the teen killing spree.

Fast paced, breezy dialogue and the protagonist's trademark dry-wit makes for another delightful reading experience in the long running Spenser series. Robert B. Parker is at the top of his game in this exciting private investigative tale that examines how a Columbine type action could happen and where the blame should be placed. Fans of this series won't be disappointed in *SCHOOL DAYS*, one of the best and most timely books Mr. Parker has ever written.



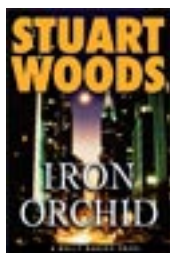
Blue Smoke
Nora Roberts
Putnam, Out 2005,
\$25.95, 448 pp.
ISBN 0399153063

In 1985 Baltimore Catarina "Reena" Hale was attacked by her neighbor twelve year old Joey Pastorelli and would have been raped if the neighbors didn't intervene. Reena's father fought with Joey's abusive dad and that night, the Hale's family pizzeria, Sirico's burns to the ground. Police find enough evidence to arrest Joey's father and Joey is taken away from his mother after he burns his dog and leaves it on Reena's doorstep.

Reena decides that she will because an arson investigator, studying hard in school to make her dream a reality. When Rena buys a house in her old neighborhood, her next door neighbor is Bo Goodnight who saw Reena at a college party years ago and fell in lust. Over the years

he sighted his Dream Girl but they never met but when the pair finally get together, lust turns into something more for Bo and the commitment phobic Reena who is afraid that he might be her one and only true love. They conduct their courtship during an arson investigation in which someone is targeting Reena and the people closest to her. Reena is in a race against time to catch the killer before the body count mounts.

Once again Nora Roberts has written a wonderful romantic thriller that is sure to hit the New York Times bestseller list. Her characterization are fantastic, the firefighting scenes are full of action and suspense and the plot moves along at a fast pace. Bo's Dream Girl is better than his fantasy of her and he is determined to woo her no matter how many obstacles she put in his path. Their love scenes are sweet, poignant sometimes downright funny. BLUE SMOKE is an example of why Ms. Roberts is one of the most popular authors writing today.



Iron Orchid
Stuart Woods
Putnam, Oct. 2005,
\$25.95, 304 pp.
ISBN 039915325X

Teddy Fay Worked for the CIA for forty years, eventually becoming a Tech Services coordinator and when he retired, he erased all his files in the Agency's computers. They have no pictures or fingerprints of the man who disappeared with astonishing ease. He started killing Right Wing politician including the Speaker of the House and when he was close to being caught, he blew up the place he was flying and jumped out into the ocean.

While the FBI and CIA think he is dead, Teddy relocates to New York when he starts killing terrorists, the enemies of America as he calls them. A joint FBI-CIA task force is formed and one of the CIA members is Holly Barker, the former Chief of Police in Orchid Beach, Florida. They recruited

her and she eagerly grabbed the chance to become an operative. She is the only agent to see Holly and she is in the forefront of the investigation as Teddy tries to avoid the agents while continuing on his mission.

The antagonist is the focus and the star of IRON ORCHID as he calmly hacks into CIA and FBI computers with the help of an inside source. Readers will be simultaneously drawn to and repelled by this character who marches to his own drummer. The protagonist takes to her CIA training like a duck to water and is able to carry her share of the work load on her uses first case as an agent. Stuart Woods has written a compelling and entertaining cat and mouse caper.



Song of Unmaking
Caitlin Brennan
Luna, Oct 2005,
\$13.95, 400 pp.
ISBN 0373802323

Euan Rohe, a Caletanni barbarian almost brought the Empire and the Emperor to its knees during the Great Dance. Valeria, a rider of the wild stallions who are gods made flesh, finished the Dance with her own and seven other stallions and for a time war was averted. Valeria returns to the mountain for more training while Euan escapes to his homeland and allies himself with Gothard, the baseborn son of the Emperor who wants to Unmake his father's empire.

