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**JANICE LAW**  
**MYSTERY AUTHOR**

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## A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

This series of free ebooks is designed to promote authors you may not have tried before. In this case, mystery author Janice Law.

Janice is a New England-based author of many great short stories and novels. This volume features three of her short stories plus sample chapters of her novel *Homeward Dove*. I hope you will enjoy them enough to check out the rest of her books.

—John Betancourt  
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## ENEMIES

If it hadn't been Turkott, Wallace would have behaved very differently. That goes without saying. Wallace L. Ivery, full professor with an endowed chair in Victorian Studies, was a temperate, cautious, responsible citizen, past president of MLA, member in good standing of the University Senate, reviewer for the best publications, and referee for countless scholarly journals.

He was reliable, too, not a man to panic in a tough situation, witness his success over the years in academic in-fighting and university politics. In his own estimation, he was a good man, tough but fair, with a certain charm and a properly ironic view of the world. If he'd been asked to sum up his personality in one word, Wallace would have picked "reasonable."

"...to see ourselves as others see us..." etc., but Burns was outside his period, and really Wallace was quite decent and rational in his dealings, with one little exception: Peter Havermeyer Turkott, III, who summed up every folly and depravity ever associated with the fields of academe. How did he hate Turkott? Let us count the ways.

He dressed like a stevedore, for one. Not that Wallace had ever seen a stevedore up close, but Turkott favored jeans of a certain age and flannel shirts or black turtlenecks under ancient tweed jackets. Sandals in the spring and fall; work boots in the winter. *Quelle horreur!*

Wallace, as befitted the holder of an endowed chair, dressed formally in dark suits or pinstripes with a vest and wore ties and display handkerchiefs in rich but subdued floral prints, a dignified couture. There was no reason for Turkott's crack that he looked "like Oscar Wilde in drag," an unwise remark in every way, given all Wallace knew about him!

But they were ‘chalk and cheese,’ as the British say, on every point. Wallace was something of an Anglophile, which Turkott thought an affectation and had said so more than once. Which showed, in Wallace’s opinion, how limited the man was. Teaching the great Victorians, many of whom were subjects of The Crown, necessitated some context, some feel for the mores of the time.

Turkott, with his Contemporary Culture Studies, ‘knickers & popcorn,’ as Wallace dubbed it, didn’t need to do more than reach for the video and pontificate on the inner meaning of television dramas and ‘cultural celebrities.’ Pathetic stuff.

Unsurprisingly, their animus carried over into department business. Pity poor graduate students who wound up with Turkott and Ivery on their dissertation committees. Pity job candidates unlucky enough to have both come to their trial lectures. Blood on the floor!

This was distressing to everyone, but, as Wallace always assured his colleagues, it was entirely Turkott’s fault. And if no one else was going to challenge habitual idiocy, he, Wallace, as one of the senior faculty, felt that he had to speak up. Sometimes he got support on this tack; other times the faculty let him down.

The fact was that Professor Peter H. Turkott, III, was also senior faculty, without, to be sure, the cachet of an endowed chair but, in the view of some impressionable minds, as eminent, or possibly even more eminent, than Wallace.

Turkott was forever being interviewed on television, called up as an expert, don’t you know, on the meaning of some disaster in Celebrity World. He spent couch time unpacking the meaning of trendy shows and books whose inner message, Wallace thought, was simply ‘buy me.’

So it is easy to understand, ‘self-evident,’ Wallace would have said, that when he saw Turkott, he did not react as he would have to any other person on or off campus. This is what happened. He finished up his twilight seminar, three hours from 3:30 to 6:30 p.m., a gathering highly desirable and always with a waiting list. Turkott could say what he liked, but the Victorians were not ‘so yesterday’ as he thought.

Wallace went out to the car with his briefcase full of papers in one hand and his laptop in its bag in the other. The parking lot was still quite busy; dry leaves were flying in a cold December air that rustled around the cars and lifted the sand that never seemed to get swept up from one season to the next. Needed tonight, probably, as there was snow in the offing.

Since Wallace was on his way to an open house at the Provost's, he decided to lock up his papers and his laptop. He turned his key and threw open the trunk of the BMW, lifted his computer bag automatically and stopped. Peter Turkott was lying inside his trunk. Anyone else would have screamed or dropped the case, at the very least. Wallace, a man of great reasonableness and self-control, slammed the trunk down and stowed his computer and his briefcase on the passenger's seat.

Then he went back and, glancing warily around the lot, eased the trunk open. It was a dummy, of course, an over-elaborate prank from his graduate students, a trick of the light—he was much overdue for a visit to the eye doctor. A second look put paid to all that. There was Peter Turkott, with his middle name and numerals and his eminent reputation and public intellectual status, lying wrapped up in a blue tarp with only his face showing, quite, quite dead.

Wallace put his hand forward cautiously: Turkott was not only dead but cold. And that was so typical of the man. Had Turkott been warm, Wallace could have called the police, confident that his presence for the last three hours at his seminar, “Sex and Spirit in Late Victorian Poetry,” put him, what was that ghastly phrase? *Out of the frame*.

He might have called anyway, being an upstanding citizen, a responsible member of societies large and small. In fact, Wallace was sure he would have called if he and Turkott had not had a serious row in the conference room just the day before. Standing in the parking lot with his rival stiff in his trunk, Wallace had to struggle to remember the quarrel. He thought it had started with *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's feminist novel in verse, and the subject of a letter he'd written in reply to an over-the-top article in TLS.

Yes, the altercation started there, the first tiny slippage before the avalanche. It ended with the department's administrative assistant threatening to call the chairman out of his Melville seminar and to summon the campus police if they didn't, right then and there, split the cost of the samovar that had been collateral damage. Naturally, most of the fault lay with Turkott, who combined inaccuracy with offensiveness, but Wallace felt that he had contributed just enough—though under great provocation—to make a 911 call awkward.

So. How to cope? His first thought was that as an unknown someone had put Turkott in his trunk, he could simply pass the corpse along. Wouldn't the Late Unlamented be better foisted off on some graduate student of unblemished record? Some sunny personality without death feuds or recent threats of bodily violence—although how anyone could take words in a literary critical context as a viable threat was beyond Wallace's imagination.

Find a car with a trunk that was unlocked, that was the thing. His own car was new and modern and needed the key—which raised questions of expertise and of the provenance of Turkott's remains, questions to be explored in some leisure hour. For now, Wallace went up and down the rows, discretely trying the latches on hatchbacks and sedans, clunkers, and SUV's, and even a handsome black Mercedes that was far too good for Turkott.

The one and only possibility was a little white Hyundai. Wallace hustled back to his car, reversed out at top speed, pulled up behind his target, and flipped up its trunk. He was ready to make the transfer when, foul luck, he saw a line of students converging on the lot. No time. Wallace slammed the trunk closed, slid back into his car, and took off.

The dashboard clock read 6:50 p.m.—unbelievably only fifteen minutes had passed since his whole life was upended. Where to go with Truscott was the question: the Mall was too busy; the dump, barred and locked; the parks, snowbound and mostly closed for the season. What about that excavation on campus, the foundation for the new classroom building? Fenced and patrolled, and in any case,

campus was a bad idea, suggesting academics, students, intellectuals with bitter conceptual differences. All undesirable.

Wallace settled finally on the Provost's open house, but not, alas, as a solution for Turkott. He realized that he couldn't miss the party, because first, he'd promised Morgan to stop in, "soon as my seminar's over," and second, he was aware that any deviation from routine might be suspicious. Just the same, when he pulled over on the narrow road up to the provost's, he checked twice that his trunk was locked like some nervous nelly.

Outside was bad; inside was worse. Though exchanging little witticisms and inter-department gossip was normally a pleasure, the party was torture. Eating the Provost's elegant canapés, drinking the quite good wine, badgering the Dean—he of the basilisk eyes and the non-committal stare—about the upcoming budget cuts, even flirting discretely with the Provost's young, vain, and influential wife, Wallace kept seeing Turkott lying in his blue tarp in the back of the BMW.

If only he could go out and lift the trunk and find Turkott gone. Or if only he could concentrate on a clever solution, despite the wandering modern jazz the provost favored and the laughter and the sallies of competitive intellects all round him. Couldn't Turkott be digested in some strange agricultural lagoon or incinerated in one of the bio labs? Didn't the sciences provide useful services like that? I should have paid more attention to such things, Wallace thought. He kept looking covertly at his watch, wishing it were time to make a graceful exit yet irrationally hoping that he could delay a decision.

Finally, he was at the door, shaking hands with Morgan and his misses, who got a quick kiss. "Wonderful party, as always. You've spoiled us forever," the usual persiflage. Then out into the storm, for while they had amused themselves inside, the straggling flakes of snow had regrouped into a thick white shower. Wallace struggled to get the BMW out while his colleagues rushed to be first away, pulling out without looking and accelerating down the narrow road as if they all had corpses in their trunks and the big decisions to make.

Wallace knew that he had to act fast, because he couldn't take

forever to get home. He'd been careful to check the handsome grandfather clock in the provost's hall. It was probably inaccurate, but none the worse for his purposes. *I left at quarter of eight; I remember the clock was striking.* He could say that if asked, but, of course, he wouldn't be; it wouldn't come to that because he'd think of something.

He considered the Mall again, with its dumpsters and trash barrels and rows of cars, and he was headed that way on the reservoir road with black water on either side of him and empty road behind and before, when he slammed on the brakes and cut his lights. Enough! He jumped from the car, unlocked the trunk, grabbed Turkott, and with one giant heave, got him from the car to the pavement and then, one step, two, three, to the guard rail and over.

A splash down below; thankfully, the water wasn't frozen. Wallace stood panting and wet with sweat in the white swirling flakes, until he thought he heard a car. He slammed the trunk shut, slid into the BMW, put it in gear, and roared away. He was at the main road, having almost slid out several times in his haste, before he remembered his seat belt. Fasten it, because everything has to be as usual.

Irene was waiting dinner for him, and, though the provost's fancy canapés were not sitting any too well, he sat down to pot roast and did his best with it. "Wonderful," he said.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," said Irene.

Had he been too fulsome? Had he eaten enough? Wallace realized that for the foreseeable future his every action would be problematical. He invented a headache and went up to read in bed, saying that he had an early morning meeting with one of his doctoral students.

"I'll get the car filled afterwards," he told Irene, though he realized as soon as he spoke that he had no reason to mention it and that the big station on the highway was not on his normal route.

"Pick up some eggs at the supermarket," she said.

He stopped himself just in time from saying that he wasn't going that way and, instead, made much of writing himself a note. This was going to be a wearying business. Even in his afterlife, Turkott

was proving a nuisance, and Wallace realized that he would have to be on his mettle.

The next morning, he forced himself to be very bright and helpful with his student, though the chapter *du jour* was on Conrad's *Nostromo*, which Wallace thought singularly ill chosen with its theft and concealments and hidden motives and hidden treasure. He profoundly wished that it was a lighter full of silver that *he'd* hidden instead of Turkott.

Finally, after two good hours of conscientious toil, with the rough spots of the chapter polished, the assumptions clarified, and the structure, sound, Wallace was able to drive off toward the reservoir. He expected to see police vans and an ambulance and streamers of yellow tape against the snow. Despite his exemplary self-control, his heart was pounding as he entered the strip of forest along the reservoir.

The pines and hemlocks were frosted with globs of snow like whipped cream and a deep blue burned in the sunny sky. Wallace noticed none of this, just the unbroken whiteness of the reservoir on both sides. He almost went off the road in surprise. The black water of the previous night had been replaced by a pure white sheet, and Turkott, who'd bobbed up persistently in his dreams, was locked somewhere under the ice. Eventually, there would be spring, maybe even a January thaw, but not yet, and the delay would produce confusion. Wallace couldn't help smiling.

At the gas station, he filled the car, ran it through the self-serve car wash, and paid the skinny, shiftless looking detailer to go over the inside. "One picks up so much sand," Wallace said, being friendly, making conversation.