War is coming and the Emperor, his warriors and his mages are at the border waiting for the right time to strike out at their enemy. Gothard has a stone that has the power to Unmake, once he knows how to use it. Valeria and her lover Kerrick, with their stallion gods travel to the battleground to stop Gothard before he starts using the stone's power to crush the Emperor's forces. Partners in love and battle Kerrick and Valeria perform a Dance unlike any dance the stallions performed, one that will determine the fate of the Empire.

This is the second book in this magnificent romantic fantasy series (See THE MOUNTAIN'S CALL) and it is full of more action, romance and drama than its prequel. The love Kerrick and Valeria feel for each other is tested by secrets he keeps from his lover and the wounds that refuse to heal, both magical and physical, inflicted on him by his half-brother. The battle scenes are magnificent, the characters are realistic and the storyline is pure magic; readers will eagerly await the next book in this tantalizing series.



Poison Study
Maria V. Snyder
Luna, Oct 2005,
\$13.99, 350 pp.
ISBN 0373802307

Yelena has been locked in the dungeon under deplorable conditions for almost a year, waiting for her execution. Even though she killed Reyad in self-defense, the Code of Behavior punishes the murderer even though there is cause for the crime to be committed. When Yelena is brought before Valek the Commander's chief spymaster and assassin, he gives her a chance since she is the next prisoner due to be executed. An opening for a taste tester for the Commander is available and Yelena eagerly accepts the position.

Valek has poisoned her and she must take the antidote each day thus preventing her escape. Reyad's father, General Brazell wants Yelena dead but Valek prevents numerous attempts on her life. Meanwhile Brazell sends candy to the commander that he eats several times a day; over time Valek and Yelena notice a change come over their leader but are unable to find any evidence that Brazell is poisoning or enchanting the Commander. When they travel to Brazell's home, a trap is sprung and the outcome will determine who rules the realm. Yelena, now aware of her magical abilities, must fight a trained magician who has had time to strengthen his position and

see his plans come to completion.

The heroine, an orphan who doesn't know her heritage, is a strong willed person able to take the pain life throws at her and remains a good hearted person giving love and loyalty to those who deserve it. POISON STUDY is rich in character development and action scenes and many of the battles take place in the magical arena. Valek is an interesting character, more so than Yelena, because he hides behind a mask so that readers wonder what motivates him while Yelena wears her heart on her sleeve. Maria V. Snyder makes readers believe in her world and the characters she creates, a writer's form of magic.

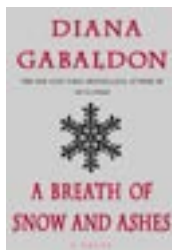


When Secrets Die
Lynn Hightower
Pocket, Oct 2005,
\$14.00, 352 pp.
ISBN 0743463919

After caring for her son during a traumatic illness that eventually killed him, Emma Marsden is finally coming to terms with her grief. Her world is shattered once again when a call from the Clay's Mill children's clinic that was treating her son informed her that they had some of his organs that they kept for research purposes. When she goes to collect them, the person who called her is under orders not to give them to her. She takes them anyway.

Soon after that incident, Dr. Theodore Turnbridge, her son's doctor, accuses Emma of poisoning her son because she has Munchausen by Proxy. She is in danger of children's protective services taking her fifteen year old daughter away from her and there is the real possibility she might go to jail. She hires private detective Lena Padgett to disprove the charges. Lena, who has an intense rapport with her client, takes the case but it isn't until Emma's daughter is kidnapped does Lena, the police and the medical people have a clue who is behind Emma's legal troubles.

Lynn Hightower is one of the best thriller writers of the new millennium and will appeal to fans of Patricia Cornwell and Nancy Taylor Rosenberg. Readers learn about the power of the medical profession and how in the wrong hands it can ruin the lives of innocent people. Emma is a sympathetic character and readers will empathize with all the problems she has to bear through no fault of her own. Lena plays more of a secondary role than in previous novels in the series but the audience won't feel cheated because she is still a key player in a tense drama.



A Breath of Snow and Ashes
Diana Gabaldon
Delacorte, Oct 2005, \$28.00
ISBN: 0385324162

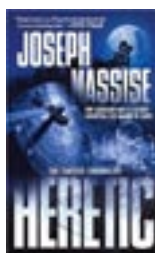
Though officially war has not been declared, blood has fallen in Massachusetts Bay. On Fraser's

Ridge, North Carolina Jamie Fraser already knows the outcome of the Revolutionary War because his spouse Claire told him having journeyed from the future to his past knowing the details about the Revolutionary War because she read about it in the American history books.

Tension is high so Colonial Governor Tryon asks Jamie, leader of those residing along Fraser Ridge, to help keep the peace there. He is not sure how to respond because Jamie knows that those who support the monarchy will either die or flee in exile yet Jamie still hopes he can avoid bloodshed. There is also the matter of knowing that three plus years from now The Wilmington Gazette December 1776 reports that Jamie and his family died in a fire. Jamie knows that the devil is in the details, but how can a mortal change history even if the events have not yet occurred. Now in 1773 he must take sides knowing that soon people he cares about will die.

The latest Gabaldon time travel historical tale is a superb entry because of the dilemmas facing the hero who knows the outcome of the upcom-

ing war and is aware of the deaths of himself and his beloved family yet must make difficult choices. For instance, perhaps he should relocate elsewhere so that the Frasers and others are nowhere near the mid December 1776 inferno, but that also means neglecting his responsibilities. Jamie, Claire, and the others are at their best when knowing what is coming, but sometimes an ethical person must choose a losing perhaps deadly position. Ms. Gabaldon is at her epic best with this powerful saga. The paragraphs above fail to even hint at the vast deep look at North Carolina on the verge of war because it is impossible to describe the scope of this work in a few paragraphs.



Heretic
Joseph Nassise
Pocket, Oct 2005,
\$6.99, 304 pp.
ISBN 0743470958

When their organization was outlawed, the Knights Templar went underground until the Vatican recognized them again and they became an arm of the church fighting the supernatural enemies of humanity. One Knight Commander Cade Williams, in charge of Echo Command, joined the order when as a policeman he encountered a supernatural entity he calls the Adversary that killed his wife. He fully intends to avenge his wife's death but for now he fights the cases of the order whenever he is called to do so.

Someone or something is attacking commanderies (various headquarters of the Knights Templar), killing the Templars and raising them from the dead as revenants. The group of nine led by Simon Hamilton Logan, the head Necromancer is looking for the Spear of Destiny for it is believed whoever possesses it could rule the world. The battle becomes personal for Cade when he realizes the Necromancer is in league with his enemy the Adversary. Before he can ever

think of taking vengeance on his foe, he must keep the spear out of the enemy's hands, a difficult thing to accomplish when there is a traitor within his organization.

Horror fans will be delighted to discover the works of Joseph Nassise a relatively new writer who can hold his own with such masters as Douglas Clegg, Bentley Little, and Stephen King. Heretic is a dark work, gothic in tone with scary scenes that will frighten even those who don't get scared by reading a horror novel. The protagonist fights on the side of the light even though he has his own agenda. Like this reviewer, fans will look forward to more adventures starring Cade and the Knights Templar.



Pale Death
David and Aimee Thurlo
Forge, Oct 2005,
\$23.95, 264 pp.
ISBN 0765313855

State police officer Leo Hawk, once known as Lee Nez, is a Navaho half vampire who frequently works with FBI agent Diane Lopez who knows what he is and cares about him anyway. They are called to a crime scene where three people are staked and bite marks are on their neck. They trace the works to a nearby top secret federal facility where vampire Stewart Tanner, a full fledged vampire was being held against his will.