The guy grunted and started up his vacuum, whisking away, Wallace hoped, all traces of Turkott and his blue tarp. When the cleaning was finished, he parted with a modest tip and drove back to campus. He arrived, light of heart, to collect the gossip of the day, the absence of Peter Havermeyer Turkott III. Wallace was all ears and properly goggle eyed with surprise.

Oh, the rumors, the joy! A lover was suggested, more than one,

the malicious added. Rough trade from the city was the general feeling, though Wallace maintained the high ground on that suggestion. Nonetheless, this useful theory sent the campus police searching various urban alleys and abandoned buildings, while Wallace kept a nervous eye on the thermometer and developed a passion for the Weather Channel.

Came the thaw in February, it was time to reconsider. Big streaks and patches of black water appeared in the reservoir. A sudden freeze closed them up again, catching the mortal remains of Peter Haver-meyer Turkott III partly above the bluish surface of the ice, where he was spotted by a fisherman setting up for the chilly delights of mid-winter angling.

Well, he was dead; that was sure at last for everyone, dead as Jacob Marley and, like Scrooge's partner, returned for the enlightenment of those left behind. Questions? Of course, there were questions, but thanks to a full teaching schedule—Wallace really thought he owed the Dean an apology for early complaints about the new teaching directives—Professor Ivery had an alibi supported by dozens of undergrads and a clutch of first-rate graduate students.

Still, the police couldn't help be interested; who else had they to consider? Turkott had been Wallace's enemy, though he spent a good deal of time explaining that the bitterness of academic disputes was strictly non-violent.

"Until now," said the Lieutenant, a skeptical soul, but there was nothing he could do about it. Wallace was an enemy with an alibi, and there seemed to be no handle on Turkott's killer. Just as well, too, because Wallace was clearly an accomplice after the fact, implicated up to his elbows, and after nearly three months, he could hardly use panic as his excuse.

By the end of the semester, when the investigation was clearly bogged down with every avenue explored leading to the same dead ends, Wallace found himself in a curious situation. He stopped tensing up at the sight of every police vehicle. He no longer had an aversion to opening the trunk of his car, though he still insisted on parking as close to buildings as possible and always near a light.

Thanks to his self-command and intelligence, he had avoided disaster. Turkott, that thorn in his flesh, was gone, and Wallace was the last combatant standing. He was relieved, but not wholly pleased, for campus life had lost some of its savor. The common room bored him; department meetings were beyond tiresome. There were days when he could have confessed to missing Turkott, who'd added a pleasant edge to every academic discussion.

And there was something else, a thought that had only gradually insinuated itself into his consciousness as his anxiety about discovery waned: someone else knew what he'd done and might be a danger to him. On the accepted theory that Turkott, killed by a mysterious stranger, had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time, Wallace's new fears were nonsense.

But he didn't believe the official line for a minute. That he had been implicated at random, by coincidence, offended his sense of importance. His car had been chosen, he knew it had, because the red BMW coupe was distinctive with the LITCRT vanity plate. Anyone hiding a body would have picked a less conspicuous vehicle, unless—and here Wallace felt a little shiver—unless it was a deliberate attempt to implicate him. Or threaten him.

Wallace was amazed that he had not considered this earlier. At first, he had been so anxious to avoid scandal, so annoyed at the inconvenience, even so triumphant about his enemy's demise that he had not considered himself a target except of Turkott's posthumous malice. Sloppy thinking.

He realized with a mix of dismay and excitement that his life had changed forever. He had an enemy, a real, not an academic, enemy, someone clever and ruthless, whom he had, inadvertently, protected by confusing the time line and removing evidence.

The killer was someone on campus; Wallace was sure of that. Perhaps in the department, perhaps in one of his seminars, even in the office. Someone hated him and he would have to watch everyone, ponder every word, every gesture, and collect every bit of gossip, every hint of displeasure. Now Wallace began to see the difference between his old "enemy" Turkott, who had produced stimulation not

anxiety, and this new unknown menace.

Was it Edgar, the Americanist, whom he had opposed on certain general education requirements? Wallace sometimes felt under observation when Edgar was in the same room. Or maybe Saul, who, rumor had it, had enjoyed a fling with Turkott. There was something about the way he greeted Wallace, a false bonhomie that jangled the nerves. Wallace was short with them both and scuttled out of the office if they were ensconced there.

Come to think of it, even Marilyn was not impossible, was she? The administrative assistant was a big strapping woman, twenty years younger than he was. Capable of putting a corpse in a trunk? Oh, he thought so.

He had to consider the students and ex-students, too, for Wallace had to admit that there had been a couple of unfortunate dissertation committees. He began to write flattering recommendations for every candidate, especially for former doctoral candidates now on the job market. If they lived in the area, he made particular efforts, because it might be anyone and who knew what the killer wanted?

On bad days, when everyone looked suspicious, when the undergrads seemed like malicious mobs and his graduate students like so many Machiavellian schemers, he sometimes thought about the police. About making a discrete call some quiet afternoon to the campus police headquarters. About expressing his fears. About asking for help.

But “why” they would ask, and then he’d have to tell them about the parking lot and the blue tarp and the terrible effort to heave Turkott, his junior by several years and heavier by several dozen pounds, over the guard rail into the dark water. He wasn’t sure he could do that, and, besides, after nearly a year wouldn’t it be too late to find the dropped threads of DNA or whatever it was that cracked such cases?

By the next December, Wallace had lost so much weight that the department chair asked if he might not want a leave, perhaps move his sabbatical up a year. It could be done. Wallace waved away the idea, though it troubled him. And he was more upset when the Dean

took him aside one day and paid him many compliments before launching into the merits of the latest money saving early retirement program.

“Oh, I intend to go on indefinitely,” Wallace said in as airy a tone as he could manage.

The Dean fixed him with a cold look. On reflection, he wasn’t sure that he didn’t dislike Wallace even more than he had disliked Turkott. “There have been complaints,” he said. “Some of a serious nature.”

“This has been a difficult year,” Wallace admitted, “but things will look up next semester.”

“I think I can guarantee emeritus status,” said the Dean. “At this point in time.” He didn’t have to add, “but not later, not if you delay.”

Out in the parking lot, Wallace found himself shivering. He had his heavy computer bag on his shoulder, and he found it hard to keep his footing on the slick pavement. He actually skidded the last few feet to his car and narrowly saved himself from sliding underneath the BMW.

Open the trunk, put away the laptop. He wouldn’t need it as much now nor his briefcase, heavy with papers. He lifted the trunk, saw a flash of blue, blue fabric, blue tarp, and tumbled forward, half in the trunk, half on the freezing pavement. He would have come to grief if an alert student, a EMT in training, hadn’t spotted him. He wrapped Wallace in the blue blanket he found handy in the trunk and dialed 911.

“You’re going to be all right,” he kept saying, but Wallace, even semi-conscious, seemed distraught. He kept mumbling about a tarpaulin and trying to throw off the blanket and to strike the medical personnel.

The Dean, who had seen the commotion, who had, in fact, been watching from his window, came down from the office. “A stroke, do you think?” he asked the EMT chief.

“Possibly a stroke or a seizure, even a tumor—we can’t tell without a scan. There are so many possibilities with the brain.”

“Or the mind? Professor Ivery’s not been himself for several months.”

“Who knows,” the EMT said, as he shut the ambulance door and vaulted into the driver’s seat. “The mind’s such a tricky thing.”

The Dean, who prided himself on his dexterity in human relations as well as his knowledge of all things automotive, nodded and smiled. He’d certainly been lucky, but the combination of electronics and psychology had proved unstoppable, and he thought that he could now count on several years of tranquility from the English department.

## MADAME SELINA

After Pa died, the farm sold up, and the debts paid, there was just enough left to send me by train to the orphan farm, where I lived on thin soup and old bread until Madame Selina arrived. Naturally, she wasn't Madame Selina that day, but Mrs. Hiram Bickerstaff, and she wanted, as I heard her tell Old Farquhar, the overseer, "a likely, capable boy less than five feet tall." She was very explicit on that last point and the first thing she did when I was brought into the chilly visitor's reception room was to pull out a measuring tape and check my height.

"A very healthy boy," wheezed Old Farquhar. "Very healthy" was his description of all but the terminally consumptive.

Mrs. Bickerstaff gave me a close look, and I returned the favor, because she wasn't the usual harried wife looking for a cheap farm hand or a sturdy girl of all work. She had a wide black hat with a plume big enough for an undertaker's horse, and a fur trimmed black cape like a war widow's, but her skirt was a deep maroon, and her blouse, shiny as ice, was the color of thick cream.

She asked if I could read and write, which Old Farquhar answered in the affirmative, and then to see my hands, which I produced for myself.

"Yes," she said, "I think he'll do."

Before I knew rightly what was what, I was sitting in a carriage opposite Mrs. Bickerstaff with my Sunday clothes and my extra shirt done up in a bundle with the last of Pa's books, and the orphan farm buildings were flying backwards into the distance. I was frightened and excited, the more so when I realized that we were headed into the city, although not my wildest imaginings could have prepared me for the job Mrs. Bickerstaff had in mind. Which only goes to show that I lacked the outsized imagination of my new patron.

Imagination was not required from me in any case, for Mrs. Bickerstaff, whom I must now call Madame Selina, had enough for the whole household, which included Hilda the cook, Maddie the chambermaid, two tortoise shell cats, and a large, savage green parrot. More important than all of us, although I did not meet him immediately for the very good reason that he'd been dead nearly 1700 years, was Aurelius, short for Marcus Aurelius, who'd lived in Rome, Italy and been an emperor and written a book—all of which seemed almost equally wonderful to me.

But Aurelius was for down the road. As soon as I joined the household, I was put to work learning the peculiar arts Madame needed. I must fit myself into a big upright cupboard which backed up against one wall of what she called her 'salon'—that's 'salon' not 'saloon,' which, thanks to Pa, I was more than familiar with. My entry was not as you'd imagine through the door but via an opening cut in the wall from a small closet.

For reasons unclear to me, I had to get from hall to closet to cupboard soundlessly and in pitch darkness. Whenever I was set to practice, Madame, the cats, and the parrot listened in the room beyond for the slightest little bump or rustle. One of the felines was particularly keen, and had Madame not been kind and the food good, I would have made sure something befell Sir Benjamin Cat.

This was not all. No sooner had I mastered the cupboard than I had to acquire other strange skills: the manipulation of certain fine strings and cords which ran who knows where and were attached to who knows what. There was even a little bellows which had to be filled with smoke from the balky kitchen fire, carried in complete darkness to the cupboard, and discharged through a small hole in one of the doors.

Once I met Aurelius, all became clear. Madame was a medium and "spiritual advisor," who, with Aurelius, gave counsel on everything from matters of the heart to stocks on the Street. Her clientele was rich and ambitious, the brokers and traders, or wealthy and grieving, the war widows; between the two, Madame made a very nice living.

Not that we didn't work for it. Besides my gymnastic efforts—kept up to snuff with daily practice—Madame spent mornings with the newspapers and stock reports and afternoons, when not conducting her séances and advising her clients, doing research of one sort or another.

When I turned out to be “a likely boy,” I was enlisted to run errands to the papers, the town hall, her broker's, or even to various cemeteries where I was instructed to find stones and dates and such useful details as confirmed Madame Selina's special powers.

One day I asked why she didn't just ask Aurelius about some detail or other.

Madame was indignant. “What would Aurelius know about railroad stocks? He's never even seen a train. No, no, we can't overburden him. And you know,” dropping her voice as if the late emperor might be listening in, “he's a bit lazy. He can't always be relied on.”

Had I thought about it, I would have figured out that running psychic errands for even a lady of Madame Selina's talents was a comedown for the Emperor of the Romans, but I was more troubled by another possibility. “But isn't he real?” I asked. It was important that he be real, that Madame, whom I'd come to like, be genuine.

“Certainly! He's as real as you and me, boy, but like us he has his days.”