Experiments were conducted on him that were painful and could be considered torture. Eventually he went insane and when he was able to escape he killed his captors and is now going after federal employees. Dianne and Lee are assigned to the case and Lee has the best chance of catching him even though he is only a half vampire and Tanner is stronger and faster than him. As the body count mounts, Lee knows he has to work faster to take Tanner down but it is difficult when he has to hold back his true nature because he is working with mortals that

will use him to experiment on if they discover he is a half vampire.

Navaho culture is woven into the vampire legend and what results is a fantastic storyline that is creatively different than most vampire stories. Lee is a good man who protects mortals from the evil vampires that want to kill or turn humans. His sense of justice is strong and as a result he recognizes that there are good vampires in the world and he has no reason to go after them. PALE DEATH will appeal to horror and mystery fans as well as those who love to read tales that are refreshingly original.



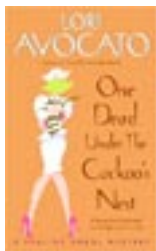
Category Five
T.J. MacGregor
Pinnacle, Oct 2005,
\$6.99, 384 pp.
ISBN 0786016809

Billy Joe Franklin and his girlfriend Crystal DeVries robbed a bank and he absconded with the money, leaving Crystal to take the fall. While waiting to go to trial, she, along with her friend Tia, transferred from the Dade County jail to the one on Tango Key. Billy successfully breaks her and Tia in a daring jail-break. It looks like his planning will allow them to make a clean getaway until Hurricane Danielle turns into a Category Five storm, worse than even Hurricane Andrew.

Bookstore owner and psychic Mira Morales, her daughter Annie and her grandmother are preparing to survive one of the worst hurricanes on record when the escaped convicts and Billy take over the house and make sure the hostages are subdued. Mira's live-n-lover, Shep, an FBI agent, knows about the danger the women face but he is trapped in a cellar and is unable to get out. Mira has to take charge and see that her family is safe until someone can rescue them but when their situation looks hopeless, help comes from a most unexpected source.

It is a toss up to Mira which is worse the

Category Five hurricane or dealing with the unstable Billy Joe. Both could get her killed and even her psychic powers are not strong enough for her foresee what kind of trauma and tragedy will result from the criminals and the storm. T.J. MacGregor has written a fantastic crime thriller, filled with action and suspense but the true antagonist in CATEGORY FIVE is Hurricane Danielle.



One Dead Under the Cuckoo's Nest
Lori Avocato
Avon, Oct 2005, \$6.99
ISBN: 0060731672

Former nurse Pauline Sokol is enjoying her birthday party with her parents when the mysterious Jagger, who she has worked with before, shows up claiming he needs her help. He wants Pauline, a Scarpello & Tonelli insurance fraud investigator, to assist him in escorting Mary Louise Huntington to the Cortona Institute of Life mental institution near Hartford, a facility run by nuns; Jagger insist that the escort must be a nurse.

At the same time her sleazy boss Fabio dumps a psychiatric fraud case on her lap while he goes to gamble at the Mohegan Sun Casino. The two simple cases collapse when the nuns take Pauline in as their patient. No one including Jagger bails her out and she fails to prove to the Sisters that's she is sane. So rather than mope, she begins sleuthing only to learn other patients have been abducted and committed to this institution. However, the fraud turns ugly when murder occurs, but Pauline refuses to walk away as she has befriended some of the innocent victims.

The third Sokol insurance fraud mystery (see A DOSE OF MURDER, THE STIFF AND THE DEAD), ONE DEAD UNDER THE CUCKOO'S NEST, is a terrific tale. Pauline is not only at her courageous best, but her family, the mental institution

patients, others and especially Jagger add depth and to a degree eccentricity to the exciting story line. Lori Avocato writes a fabulous mystery starring a delightful protagonist and a horde of supporting players who together provide a fine who-done-it reading experience.