Not being acquainted with the finer points of the afterlife, I put aside my doubts. Madame was a cheerful woman who made her clients happy—or, at least, happier—and as her unimaginative apprentice, I was a lot better off than I'd been at the orphanage—or even, if I was honest, on the farm. I only became uneasy again with the arrival of Lydia Fuller, our favorite client. My favorite, anyway, and perhaps Madame's, too, because she worked hard on the case.

Mrs. Fuller arrived one dreary afternoon, rain streaming off her black umbrella and spotting her black cloak and her rustling black skirt, for she was in deepest mourning for her husband, a young lieutenant missing since Gettysburg. I was used to widows; we had at least two a week and usually more, but rarely were they as lovely as Mrs. Fuller. She was tall, and very pale and blonde with clean, even

features, large gray eyes, and a finely shaped mouth. She looked like one of Madame's marble statues come to life, or almost to life, because her expression was unchanging, her perfect oval face a blank with all its thoughts and secrets hidden. Just the same I loved her from the instant she handed me her umbrella in Madame's ornate foyer.

Most of our ladies only came for the session or two needed for Aurelius to make contact with the spirits of those who'd passed. A few returned occasionally—or even more than occasionally—seeking advice or solace from the ghostly remains of their loved ones. I found that peculiar; I hardly remembered Ma, and I was not sure what I would have asked Pa. I don't think anything in his experience could have helped me in my new employment, though, of course, translated as he was—Madame always referred to the departed as 'translated'—it was conceivable that he was already on speaking terms with Aurelius.

Mrs. Fuller, however, had another, more worldly, request: she wanted Aurelius to find her husband's body. This was after Madame and I had exerted ourselves to the utmost to make contact with the lieutenant. I'd nearly been choked with smoke creating the 'ectoplasm' that drifted eerily in the faint candlelight, and Madame had collapsed and gone into a full trance. Aurelius spoke in his hollow baritone, then very soft and far away, Timothy Fuller called, "Lyddie, Lyddie is that you?"

Mrs. Fuller fainted dead away and toppled off the sofa; Maddie hustled in with smelling salts, and I squirmed out of the cabinet and ran to get water.

No one could say we hadn't done our best, but contact with the departed via a bona fide Roman emperor was not enough; Lydia Fuller wanted the Lieutenant's body returned. The family had a mausoleum in the best cemetery in Brooklyn, and Mrs. Fuller said that she'd never rest until he was laid there.

"Difficulties, you know, my dear," said Madame. This was on a subsequent visit, for Madame was incapable of speaking immediately after a full trance and was usually served supper in bed. "And,

of course, after this considerable time—” She didn’t need to say more; we didn’t need Aurelius to tell us the state of ill-buried—or unburied—corpses after a year or so in the fields at Gettysburg.

Lydia Fuller’s expression did not change. One of her brothers had been in a big army hospital in Washington, and she had gone down to nurse him. She had seen the worst, I suppose, but it didn’t change her mind.

Madame asked if she had checked with the Sanitary Commission and with Quartermaster Whitman, who was doing such good work locating the Union dead.

“Quartermaster Whitman says the battlefield was complete chaos; some of the fallen were buried by their companions, and few of those graves are marked. Knowing now that Timothy really is dead,”—she put emphasis on that with a nod toward Madame—“I’ve come to you, Madame Selina, because all other attempts to find him have failed.”

“Very well,” said Madame, but after Mrs. Fuller left, I could see that she was not happy, and this raised my sleeping doubts, as well as my anxiety for Lydia Fuller.

“Aurelius can find it,” I said, not because I really believed this, but because, besotted with Mrs. Fuller and again doubtful of our enterprise, I wanted to put Madame on the spot.

To my regret, I soon discovered that this was a case where Aurelius would need, as Madame put it, ‘terrestrial assistance.’ Madame had a network of valuable men with invaluable contacts. But though I was sent hither and yon with messages, after a week we were no closer to the Lieutenant’s bones.

Then, quite by accident, I turned our work in a different direction altogether. I was returning from an address near Washington Square, when I saw Mrs. Fuller arm in arm with a top-hatted gent. He had a fine set of whiskers and an upright, almost military air, enhanced by his stiff right leg, but there was something about him I did not like. I especially didn’t care for the way he leaned toward Mrs. Fuller, nor the confidential way he patted the hand that was linked through his arm.

I couldn't see her face, so I did not know if her impassive features had changed, but, as the presence of such a man was exactly the sort of information Madame cherished, I fell in behind them on their stroll up Broadway.

When I returned home, Madame made me repeat his description half a dozen times until she was sure I had forgotten no detail.

"And his name," asked Madame. "Did you hear his name?"

"She called him Colonel Parsons," I said.

"A Colonel, no less! We should be able to find him."

Madame dispatched me to visit a florid faced reporter named Jim Kaynes. I sat on the edge of his desk in the smoky, chaotic, ink-stained newsroom, while he finished scribbling his latest story, cursing everything from the town hall to a missing semi-colon. Then he pulled a flask out of his desk, took a long drink, and asked what "the Old Girl" wanted this time.

"She wants a Colonel Parsons," I said, and I gave my by now oft repeated description.

"What did he sound like? Is he a New York City man?"

I thought a moment. "Not city," I said.

"One of those who talks through his nose, eh, like a Dutchman in a windstorm?" and he mimicked my own northern twang.

I nodded, too timid to add more. Kaynes made a face and pursed his leathery cheeks, which were embroidered with an astonishing network of purple veins. "Maybe something in this, maybe not," he said. "Tell the Old Girl to hold her horses, and I'll see what I can do."

While we awaited his intelligence, Mrs. Fuller arrived for a seance. Madame once again went into a full trance—"An exhausting business," she remarked to me later—but Aurelius was not on form. All we got from him was that he saw the Lieutenant struck down. "His arm is bleeding, oh, his poor arm is bleeding," the emperor intoned before disappearing into the ether and my cloud of smoke.

I'd figured a Roman Emperor would be less flustered by blood, but a wounded arm did not sound lethal. Which only meant, I sup-

posed, that poor Fuller had bled to death on the way to the field hospital or been ruined there by dysentery or infection.

Shortly after this inconclusive session, Mrs. Fuller sent a note thanking Madame and informing us that she had good hopes of recovering the Lieutenant elsewhere.

This did not sit well with Madame Selina, who prided herself that she rarely lost a customer, and certainly never after two full trance sessions. “That rascal Parsons has turned her head.”

“Maybe he was at Gettysburg,” I said. “Maybe they served together.”

“Never. He was never a Colonel, either,” said Madame, whose contacts had evidently been busy. “He bought his way out. But he’ll find her a body, you see if I’m not right, and he’ll pass it off as Timothy Fuller.”

“Why ever would he do that?”

Madame raised an eyebrow as if my lack of imagination continued to amaze her. “Because Lydia Fuller is very rich—or will be—once it is certain that her husband is dead.”

“He fell at Gettysburg!” I exclaimed. “How can it be in doubt? And Aurelius spoke with...”

“The soul can wander before death as well as after,” said Madame Selina, making me think with a shudder of the poor cripples and drunkards and laudanum addicts who wandered the Bowery. Half of them were still wearing the rags of their old uniforms, a battle blouse, cracked cavalry boots, a forage cap.

“Can’t Aurelius tell?” I asked. A ghost, and an emperor’s ghost at that, should manage to tell the dead from the living.

“Like as not he can,” she said. “I don’t know whether he will enlighten us, but, as for Parsons, I’m guessing that he means to marry Lydia Fuller and make himself rich.”

“We must save her,” I cried. “She must come and you must tell her! Maybe Aurelius will find the grave. He can, can’t he?”

“I think Fuller’s grave will be far from Gettysburg,” Madame Selina said mysteriously, before setting me to watch a certain doss house in the Bowery. I was to tell her immediately if I saw ‘Colonel’

Parsons arrive, and I spent most of a rainy week crouched behind a rain barrel in the alley or sharing a pipe with one of the street boys. At last, when Madame Selina had begun to doubt my alertness and to despair of success, I saw the Colonel appear in the doorway, talking to the evil looking manager.

I took this news home to Madame, who immediately dispatched me to her newspaper friend, who, in turn, grabbed his hat and his stick and set off at surprising speed for the police station. I was desperate to go with him, but he insisted I return to Madame. She ordered me into the dark clothes I wore during her consultations and bustled around preparing the salon. Finally, a knock at the door; a boy handed in a note. Madame read it, nodded, and sent me off with a message to Lydia Fuller.

My fantasies come to life! I had often dreamed of running an errand to Mrs. Fuller's and now I tore along the street to the horse cars with one of Madame's big stiff envelopes clutched in my hand. I rode in style down Broadway then walked to Mrs. Fuller's town house off Washington Square.

There was a tiny garden in front and an entry with gleaming brass fittings. A pert, beribboned maid, wearing a pretty ruffled apron over her dove gray dress, took the letter and disappeared. I waited in the hall that was tiled like Madame Selina's in a complex pattern of blue, brown and white, and craned my neck to catch a glimpse of Mrs. Fuller.

Voices in one of the rooms beyond. "What does this mean?"

A low response—"something, something...very soon." Male? My heart jumped. Surely not, surely not! Surely nothing more than the butler. A minute more, then Lydia Fuller herself stepped out into the hall. "Is she certain?" she asked me without preliminary. "Is Madame Selina certain?"

Madame Selina had not confided in me, but I said confidently that I was sure she was.

Mrs. Fuller bit her lip and seemed as close to vexed as her placid features would allow.

"What am I to tell Madame Selina?" I asked.

“We will be there,” said Lydia Fuller.

You can be sure that I puzzled that ‘we’ all the way back and arrived in an uneasy mood.

Madame Selina declined to enlighten me; instead she gave me strict instructions and sent me to the back of the house, where I found Mr. Jim Kaynes, a copper nearly as red faced as the reporter, and, most extraordinarily, a thin, gray faced man of indeterminate age reclining on a chaise under a thick wool blanket. As we waited, he periodically asked for some ‘medicine.’ Depending on his mood, Kaynes either denied him with the admonition that he must ‘keep his wits about him’ or poured him a small ration of opium and whiskey. Beyond his dosage, the man, who was trembling with cold even in the warm parlor, seemed quite indifferent to anything but his blankets, which he kept plucking up under his chin.

After what seemed a long time, there was a bustle in the hall: arriving clients. I cracked open the door and waited until they were all settled in the salon, then, as directed, I crept away—not to my usual hiding place in the cupboard—but to a position near the door where I could hear what was going on.

After few minutes of whispering, I heard Madame give the curious little groan that signaled a trance. For not so serious cases, she went into a half trance, where she was lucid but remote, as if dreaming with her eyes open; but for Mrs. Fuller’s case, which I had begun to realize was more complex than I had imagined, only the full trance would do. There was a sort of soft thump: that was Madame collapsing back against her deep arm chair. Then a silence. Normally this would be the time for my ‘ectoplasm,’ but I understood that we had other helps for Aurelius this time, and sure enough, he appeared.

“Are you there?” Madame asked, her voice was weak and strange.

“I am.” A full octave lower, maybe two.

“We have one seeking knowledge.” This was Madame’s standard opening.

“I am on a different errand,” said Aurelius. “There is one here

in danger.”

I could feel the hair rising on my neck. When I was in the special cupboard, I was too busy working the effects and too frightened of making any noise to pay attention. Standing in the hallway with the lamp turned low and the curtains twitching in the draft was another thing altogether.

“Who is in danger?” Madame’s voice, though no louder than a breath, carried out into the hall.

“He is near,” said Aurelius. “He is a prisoner, near home but a prisoner.”

I waved my hand to signal Kaynes as I had been instructed.

“This is rubbish,” said a man’s voice. Parsons, I was sure.

“His grave is ready for him,” said Aurelius. “His death is awaited. His murderers are before me.”

Mrs. Fuller gave a cry; there was a shout and the sound of a chair toppling.

“Do you deny it?” asked Aurelius, his voice hollow yet loud.

I opened the door, holding the candle aloft as Madame had instructed me, and Kaynes half pushed the sick man through it. “Do you deny it now?” the emperor asked.

A scream and the Colonel shouted, “Lights! Bring us lights!” He leapt to his feet and found the gas lamp, filling the salon with dazzling light.

Madame was slumped, her eyes rolled up in her head. Lydia Fuller was clutching the arms of her chair and screaming, her perfect features distorted \_ with fear, with surprise, with rage?

“It’s all up ‘Colonel,’ said the copper, stepping into the room. Parsons made a lunge. Despite his game leg, he was a big, strong fellow, surprisingly quick. He got past the officer and, as neither me nor Kaynes was about to stop him, he had a clear shot at the door until the sick man stumbled into his path and, overbalanced, they both fell to the floor. The copper took the opportunity to lay his nightstick against the ‘Colonel’s’ head. For a moment there was only the sound of Madame gasping and of Mrs. Fuller’s sobbing, before a police whistle shrilled, summoning heavy boots to the foyer.

Madame's trance had been dangerously interrupted. I brought her some water, while Maddie saw to Mrs. Fuller. Then Kaynes and I helped the sick man to a seat by the fire. He looked older than Mrs. Fuller by many years and terribly feeble, but after Kaynes applied another dose of his 'medicine' he was able to speak. "Don't you know me, Lyddie?"

Lydia Fuller had regained control of herself by this time. She knelt down beside him and took his hand. "We believed you died at Gettysburg."

"Left a piece of me there," he said, gesturing with the six inches or so that remained of his left arm.

"You did not come back; you did not write. What were we to think?" There was a sharp note in her voice that I had not heard before.

"A bad time, Lyddie. I was having a bad time when Parsons found me." His large, feverish eyes were immense in his wasted face. "Don't trust him, Lyddie."

"He has been most kind," she murmured, and something in her voice made me uneasy.

"He kept me a prisoner," Timothy Fuller said, "of my weaknesses, Lyddie." He closed his eyes and fell back into a drugged sleep.

"What am I to do?" cried Mrs. Fuller.

"Take him home, my dear, and see he gets well. You have had a narrow escape. Parsons is notorious for preying on widows, as Mr. Kaynes here can tell you."

Mrs. Fuller shook her head frantically and looked with horror at the wreckage of her husband. She seemed incapable of action, and in the end, Madame, shaky as she was, had to call for her carriage and send Maddie home with them.

"We saved his life and her money," said Madame later, "though neither seems very happy."

I thought of Mrs. Fuller's white face and staring eyes. We had saved her and found her husband, yet she'd looked as if she wanted to die.

Madame had me open all the windows and burn lavender and

rosemary in the fireplaces and carry the sick man's blankets immediately to the laundress and to bathe even though it wasn't bath night. Perhaps that saved us, for though Maddie was quite ill for a time, the rest of us were spared.

Not so the Fullers. Sick as he was, Timothy Fuller strangely recovered, but beautiful, perfect Lydia succumbed to fever. Madame sent a wreath for her burial, and I saw her laid in the earth.

"I wish we'd never helped Aurelius," I said, as we walked away from the Fuller mausoleum, a dark granite cube with columns at the front in what Madame told me was the 'Egyptian manner.' The other mourners were dispersing slowly; Lieutenant Fuller wrapped in a thick shawl over his black suit and attended by his sister, a dark haired girl who shared his lean features. "I wish he'd stayed wherever he stays."

"You wouldn't eat half so well if he did," said Madame. "And you were keen to save her from the 'Colonel.' She didn't ask to be saved; it's a mistake, I've found, to go beyond the client's wishes."

I nodded my head.

Seeing my misery, Madame added, "But 'Colonel' Parsons is a bad party, a very bad party, indeed. She was not the first, you know. Mr. Kaynes knew of him, but the 'Colonel' was clever; he'd covered his tracks very well."

"She'd be alive if we'd never found the lieutenant nor investigated 'the Colonel'."

"But her poor husband would be dead. And who knows what would have happened to her once Parsons had run through her money."

"He might have taken the fever instead; anything might have happened."

"You know, she suspected from the first that her husband was alive," Madame said after a moment.

"Did Aurelius tell you that?" I had a lot against Aurelius, whom I blamed for meddling in things he might well have left alone.

"Indirectly," said Madame. "When Aurelius made contact and the lieutenant spoke, Mrs. Fuller fainted."

“From the shock,” I suggested.

“From the shock, indeed. Most of my clients come hoping to hear from their loved one. She came hoping to find his grave. After that, I didn’t need Aurelius to tell me that something was afoot.”

## THE PULP FICTION WRITER

*I was fixing a smoke and figuring out how to pay the next month's rent, when she walked into the office. She wasn't beautiful, exactly, but she rearranged the atmosphere. She had platinum hair that might have been natural but probably wasn't and a lot of mink that certainly was. She wore a black hat with a pheasant feather and a little black veil, and the way she sashayed into my office and took a chair told me that this was no shrinking violet.*

*"You Mr. Slade?" Her voice was the way I like 'em, whiskey cured and smoky at the edges.*

*"Monday through Friday, 9 to 5," I said. "On the weekend I sometimes take a powder."*

*"Too bad. Weekends is what I got in mind." She opened her purse and took out a cigarette holder half as long as my arm.*

*"Make it worth my while," I said and lit her cigarette. She was the kind of dame I could lose a weekend with any time.*

I stopped typing; *half as long as my arm*—was that a good simile? What about, *long enough for a pool cue*? Too long, maybe, but forties style. I went back and changed the phrase to *a cigarette holder long as a pool cue*. Then I pushed on with the typing, because it's easy to get hung up on snappy similes and metaphors and delay moving the plot forward.

Sometimes I wish I'd modeled my pastiches on Dashiell Hammett, him of *The Maltese Falcon* and the bare bones sentences, but my preference is for Raymond Chandler, style-meister first class and creator of the best wise guy narrator ever. I think I could recite *The Big Sleep* in my dreams and manage most of *Farewell, My Lovely* and *The Long Goodbye*, too.

Besides, my fans agree. Forties and fifties tough guys and hard boiled dames are still money in the bank for a wordsmith like myself

with a whole lot more ingenuity and facility than real imagination. I can turn out a pseudo-Chandler, 250 pages worth, in a month. Give or take a week for revisions, and I'm on to the next one. Those little paperbacks have kept me solvent for years.

My characters are good company, too. Especially Joe Slade, who's my bow to the great Philip Marlowe. Sometimes when I'm in a jam, I think to myself, what would Marlowe do? Naturally, his course of action usually involves a cloud of smoke and a pint of bourbon, but his advice on hard women and tough guys is generally good.

Just then my computer screen went dark, concealing the introductory scene of my new novel, *Poison Lady*. I wasn't too happy with the book. I didn't have the right name for the client yet, always a problem, and I wasn't sure that phrase, *rearranged the atmosphere*, was going to do the trick and bring her up sharp and clear for the reader.

It's not like me to get hung up on details like that—you don't turn out ten finished pages a day having second thoughts about every other sentence—and I could tell my mind was wandering. It wasn't with the fur swaddled broad with the dubious habits and a dangerous job for Slade.

No, my focus was with another dame with bad habits, and, I'll admit, the inspiration for a lot of my tough and deadly heroines. Aly, short for Alison, the Femme Fatale of Westgate Rehabilitation Facility and my very own naughty nurse, was showing signs of kicking up her heels and leaving the reservation, A.K.A. our marriage, for good.

*"I got a job for you, Shamus. If you think you can handle it."*

*I figured that this was a babe I could handle any time, which shows you how wrong I can be.*

Ugh. That last sentence is a clunker. I wasn't channeling old Raymond that afternoon. I had murder on my mind, all right, but my focus had drifted from blue movie purveyors, rich gamblers, club impresarios, and fedora wearing hoods to a certain Daniel H. P. Becker, the avaricious proprietor of Westgate Rehabilitation Facility.

ity and a string of nursing homes, assisted living outfits, and rehab joints.

Becker made the mega-bucks employing low wage labor to service deep pocketed patients. According to Aly, who was not at all squeamish, the facilities cut every corner possible and billed Medicare for everything but the toilet seats. Not my problem until Daniel H. P. cast a covetous eye on Aly, who has a nice cut to her jib and very nice topsails, too.

And being Aly, she was not averse to a little romance, not when it came with practical benefits. She went from dishing out pills and supervising bedpans to administrative assistant, filing inflated claims and dunning insurance companies. She kept her eye on the moola, too, because she thought that there was some funny money running through the facility. Large amounts of cash came and went, and more than once, she saw Daniel H. P. booking out of the office with wads of big bills in his brief case.

You may find it surprising that Aly told me all of this. Part of the pattern. She's the original free spirit and a lunchtime tumble with Daniel H. P. doesn't mean she's ready to leave Herman 'Hank' Arthur, creator of the Slade mysteries. "You're going to immortalize me," she says, and I gotta admit, 99% of my hard boiled babes owe their souls to Aly.

So, she and I, we got an understanding, as one of my characters would say. Until now, that is. Daniel H. P. Becker has something none of her other passing fancies possessed—money. Not just playing around money, but solid, put your feet up and take life easy money. I could see that she was tempted, for the first time in nearly twenty years, to take a powder.

How did I know that? She'd stopped talking about Daniel H. P.'s cash flow and his dubious handling of the rehab facility. She'd opened a separate bank account in her own name and let me see the new check book. She'd packed up some of her dresses and personal effects and put her grandmother's two antique clocks in storage. All this, knowing Aly, was her way of making a gradual break.

*"Better tell me about it, Miss—"*

I sometimes do that. Just type and figure the old subconscious will provide.

“—*LeMonde. And its Mrs. LeMonde. I’ve come about my baby sister.*”

Baby sisters are always good and my own homage, as the Frenchies say, to Carmen Sternwood of *The Big Sleep*. I’d used little sisters before, but this was a dry day in the inspiration line, and if I was going to knock out my normal word count, I couldn’t be fussy.

What should this kid be up to? Let me see. Today, I think murder. I think so. And as soon as I decided that Delphine, she’s the baby sister, would kill her mobster lover, I knew that I, Herman ‘Hank’ Arthur, creator of the popular Slade mysteries, was going to kill Daniel H. P. of the rehab facilities and possibly dirty cash.

And soon. Before I thought myself out of it. I consulted Marlowe about the proceedings, but this was not the best idea. Old Philip’s a nifty shot, but he’s no contract killer and he goes for hot lead only as a last resort. He does have good taste in booze, however, and I reached for the pint I keep on my desk. Mostly it’s for atmosphere but not today. I poured myself the second—or was it the third—of the afternoon and drank up. I was beginning to see the point of Marlowe’s habits.

But what about my man Slade, who, to suit modern taste, is quicker on the trigger and lighter on the ciggies? What would he do? I could answer that. He’d put his gat in his briefcase and confront the tough guy. Scare him off or finish him off, one or the other.

I liked that idea. I even had a briefcase, currently holding the paper copy of my most recently completed novel, *A Minute to Midnight*, packaged for the mail. I added my nice old Colt .38 automatic, a perfectly functional prop for my imaginary shamus, and went down to the garage.

I felt perfectly calm, though in retrospect, I admit that I must have been in a seriously altered state. Still, I was clean and brushed up, and like Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*, I was off to call on serious money, because Daniel H. P. was hosting a big cocktail party. This was a preliminary, Aly had told me, to a possible run for

Congress. Local wheelers and dealers would be there to check out our local plutocrat and decide if he was suitable for the helm of the Republic. I thought it would be very fitting if old Hank Arthur, local hack writer, weighed in with *his* vote on the matter.

The Daniel H. P. Becker house was the current model of grandiose: more gables than Hawthorne, more palladium windows than Monticello, and more garage than the town's road crew. Of course, there was lawn and lots of it, and the flowering cherry trees would give D.C. a run for its money. A chap in a cutaway coat answered the door, and before I could protest, he had taken both my coat and my briefcase and stashed them in a closet as big as my writing room.