Death at a Premium
Valerie Wolzien
Fawcett, Oct 2005,
\$6.99, 272 pp.
ISBN: 0345468090

Just before Memorial Day, building contractor Josie Pigeon and her fiancé lawyer Sam Richardson discuss their Labor Day wedding when she learns that her firm Island Contracting won the bid to renovate Bride's Bed and Breakfast. However, her client also sends his grandson, an undergraduate architectural student Christopher Higgins, to redesign the B&B. Worse than keeping the rookie in line, her associate accidentally hires a man who besides breaking Josie's gender wall is unable to get insurance due to illness.

As the crew works on breaking down a wall, they find a corpse behind the plaster. However, the body turns out to have been a mannequin. Later they find a second dummy under the house. Not long afterward they find a third except this time it is a real corpse. The father and son Rodney "Rats" who make up the sheriff's department assumes that one of the crew killed the victim though their preference is to pin the crime on Josie. Not sitting idly around waiting for the Rats to devour her, Josie investigates beyond just her team though some shaky shenanigans over E-Bay items surface.

DEATH AT A PREMIUM is a fine amateur sleuth tale starring a strong intelligent and proactive heroine in a Florida barrier island setting. The cozy like story line starts off breezy with wedding plans, unwanted male help, and buried mannequins, but soon turns into a homicide

investigation. Josie is at her best saving her business, solving a murder mystery along with a summer cop (female of course), coping with her teenage son and her future mother-in-law and planning a wedding. This is no different than battling Hurricane Agatha as she did in *Murder in the Forecast*.

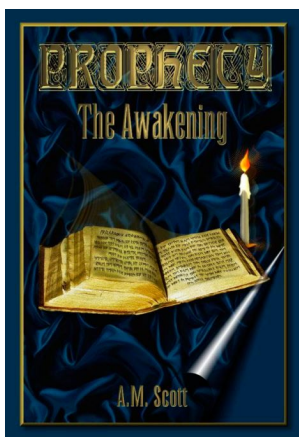


Grave Sight
Charlaine Harris
Berkley, Oct 2005,
\$23.95, 272 pp.
ISBN 0425205681

After being struck by lightning, Harper Connelly can locate dead people and know if they died of natural causes, committed suicide, or were murdered. Relatives of missing people hire Harper to find their missing loved ones. Harper knows how they died because she senses the last minutes of the individual's life. Right now she and her step-brother Tolliver are in the Ozark town of Sarne, hired to find Teenie, a missing teenage girl.

Harper finds the burial place and knows that the girl was murdered. She also discovers that Teenie's boyfriend didn't kill her and in remorse committed suicide but was murdered as well. Hollis, one of the police officers working the homicides, is interested in Harper who tells him that his wife Sally, the sister of Teenie was murdered and not an accident victim. Someone wants Harper and Tollivar gone and that person will not hesitate to use violence if it results in getting rid of them permanently.

Considering that the heroine can find a dead body and learn how they died, she is amazingly normal and treats her skill like any of her other five senses. She even make a living out of it, not to exploit people but to give closure and sometimes even helping her client figure out who killed them if it was a homicide. Fast pacing, excellent character development and a strong storyline make GRAVE SIGHT an excellent reading experience. This fabulous opening gambit affirms that every series Charlaine Harris creates is utterly fantastic.



ISBN: 1-931201-32-3 New Age
 Available from Twilight Times Books
<http://twilighttimesbooks.com/>

PROPHECY: *THE AWAKENING* by Ardy M. Scott

What if you had to share your consciousness with a benign, but ancient being on a mission?

What if you had to make life or death decisions with sketchy knowledge of the issues at stake?

What if the balance between Light and Dark has shifted — giving Dark the upper hand?

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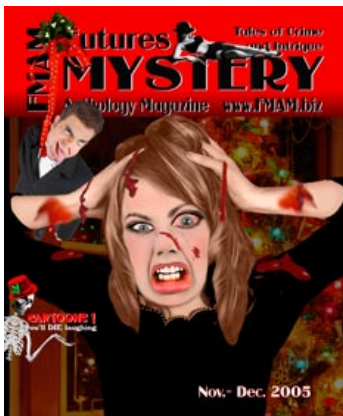
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