Either Slade or Marlowe would have kept his gat close to hand, but Hank Arthur doesn't rattle easily. I figured that I'd get my briefcase when the time came. Meanwhile, that looked like bubbly circulating, and I had just enough alcohol in my system to think that a party was a grand idea.

Except for the host. Daniel H. P. was as well larded as a prize pig and bald to boot. He had cheeks as smooth as a surgeon's knife and sharp blue eyes sitting like Easter eggs in fat pouches. He had a little prissy mouth and a snub nose. Young Dr. Kildare, he wasn't, but confidence flowed over him like syrup on pancakes, and I was afraid that for this porcine gent Aly was going to abandon a man with imagination, one of the jewels of the mind.

I put down my drink and headed toward the hall closet. Was I going to shoot him? Or was I going to leave? I've asked myself that several times, but I've never come to an answer, because just as I was about to exit the big reception room there was a scream and a thud and the crowd of well wishers and politicians and ambitious moneybags all began crying and shouting and calling for help.

I pushed my way back into the crowd. A man was lying on the marble tiles, a shattered champagne glass near one hand. His face seemed twisted to one side, and he was trying to speak but not succeeding. Right away Daniel H. P. and my Aly were out of the crowd, by his side.

I heard Daniel H. P. say, "Can you raise both arms?"

The man flopped ineffectually.

“Tell me your name.”

A mumble.

Aly already had her phone in hand. “Ambulance,” I heard her say. “Possible stroke victim.”

“We need to clear the area immediately,” Daniel H. P. said. “We need room here. Sorry, folks.”

I thought that Daniel H. P. Becker, master of medicine, a cool head in a crisis, was probably not sorry at all. Wasn’t this incident a gift to any politico? And could I shoot him now, in the midst of heroism when some poor fellow needed medical help? Not very likely.

I made my way to the closet, grabbed my coat and my case. To tell you the truth, although Slade was disappointed, I was maybe relieved. But I didn’t have time for introspection, because an emergency vehicle came howling up the drive. EMTs leaped out to be marshaled by Daniel H. P., who was looking less porcine and more congressional by the moment. Hank Arthur fled the depressing scene.

I made my way home carefully. Champagne is not the best chaser for Slade’s bourbon. I was back in my office before I realized that, with one thing and another, I had forgotten to stop at the post office. Was Fed Ex still open?

I opened my case for the manuscript and though both Slade and Hank Arthur are cool characters under fire, I nearly fell over. I was looking at bundles of cash. The bundles were thick. The bills were hundreds.

I took a closer look at the briefcase. It was the same model as mine, probably chosen because it was cheap and looked innocuous. I ruffled enough of the bundles to know I’d been handed a small fortune and started to laugh.

Daniel H. P. of the great wealth and dodgy facilities was now the possessor of one antique Colt .38 and a clean copy of *A Minute to Midnight*, which I hoped he would enjoy a lot. And of Aly, who, I thought, evened up the swap very nicely.

I drank a lot of black coffee, packed my computer and my print-

er, put a few shirts in my case, apologized to the philodendrons, and headed north. I've always liked Canada, and I certainly didn't want anything to do with airport scanning.

I told the nice customs officer that I was researching my new novel. "*A Bad North Wind* is the working title," I said. I was well into the plot when she waved me through, and, really, the story line has possibilities, and the more I see of Quebec, the more attracted I am to the idea of a little northern excursion for Slade. It would mean research, but I have time. And I have money.

It's possible that I may have Aly back, too. Oh, yes, we've been in contact. Cautiously, as you can imagine, on my part. Real spy guy stuff, calling on a disposable burner and sending messages out of the local library's computer.

Had Daniel H. P. still been in the picture, I think Aly would have turned me in. But soon after that party, tragedy struck our safe, suburban town in the form of a mysterious hit on Dr. Becker, murdered on his doorstep, not by an old Colt but a very up-to-date Glock. A professional job is the latest theory floated by our local rag, which has bestirred itself from fluff and puffery to cover the case, and which I follow on line.

Aly, of course, has more information. The not-so-good doctor had lost a whole briefcase full of cash that was supposed to be washed clean and white at the Westgate facility. And, though both Slade and I were surprised, the guys behind the scheme were not consoled by a manuscript copy of *A Minute to Midnight*. Sad but true, the products of the imagination are rarely well compensated.

Now Aly wants to know about the money. And I want to know what sort of trouble I'm in. Not much, as it turns out, though the authorities would like to know how my novel and my Colt .38 turned up in Daniel H. P.'s hall closet. And why I'd brought both to the party and whether I went off with the moola.

"I was thinking of shooting him," I told Aly, who was flattered but skeptical.

"The gun wasn't loaded." That's my Aly. She's a 'just the facts' gal.

“I had the bullets in my pocket.”

“Just like you,” she said. “But,” this in a more conciliatory note, “the fact that the gun wasn’t loaded is in your favor.”

A pause.

“I told them you are a writer. That you carry around various props for inspiration.”

No doubt she told them I was an idiot. But I was a live idiot and Daniel H. P. Becker was dead and his dubious medical empire was under investigation. I didn’t think that either Marlowe or Slade could have done better.

Anyway, I was in a good mood, because *Poison Lady* was zip-ping right along. The late Dr. Becker and the Westgate facility inspired me to come up with a mysterious clinic and a doctor who was doing dubious treatments with goat glands and such. I was about to send Slade out of the southern California sunshine into this sinister establishment, and I paused just a moment to channel Old Raymond of the gimlet eye and the pungent vernacular.

*It was a long, low building in pink stucco with big dark shutters and heavy gray tiles that squatted on the roof like an ice bag on a hangover. I parked the coupe to one side and got out. A thin, dark fellow was tending a lawn sprinkler that was throwing its head around like a nervous horse. Everything else was quiet and still with the kind of tranquility that you only buy in this town with a lot of money...*

Was that ice bag image too much? Maybe, but I had ten pages to knock out, and I decided that it would have to do. I wasn’t Raymond Chandler and I wasn’t Slade, either, but I was OK in my own line of work, and now I was moving full speed ahead.

# HOMeward DOVE

*Sample chapters.*

## CHAPTER 1

When my grandmother got real old she began to go strange. She bought stuff she didn't need, picked fights she couldn't win, and told the damndest stories she could make up. She about drove my mom and dad nuts with crazy ideas and late night phone calls and monster bills from the shopping catalogues. The funny thing was that she could seem fine, normal, sane. She put on sanity the way you or me put on a shirt—a sleeve at a time and buttons up to the neck. And she'd get it almost right; then, just when you'd be thinking you were talking to a normal person, she'd tell you how Uncle Joe died of polio, even though he's running the lunch wagon in Plainfield this minute, or how Cousin Dorine hasn't talked to her in years, when you know Dorine, who's too dumb to recognize a hopeless case, calls her every Sunday four o'clock sharp.

I didn't appreciate Gram's efforts. I thought you're crazy or you're not, an open and shut case and not a damn thing you can do about it. Now I'm not so sure. Some days you can feel yourself getting crazy and you think why not? Shit, the whole world's crazy why not me? Other days, you decide to resist, you try to hold it together. You opt for sanity and hope it'll treat you better than the alternative.

I know; I've tried both, and between one and the other, or maybe with trying to decide between one and the other, I've gotten myself into some pretty strange places. Days like this when I'm not feeling so good and my legs, specially the right one, are acting up, I ask myself how I ever wound up where I am, because unlike Gram, I'm

a sharp guy. Ask anybody; they'll tell you, Jeff's a sharp guy. I was even pretty good at the books, but I could see where that was leading. My cousin Vincent—two years at the university and an Associate Degree and where is he? Sub-sub manager at the Burger King just below the by-pass. Aggravation I don't need. Me, I went right from school to the auto body. I stayed there until Electric Boat got hit with cutbacks and Jimmy said they had to lay me off.

So I come back here and bum around some. I help Frenchie and his dad with their roofing business for a while, but I hate heights. Start the morning up forty—fifty feet and I feel like puking. Roofing about ruined my gut, and I got so I just had to look at a ladder to feel I needed a six-pack. Then I did some painting, and I worked one summer for a cut rate blacktop outfit until consumer protection got onto them. I was flat broke and ready to sell my truck when Bargain Barn opened its warehouse five miles down the road. I got a job in their shipping department—two dollars above minimum wage plus benefits, workman's comp included. If I'd been lucky, I'd of strained my back and gotten disability.

That's the racket I should of tried, but, instead, one night I'm in Dougie Donelley's, an Irish pub up near the Mass line and Frenchie introduces me to a cousin of a friend's cousin who's over from Rhode Island. You don't want to know the details, but what happens is that the Barn's overpriced Jap and Taiwan VCR's and TV's and stereos start finding their way into the back of a Delivery Dispatch truck that the C of FC, Arnie, runs for some electronics shops with good connections. Me and Cousin Arnie split the profits; I adjust my inventory sheets and figure I'm about earning what I'm worth for shifting imported crap for the guys in the fancy suits.

It's a no sweat operation. I'm good with math and I'm neat. Some of the guys in the warehouse can barely add 3+2 and their sheets look like cat barf. You ask Pat how many Toshiba 400's are on the shelf; he'll give you a different count every time. Me, I got all my inventory down cold and my sheets are so neat who'd believe they're off? And they're not—by much. The cousin had a bit of a greed problem, but I knew my limits: a TV here, a stereo there, a

little “damage” to a VCR, a scratch on a console. I was never even questioned, and some weeks I was all square. You want to be careful, see, and not press your luck. And I didn’t. I can say I was as careful as it made any sense to be, and though the cousin was always pushing me for “special orders” and big screen TV’s, I knew where to draw the line. That’s sanity, I think you’ll agree. I pay off my truck and I’m making my rent on time and things are going about as well as they ever are around here, when the craziness arrives.

Her name’s Michelle. She has connections, though I don’t know it at the time and wish now I had, because I’m smart enough to spot trouble if I have even a hint. But all I know is she’s the new inventory control checker, and she’s got the official red and white Bargain Barn name badge pinned to a sizeable right tit. Michelle has a lot of brown hair permed to look like a grown up brillo pad, and she’s basically the same as the last one except maybe more surly. Michelle chews gum and sucks on a diet coke all night instead of running out the back for a smoke every half hour which is what got the last one fired.

I keep an eye on her anyway for a couple of weeks. Then I start again with a few modest donations to Delivery Dispatch, but Michelle doesn’t break a sweat. She double checks my inventory sheets and says I’ve got great handwriting and how she wishes all the guys were as neat. She’s making so nice I’m sorry that she isn’t my type. Then she goes back to her paperback and pretty soon I’m shipping out more than ever to the C of FC. I’ll tell you how things got: things got to the point where I stopped wanting to blow off the damn job and started to worry about holding onto it. Talk about turning into your old man! That kind of anxiety should of warned me, but I’m making some real coin and I’m getting used to the little extras. I’ve got my eye on a Harley 883 and I’m even thinking about a little boat to use bass fishing up the lake, when outa the blue, Michelle stops me one night I’m signing out.

“You gotta problem,” she says. Michelle wears contacts that are tinted different colors. Tonight’s are kinda maroon which gives her werewolf eyes.

“Oh yeah?” I says. I’m still thinking about boats and Harley 883’s and sanity.

“You gotta discrepancy.”

I furrow my brow and look all worried and concerned. “I don’t see where my count’s off,” I says.

“Oh, tonight’s fine,” she says, working over her gum. “Tonight’s fine.” Then she pulls out a sheet with my tallies going back for three weeks. She’s got them cross referenced against the incoming shipments and the legitimate delivery invoices. Three weeks she’s been watching me! She musta been hiding invoices behind all those Stephen King’s and Danielle Steele’s she reads, ’cause she’s got me cold. I feel just the way I used to feel up on Frenchie’s high ladder—bouncing around in the wind with a square of shingles on my back and my gut having contractions.

“It’s these nights,” she says.

She’s holding out the figures, but all I see is the Correctional Institute: leaf raking and raising marigolds behind the razor wire—or maybe even Somers: Latin Kings and gang rape and home made knives—when Morrissey, the shift warehouse boss comes over. He’s stout and suspicious with little piggy eyes and a mustache thick as a siding brush. He looks at me like I’m a pile of dog shit and says, “You gotta problem? What’s the problem here?”

Morrissey is always nervous about the stock. He’s over-paid to be, but now I remember he’s been on the last month or so about inventory losses. I should of taken the hint and layed off Delivery Dispatch for a while, but instead I was a damn fool, and now I hear the cell door closing, clang, just like in the movies, when Michelle turns around and smiles. She shoots Morrissey a pink tinged death ray and says, “I spilled some coffee on my form and I wanted to double check some figures with Jeff.”

I’d just about wet myself, and there she is smooth as Pennzoil. If you’d asked me at that moment, I didn’t know whether I wanted to kiss her or strangle her.

Morrissey hikes his pants another few inches toward his armpits and says, “Drinks confined to breaks, Michelle. You know the regu-

lations.”

She parks her gum in one cheek and calls him “Mr. Morrissey” and tells him it’ll never happen again. He gives her a look like a rat after cheese and jaws a minute about company policy and company morale, and she sits there looking fascinated. I’m recovering fast and thinking flat out, wondering what she’s up to. She’s got enough to bust my ass and get promoted right into decent money and decent hours. I can see she’s watching me all the time out of the corners of her werewolf eyes, and I think, “Love Slave to a Female Werewolf,” and curse my good looks and the C of FC and all Irish pubs everywhere. Then Morrissey is gone and I’m saying good-night and feeling cold now and wondering how to get my hands on that inventory check sheet she’s holding, when Michelle says, “Walk me to my car. We’ve gotta talk.”

It turns out, *she* has to talk. She’s honest as the next person, she says—there’s a laugh—but I’m screwing with her job. I’m thinking maybe I can pull out the charm and promise to be a good boy, when she says, “One third should do it.” Just like that. “Retroactive,” she says, ’cause she’s taking a risk, blah, blah, blah.

“And if I don’t?” I says.

She shrugs. “Morrissey’ll have an orgasm,” she says. She don’t need to say what’ll happen to me.

“I want that sheet,” I says.

“When I get what you owe me,” she says. “I’m figuring \$1300 would keep us square.”

She wasn’t a werewolf; she was a bloodsucker, a leech, a goddamn lamprey eel. With red tinged eyes.

“Don’t get me mad,” I says.

“I got friends,” she says. “Friends you want to stay friends with.” Just tone of voice I’m inclined to believe her. Later the C of FC confirms she’s got connections in Providence. “Low level”, he tells me. “Nothing we can’t handle. Her half sister married a soldier in one of the families. That’s all I know.”

“Christ, I don’t want that kind of trouble,” I tell him.

“Who’s got trouble?” he says. “She’s a businesswoman.”

He wasn't so cheerful when I told him how she shot the shit out of his profit margin.

"Far as I'm concerned, we can forget all about the business," I says.

But he doesn't want to do that. Family trees should be rewritten to eliminate cousins of all kinds. He wants to expand now that we've got Michelle "working for us". He doesn't know the bitch. She has me by the balls and before he knows it, she'll have him, too, and we'll both be working for her. I could see it coming and it came.

First it was suggestions and then it was orders and pretty soon I'm getting a hernia just from looking at all the crap I'm humping. Worse yet, she's craziness, and she and the C of FC together are greedy craziness. I'm working twice as hard for a pay cut and I'm starting to get nervous. I flash all the time on the Correctional Institute, and I feel like puking every time I pull into the Bargain Barn lot. About the best thing I could of done was left town and not come back, but with Dad feeling cruddy, and Mom getting old at the Discount I hated to do that. And then there was the usual shit, the slumlord tangle of rental deposit and yearly lease and money tied up. Besides, trout season was coming. One of the sweetest streams in the east is just miles away and, south of town, where the river runs wide and shallow, ain't so bad, neither.

Finally I figure wait til trout season's over, take the loss on the last two months of my lease, and call the folks collect from Denver or Spokane. I sweet talk Michelle, stall the C of FC, and start handing in clean sheets. I'm living smooth and easy and broke, an employee theft dropout, when Michelle says one night, "I need money." Just like that.

"Talk to the boss," I says, and I get myself out the door. She catches me half way across the parking lot. Seven-fifteen, white arc lights, smell of rain, a few early peepers calling. I'm already seeing the stream with a big rainbow lying in the pool below the bridge, when she pulls up in her Datsun. Piece of junk.

The lot's almost empty. She rolls down the window. "We had a deal," she says.

“Listen”, I says, “we *had* a deal. Now I’m sick of the deal, all right?”

She shakes her head. Tonight she’s got her blue contacts in, making ultraviolet eyes that remind me of bug snappers and cheap grocery stores. “I’da gotten a raise for busting you,” she says.

“Yeah and you wouldn’t have been spending my cash for the last six months.” I didn’t even want to think how much I’d paid her. Every time I looked at her, I saw my Harley 883.

She makes a sour face. “That was short term gain,” she says, and I see that the C of FC was right, this is a business woman. “Long term, I’m better with the raise.”

“Christ!” I says, “They coulda closed the fucking Barn by the time you made it back. You coulda been fired, taken a hemorrhage, won the Lotto. You got yours up front and no problem.”

“None whatsoever,” she says. “So call Arnie. Cash by the end of next week.” She puts the Datsun into gear and burns out the yard. I’m running through my vocabulary, but I’m not feeling so good. Ms. Vampire knows the C of FC’s name, which means she knows even more of my business than I thought she did. If she’s onto Arnie, too, it means she’s got a way to back up what she says; it’s not just her word against mine any more.

I’m in a helluva fix. My first impulse is to call that troublesome little bastard, the C of FC, and lay out the situation. My next is to say the hell with them both. Anything can happen in a week, and tomorrow’s the opening of the fishing season. After sticking around and ruining my digestion this long, I’m going to be out tomorrow morning sure. I jump in my truck and head for The Kitchen, where I figure to drink a couple beers and have a pizza with everything. I’ve gotten through the first part of the program, when in walks one of my old high school buddies, third base on the softball team and the foulest mouth on the school bus, Lynn Santori.

“Hey, Red Gal!” She stops just inside the doorway. Lynn’s maybe 5’9 or 5’10, blonde, wide face, kinda Scandinavian looking despite the Greek name. She carries some weight but it’s artistically arranged, with the better parts hidden at the moment under a baggy

red and gray sweat suit.

“Hey, hey, hey, Red Man!” She comes in and gives with the high fives over the bar, the traditional Red greeting. I’ve had just enough Rolling Rock to miss the old school with the Redmen out on the football field and the Red Gals warming up next door in their soccer shorts and hockey kilts. I have fond memories of Lynn’s strong thighs, red and cold to the touch under her hockey kilt after a windy November game. I put my arm around her shoulders and give her a kiss.

“What you drinking?”

“I came in to use the phone. Sorry, Joe,” she says to the barman.

“You gotta have a margarita,” he says. “You never come in without buying a margarita.” Joe was a few years ahead of us at the regional. He’s a nice guy, but the glummiest looking bartender you’ve ever seen. He’s tall and thin, and he looks as if they assembled him out of skin and a skeleton without remembering to put any meat between.

“I gotta call Gina,” Lynn says without saying “yes” and without saying “no”.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Mom’s keeping the kids and we’re going to play the slots at the Pequots.”

“I like that theater they’ve got there,” Joe says.

“Yeah? Me and Gina are going to the slots,” Lynn says. “If I can get hold of her. I thought Mom couldn’t keep the kids, see, since her back’s been bad. But she saw the chiro today and she’s moving pretty good.”

“Yeah?” I says but I’ve still got my arm around her, and I’m going on autopilot. I don’t know how it is, but I take spells of being wild about Lynn and sometimes these coincide with spells of her being wild about me, too. It just takes a certain atmosphere. The smoky bar at the Kitchen, a few Rolling Rocks, maybe the old red and gray Red Men colors—who the hell knows? “So your mom’s keeping the kids tonight?”

“Yeah. She and Dad are crazy about them.”

Crazy, they'd have to be. Lynn has seven-year-old twins, a boy and a girl. They look completely different but they're both wild and bratty and too much like their dad, Buddy, who ran off soon as he saw what family life was like. They're even too much for Lynn sometimes, so that once and a while she drops them off for the grandparents to spoil. She gets her friend Gina and runs down and plays the slots at the Pequot casino. Then she stays overnight at Gina's, where she wins her losses back playing poker with Gina and her old man and her Uncle Tony.

That's sometimes. Other times, she tells her Mom she's going to the casino and comes over and plays games with me, instead.

"So how's life treating you?" she asks me.

"Not too bad," I says. Actually, as you already know, it's pure shit, but I hate to grouse to Lynn. She was dealt a crap hand with Buddy, who had more muscle than brain and more prick than muscle. All in all as lousy a card as she could of found in the deck, but she keeps cheerful, and I admire that. So I says, "Not too bad. Considering."

"Yeah," she says, "considering the general fuck-up of the universe. Right, Joe?"

"How you want that margarita?" he asks.

"Cold," she says. "I guess I want that margarita cold and strong."

"Now you're talking," he says. Joe likes to fix fussy mixed drinks and things with frosted rims and fruit floating on top. I tell him he's wasted at the Kitchen, and he and Lynn both laugh and she says, "You look like you're getting wasted, too."

"Naw," I says. "Warehouse is thirsty work. You need a couple beers just to settle the dust."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You want some pizza?"

"Naw. I'm going to call Gina and go to the casino."

"Don't try to delay a woman in the gambling mood," says Joe, setting her drink on the counter.

"With everything," I says. "Pepperoni, spinach—look at that—the salad comes right on the damn pizza."

She laughs again. “I gotta call Gina,” she says, but I can feel her hip against mine and she’s not moving it away.

“You got time for a slice of pizza,” I says.

“You want nachos with a margarita. Am I right, Joe?”

He nods his cadaverous head. “A margarita takes nachos.”

“So get some nachos,” I says, slipping my arm around her waist. “They make nachos here, don’t they?”

“Can’t sell margaritas without nachos,” Joe says. “State regulation,” and he winks just in case we can’t recognize the joke.

“I maybe got time for some nachos,” she says.

Up on Joe’s big screen tv, the Knicks have just gone ahead of the Rockets. “You want to see the Knicks win,” I says. “Save your money and root for New York.”

“I like Ewing,” she says as if she’s thinking things over.

“He’s terrific when his knee’s okay.”

“You like nachos?” She asks.

“Sure I like nachos. But I’m eating pizza.”

She holds one out anyway, dripping with cheese, and pretty soon my crotch’s running a fever, and I’m beginning to forget about the Bargain Barn and Michelle and the C of FC. I have another beer. “Don’t call Gina,” I says.

She raises her eyebrows and doesn’t say anything. Lynn likes to be persuaded even if she’s already made up her mind. “I got a tape of the last Red Men football game,” I says.

“I like that theater the Pequots got now,” Joe says. Is he thick or not?

“You hear that,” Lynn says. “What do I want to watch the Red Men for?”

I wonder if I’ve made a tactical error: Buddy was a Red Man. Captain, quarterback, All-Conference. “This was the Turkey Day game,” I says. “A vintage game.”

“A vintage game is one we won,” Lynn says to Joe.

“My cousin plays,” Joe says. “Travis. He’s a pulling guard.”

There must be weight somewhere in Joe’s family. But probably no more brain.

Lynn looks at her watch. “I gotta call Gina,” she says. “You’ve kept me here half an hour and I haven’t phoned yet.” When she pushes back from the bar, her sweatshirt rides up and I feel the satiny flesh at the top of her hip. Have I said she’s covered in one hundred percent pure silk? The underlying upholstery ain’t bad, either.

“Don’t call yet,” I says. I’ve figured out that all she’s wearing is the sweat suit. I flash on my apartment with the lights low, Garth Brooks on the stereo, a mess of sheets and pillows on the floor, and my head starts reeling. Sometimes she affects me that way. “You can call from the bank,” I says. “Where’s your car? They got one of those outside phones by the bank.”

“Mighty cold out there,” says Joe.

Maybe you see why I sometimes wonder if Joe is dumb or if he’s got a lot of hidden agendas.

“My car’s other side,” Lynn says but she’s kinda leaning against me in a way I find hopeful.

“I’ll drive you over,” I says. “My truck’s right in front. I’ll drive you over. With the heater on.”

“I can imagine,” she says. But she looks at me as if she’s seeing nights watching “Star Trek” with the twins, and Sunday dinners at her folks, and the day shift at the Donut Shack.

“You gotta coat?”

“Do I need a coat?” She asks.

“Not in my truck. You don’t need a coat in my truck.”

She laughs then. She’s got a big laugh. Maybe that’s what gets to me cause I’m beginning to see everything with a red tinge around it.

“Come on,” I says. “Night, Joe.”

“You don’t need to drive me,” she says as we go out the door.

“Come on,” I says. “It’s one of those drive up phones. You’ve got to drive up.” I open the door and she climbs in. I go round the other side and get in and lean over and kiss her. I feel the universe contracting—no Bargain Barn, no Michelle, no C of FC, no Kitchen, no bar, no parking lot. I get my hands under her sweat suit and my guess was right and I’m trying to pull up her top when The Kitchen door opens and there are voices and she stops trying to swallow my

tongue and gives me a look.

“I don’t think you want me to call Gina,” she says.

“Come home with me.”

“I can’t leave my car,” she says. But she’s running her hand up the inside of my leg.

“I’ll bring you back,” I says. “Christ, we can take your car if you want.”

She gives me a squeeze. “I’ll follow you,” she says, hopping out. “You got room in your garage?”

“Yeah,” I says, though George, the landlord’s brother’s got his Toyota all in pieces on one side and with the recycling cans and the garbage, there’s barely room for my truck. “Yeah,” I says again, cause I know she won’t leave her car out on the street where some busybody will see it and tell her Mom and cause problems about leaving the twins next time.

“Hey, hey, hey,” she says, and I understand the deep meaning of lust, at least. Then I put the truck in gear and go lurching out of The Kitchen’s lot with my whole life focused south of my navel.

Down the highway, I keep watching her lights in my mirror. Times like the one I’m telling you about I used to wonder why I didn’t marry Lynn. Or at least raise the subject with her. Back then I’d have said I’d checked out the gene pool: those twins were enough to scare Attila the Hun. But now, I think it was other things. She liked me sure, but I also knew she’d loved Buddy, the loathsome. And me, I liked her, I liked her a whole lot, but I didn’t love her or anyone else, really, though I’d gotten a glimpse of the possibilities one night at a high school dance. That was the night Jess Portinari sat crying in my truck trying to decide if she should marry Andre Simeone.

If she hadn’t, a whole lot might have been different, but she got married, and Andre became an almost war hero, and I learned that love’s not rational. Not even close. It comes up and hits you like water out of a pothole. There you are soaked, and there’s not a damn thing you can do if it happens to be muddy. Or dangerous. Or stupid. Or impossible. I learned about impossible long ago, and I know

about stupid now. But driving out of The Kitchen lot after Lynn, I'm thinking mostly immediate gratification with the fewest complications, which means it wasn't love—which has some of the same details, you bet, but a whole different floor plan.

I reach my street and park and throw up the garage door for Lynn and wave her in. I run the truck into the drive, squeezing its nose against the garage until the back end is off the side walk, step inside and pull down the door. It's dark and cold and I can smell the grease and oil from George's gutted Toyota and Lynn's saying, "What the hell you doing?" when I find her and pull her against me. There we are, heading for the point of no return against the trunk of her Ford, when the side door opens. Lotsa light, Lynn untangling, me working on various buttons and zippers, and George's standing there, shit-faced, saying, "Sorry, I couldn't get around your truck" and Lynn says, "I shoulda gone to the slots."

As soon as we're outside, I start telling her about the sexual merits of Red Gals in general and of herself, in particular; all of which she says she already knows. But she's willing to listen, and I've had enough brew to be persuasive. Upstairs in my apartment, I haul out the margarita mix I laid in last time Lynn stayed over, and she puts Mary Chapin Carpenter on my stereo. When I come out of the kitchen with a brew and a margarita, everything is dark, Carpenter's singing about passionate kisses, and Lynn calls, "Hey, hey, hey, Red Man," from the bedroom. I set down the drinks, hop out of my boots, and shuck my troubles with my Bargain Barn uniform.

## CHAPTER 2

I wake up around five as it's coming light. My head feels like my brain's gone solid, and I lie there thinking about density for a minute. Cement, lead, squares of shingles, bags of sand. Combined, in the case in point between my ears, with feathers, big, blood stained, sharp pointed turkey feathers like the ones that used to be left after Dad cleaned the Thanksgiving bird bought from the turkey farm. That's how my brain feels at the moment, heavy, but with lots of

sharp points floating through it. Then I hear Lynn breathing slow and steady, and I remember drinking a beer and a margarita at some point in the proceedings, or maybe it was beer and a tequila straight up. That was some time after the Mary Chapin Carpenter disk finished and before we got doing complicated, exciting stuff on the living room couch. As I stretch my legs, the creaking bed springs remind me of various night noises and pleasures, and I'm about to slide over and wake Lynn up, when one of those sharp points lands. There's Michelle and the C of FC and the Bargain Barn all after my ass.

So instead of starting in on a pleasant half hour, I study the ceiling for a bit and wonder if I'm going to like Seattle or Yuma or wherever I'm going. Then I know why I'm awake three hours before I need to get up. I slid out of the warm, ruffled blankets and head for the john: it's opening day.

My dad never had to set a clock in fishing season. Not once, though the alarm rang regular at 6 a.m. the rest of the year. He used to say the fish just called him. I understand that. The river's been calling me for several weeks now, not just the water alone or the fish, but the whole thing: early morning mist with the sunrise breaking through, a cold smell of water and earth, the whirl of a line running out, and a spinner winking in a pool where trout are rising. I'm thinking that I should of called Dad last night and asked did he want to go up the river. Probably he would of said "no", which is why I didn't—that and running into the Numero Uno Red Gal—but maybe he'd have liked to sit in the car. He does that sometimes now that his emphysema's gotten bad. He goes down to the shore and sits in the car with the windows open a crack and thinks about surf casting and tells anyone who is willing to listen how many flounders he used to catch and how good the blues were before they made a toilet out of the Sound and poisoned all the creeks with runoff.

He and Mom used to like surf casting a lot. I have some pictures of them, both young and good looking, standing in baggy, old fashioned swimsuits beside big surf poles. "That's real fishing," Dad says, and he gets this wistful look as if the young fellow with the

black hair and the faded t-shirt is still behind his eyes, trapped forever now by lungs getting brittle and by arteries clogging up like old pipes. It's an odd feeling to think that Dad and Mom, who I've known all my life, really live elsewhere, back in that unreachable foreign country, their youth.

I've got a lot of odd feelings this morning, which is what you get with tequila and all those crazy mixed drinks that alter the composition of your brain, solidifying some bits and putting others in flotation. But though I feel sand, lead, and feathers settling every time I move my head, I put on my thermals and my overalls. Then I shut the bedroom door and get on into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee for my thermos. While I'm waiting, I'm so thirsty I drink another Rolling Rock, and it's five-thirty by the time I write Lynn a note and carry my rod, waders, and tackle box down to the truck. Maybe it's the beer, but my stomach isn't feeling too good. I stand beside the garage, thinking it over, and then I stash my thermos in the truck and say the hell with it; I'll walk to the river and save the trout stream for tomorrow.

That's how come opening day I'm down on the river no more than six blocks from my apartment. The rain hasn't come; it's all hanging around in mist, and when couple of pickups pass me with guys heading further out, I regret my decision but don't feel like walking back. I cross the big intersection, empty except for a couple of heavy tractor-trailer trucks barreling through on their way to Providence, and reach the new park that's supposed to bring folks out to enjoy the river. What it'll mean will be more crap in the water and kids tearing up the benches at public expense, but at least the politicians left some gaps in the railing. I scramble on down the slope, holding my rod out to one side so I don't break the tip and using my tacklebox for balance.

This part of the river bank's rocky, with big ledges that start far back on the land and jut into the water, breaking up the flow and creating pools and shallows. I walk south with only the sound of the river running noisy over its stony bed. The old factory buildings on the west side are empty and quiet; the highway is muffled by the

slope. A few mallards drift on the swift current, and big, silent gulls float in and out of the mist. I feel the cold of the river through my waders before the sweet sound of the reel letting out line.

I take a few minutes to get the rhythm again, then suddenly there's just the river and calm and the spinner flashing below the surface, gliding carefree and deadly. After I've been there an hour maybe, I catch a brown trout—the state stocks them by the thousands. The brownie's a bit small, and since I don't feel like cleaning it, I take the hook out. The fish struggles slimy in my hand but goes still when it feels the river again. I hold it for a minute, watching the gills soaking in the oxygen laden water, then it dips to one side before regaining balance and slipping effortlessly into the stream. While I'm tying on another spinner, I think I could of brought the trout back for Lynn. I decide to keep the next one, but my hand is off or the fish are spooked or there's too much food cause that little brownie's the only one I catch.

By eight o'clock, the sun's behind the mist, and, though my feet and hands are frozen, I'm sweating in my thermals. My gut's about settled, too, and I'm beginning to think breakfast and coffee. I pack up my stuff, put on a pair of gloves to thaw my fingers, and climb up to the park. I'm standing by the fence, putting away some spinners I'd stuck on my vest, when I hear a rattle. First I think something on the highway, which is out of sight behind the new trees and shrubbery, but no. Here comes a woman rushing along with her head down, pushing a little fat faced kid in a baby stroller. She looks up and puts on the brakes just as she's about to run me over. Michelle's got plain brown eyes this morning, and she's as surprised as I am and no happier.

“Your box there's on the walk,” she says like she can't get by and this is holding up her life.

“You going to a fire?” I says.

“I got things to do,” she says, and she heels the stroller over at a 45 degree angle and starts by. I put out my hand to stop her.

“This is a good a time to talk,” I says. I'm wondering who the kid is and is it hers and whether this is something I can use to get

out from under.

“What’s to talk about? We’ve got an agreement.”

She starts working on her gum, and for the first time it strikes me that she’s stupid. Shrewd but stupid which is the worst combination cause it doesn’t give you flexibility. “What’s the matter with you,” I says. “You don’t like where you’re living? You want to wind up in Niantic?”

“I’ve got proof,” she says. “What have you got?”

Like I should have written her checks and kept the stubs. “We couldn’t have moved that much stuff without your knowing,” I says. “Anyone with half a brain will see that.”

“I wanted to be sure,” she says. “That’s what I’ll say. And what’ll you say? You say anything, you’re all finished. Arnie, too.”

“So why should I take the risk?” I says. “That’s all I’m telling you: no more.”

“I need the money,” she says. “I turn you in, I get a raise.”

“Maybe you get a raise, maybe you get fired. Morrissey will want a clean sweep.”

She gives a little smirk and that puts another idea in my head: Michelle plus Morrissey. This is worse and worse, cause if he’s having it off with her, she’ll turn me in sure.

“I got proof,” she says again.

The little kid’s restless. He’s got blond hair and brown eyes and he’s drooled a bit on his blue sweater. He pulls at one sleeve and then he starts chewing on a leather strap. The strap ends at the black purse as big as a back pack that’s stashed behind him. Michelle’s never without it; she won’t even walk across the warehouse without that damn bag.

“Yeah?” I says, and I reach over and whip it outa the kid’s grasp before either one can stop me. “Names and dates and invoice copies, maybe?”

“Give me that!” The kid’s cheeks get all red; he wrinkles up his face and starts high decibel yelling. Michelle starts, too. She’s got less imagination than my favorite Red Gal but a whole lot more venom. I open the flap and see a shit pile of stuff, wallet, makeup,

little plastic boxes for this and that. Probably has her werewolf eyes in one of them. She's grabbing for it, but I'm taller, and I keep pushing stuff around, which is hard with gloves on, and then I hear something crackle, and I turn away from her. While she's pounding on my back, I unzip a compartment and see papers—pink and yellow invoices, photocopies, a little notebook. I scoop them all out and start stuffing them into the pockets of my fishing vest. She's trying to get at my face and I'm keeping one elbow up, when she takes the stroller and runs it into my shins. The kid's hollering and wrestling around and my leg hurts like hell and I ask her what the fuck she thinks she's doing? She's screaming about her purse and her papers. I pat the purse—no more crackling and rustling—and hand it over.

Instead of saying “thanks”, she gets behind the stroller again and starts using it as a battering ram, screaming kid and all, which is crazy. Pure, pointless craziness. And I'm no better, because I'm caught against the rail and I stick out my fist to stop her and catch her off balance. When she falls, she tips over the stroller, the kid, the purse, the baby junk, and I see everything without any emotion but satisfaction until there's this bad thud. Which is her head hitting a bolt that's holding down one of the new benches. It hear it even with the kid wailing and the stroller wheels rotating and a truck shifting gear just over behind the knoll.

I go cold and hot at the same time and grab for the stroller. The kid, I guess it's a boy, is okay, though he's had all the noise scared out of him, and he's scraped his cheek. I can see the lymph oozing off the raw patch and, just for an instant, his big eyes are very close to mine. He doesn't say a word, just looks at me like he's some sort of automatic camera. Beyond the stroller, Michelle's lying with her eyes open and a funny expression on her face. She looks surprised, really, really surprised. She puts her hand on her chest and gasps, and I'm puzzled and relieved and figuring how we'll settle things, when she gives this funny noise like she's had the wind knocked out of her, only she hasn't, she's hit her head. There's some blood now and a shit smell and fluid darkening her legs. She's not moving at all, not even breathing, and I just go crazy. I grab my pole and I'm

through the opening and half way down the slope before I remember my tackle box. I scramble back up, half blind with sweat. By this time, the kid's started in crying and chewing on the leather strap again, but Michelle's still lying there surprised and motionless. I cut back down to the river, where I puke up that unwise a.m. Rolling Rock before I start running. I stumble over the ledges and splash through the shallows until my gut hurts so much that I have to stop.

I'm expecting witnesses and disaster. What I hear is the river rushing and gurgling. No one's following me. There are no shouts, no sirens, no eager, pursuing footsteps. The sun hasn't burned through down by the water yet, and with the trees starting to leaf out, I'm pretty well hidden. I tell myself to get a grip. To wash off my face. To walk down under the bridge and come up over the chain link fence on Water Street and go home like any other morning. I haven't seen a soul and who's to say I was ever near the park?

So I start along, telling myself at every step what I'm wishing was true: that I've been fishing along the river, that I caught a small brownie and let it go, that I've seen nothing unusual, that whatever happened up on the sidewalk—if anything happened up on the sidewalk—has nothing to do with me. And at every step, the papers in my pocket are shifting and rustling and telling me that I was up on the walk and that Michelle's dead—or maybe that she's not dead but even now is putting the finger on me—or that she's dying and I should of gone back, flagged a truck, gotten an ambulance. The kid'll be screaming his head off and maybe he'll get out of the stroller and fall in the river and I should go back. I actually stop and stand still, the shallow water running cold and fast around my waders, and it comes to me that I was happy an hour before. I thought I was hung over and bummed out. Now I realize I was happy. I realize I could have fished another hour, maybe caught another trout and taken it back. Lynn might still have been there, and I'd of fried the trout up for breakfast and we might of gone back in the sack for an hour before she left for the Donut Shack. That would of been happiness. Now I see that everything else, even the Bargain Barn and the Correctional Institute, even telling Mom and Dad, were just difficulties.

This is different, and, standing in the shadow of the bridge with the morning traffic starting to get heavy and the smell of diesel, I realize my life has changed beyond control.

So I go crazy again, which maybe is nature's own protection, cause I pick up my tackle box and my pole and I tell myself again I've been fishing right near the bridge. And when I see there's no sign of life above the bridge, either, I tell myself I was there the whole time.

I'm not sure I believe that, but I walk upstream anyway til I'm near my street and come out at the parking lot by the feed store. Since there's a truck out front, I walk around back. I'm expecting to see someone unloading big dusty bags of oats or chicken feed or shiny sacks of dog chow, but, though the door's wide open, nobody's on the loading dock. My heart is pounding away, my waders are beginning to rub my banged up knees, and I have to tell myself twice that I've just been fishing, just fishing, before I can walk around the loading dock and cross the road and the old rail line. When I get to Water Street, I loiter behind the electrical repair shop until a car pulls away from the curb, then I walk, as casually as I can, toward my house.

I'm coming back from the river where the fish weren't biting worth a damn and what does the State know about trout, anyway, because that brownie was hardly bigger than a minnow. I keep that in my mind along with the bridge and the idea of a spinner bright for a moment in its shadow and of the mist filling up the spaces between the railroad girders. I've got to think of that and not the sidewalk, cold and bare in the wind, or the odd noise Michelle made or the child, speechless and watchful, or the sound of rocks and dirt scattered by panic flight. I've got nothing to do with them. Nothing.

If I can only get back inside my apartment, it will be all right. I've just got to walk down the sidewalk with my tackle box and rod the way I walk dozens of days every year. And if old Claire Wilkins looks out and asks how did I do, I'll say "nothing worth keeping, but if I get lucky I'll bring you back a mess of trout." I say this over to myself, although I've barely enough breath to get the words out,

and then I repeat them, because they sound so strange. They're like words out of a different life and not the one I'm in now, the one that started as soon as I heard the bad thud, the bad thud which was the door between one life and another closing.

My truck's in the drive, and I'm behind it when Danny next door comes out and waves to his little girl. He doesn't see me and neither does his wife, Carmelita. That's all to the good, let me tell you. Danny's Chevy pulls out and bumps down over the sidewalk cause he's got it riding low, which he claims is style but which is really stupid when you get as much snow as we do. Bump, I hear him, then the screen door shutting. I slide around my truck, ease the side door of the garage. I put down my tackle box and pole and take off my waders. I leave everything there, though normally I take my stuff upstairs, since the garage isn't always locked. I cross to the house and use the back stairs. It's so quiet in my apartment, I wonder if Lynn's up and gone, and I kinda hope she has, because I don't know what to say to anyone and Lynn's known me long enough to notice how all my words are strange. But when I look through the bedroom door, she's lying in a big lump of covers with a pillow half over her face and seeing her gives me a shock. I got to stifle this urge to check her breathing and make sure she's all right. I stand there listening for bad noises, for gasps and thuds and queer little rasping sounds. Then I tell myself to use my brains: Lynn's asleep and nobody's seen me.

I stand there shaking—like the chance of escape is scarier than being caught for sure. Then I go into the bathroom ultra quiet and take off my overalls and hang them up behind the door. Everything else is soaked in sweat. I smell like the old Red Men's locker room with thirty guys whooping and dancing and snapping towels after a win over the Whips. I jam everything into the laundry bag, turn the hot on all the way, and step into the shower.

I don't know how long I'm in there. I stand with the water beating on my face and then on my back and then on my face again. When I finally turn off the tap, my feet have thawed out and Lynn's calling from the next room.

“Out in a minute,” I say. I wrap a towel around my waist and

open the door.

“Hey,” she says. She’s sitting up on the end of the bed with her sweatshirt on and a lot of nice leg showing. Normally, I’d make a pitch for cutting the Donut Shack, but I don’t trust myself at the moment with anything too intense.

“How you doing?” I says.

“I’m going to go home with money in my pocket,” she says.

“This sure is the right casino,” I say but my voice sounds feeble.

“You okay?” she says. “You’re looking kinda flushed.”

“My stomach’s a bit upset,” I says. “I think it was that marguerita.”

“Maybe the third one,” she says and comes over and puts her hand on my forehead. Instantly I’m so nervous I start sweating. “Yeah, you feel clammy. Maybe you should go back to bed.”

“Naw, I just got up,” I says and I expect her to say, ‘Liar, you’ve been up for hours,’ but all she says is, “I didn’t hear a thing until the water running.” I take a deep breath and give her a hug and go get a shirt on.

“You want breakfast? I’ll put on coffee,” I says.

“Yeah. Got any eggs? I’m not supposed to have too many eggs,” she says.

“I think so. I think there’s some eggs.”

She makes a face and wanders out to the kitchen to check the fridge. I’m getting into a clean pair of brown Bargain Barn jeans for work when I remember the note. I just about a hemorrhage at the stupidity of it, and I’m making up some story about getting up and going back to bed when I go into the kitchen and see she’s got her head in the fridge.

“There’s bacon,” I say as I go to grab the note.

“What the hell’s this?” she says. “Come here and look at this.”

She looks around and I step in front of the table, all the time asking myself did she read the message? There’s a strong smell of old hamburger from the fridge. “I’ll put it out,” I says, and I grab the package which is dried up and stained, stained with blood, which makes me flash on the sidewalk and starts my stomach twitching

again.

“Phew,” she says.

“The bacon’s okay,” I says. I’m still thinking, did she read the note, did she read the note?

“I’ll make eggs,” she says. “You wanna egg?”

“Just one,” I says. I don’t want an egg. I don’t want to eat, period, but Lynn always makes me eggs, and I see that everything has to be as always. Normal: it’s a kind of magic. If everything looks normal, everything will be normal. I grab the note as I go by and wrap it around the hamburger and take both out to the cans, going down the splintery back steps cautious in my bare feet. I drop the hamburger in and the note, too, then I think of searches and the show I just saw with the FBI going through some guy’s garbage week after week. I rummage around, find the note, tear it in half and in half again, drop the pieces in the can. I think better of that as soon as I’ve done it, so I have to start picking up the bits and putting them in my pocket. I’ve got the serious shakes, and my head’s in orbit. I can still make out my handwriting on all those little pieces of paper; all those little pieces of paper saying, “Going fishing”, “Going fishing”, “Going fishing”.

I hear the door open behind me. “Eggs are ready,” Lynn calls. She’s added her sweat pants and her sneakers. “You okay?”

I’m clinging to the cold, bashed up metal sides of the trashcan. I let the last little piece of paper go and straighten up. I shake my head. “I just feel kinda sick,” I says.

Lynn starts down the stairs.

“No, I’m okay now. Maybe that flu that’s around, I don’t know.” And for a moment I let myself think, I’m feverish, it’s the flu, I’ve been in bed and just gotten up. I keep thinking that until I get upstairs and look at the egg on my plate and smell the toast and feel the shock wave between what is and what might have been and realize that my only chance is to be normal and natural even if I’ve forgotten how.

### CHAPTER 3

Lynn has to be at the Donut Shack by 9:30, and though normally I'd as soon spend time with her as anyone, I'm real glad to see her leave. I go down to open the garage door, see my waders, and worry she'll notice them dripping in the corner. That's what I mean by I've stopped being normal. It's like everything comes with a hidden meaning. I have to keep figuring out which life I'm in and whether it's okay for there to be waders in the garage and a pool of water under them and what I'll say to the Red Gal if she notices.

She doesn't, which brings me to something else I don't understand right away but catch onto only gradually: most people don't notice. I guess it's hard enough keeping one life straight without considering all the alternatives, but most people only see what they're expecting to see. Standing waving to the Red Gal outside the garage, I don't know that, so what I do is run inside and get paper towels and dry off the waders and mop up the puddle on the garage floor like some ditz in a detergent commercial. I'm swearing and breakfast is turning over, and I'm beginning to see how much has to be changed for me to have spent the morning in bed and never gone fishing.

When I'm finished, I go in and turn on the news but it's too early for anything. Maybe Michelle is okay, after all, and maybe she'll be smart and say she tripped. Or maybe there's already a police car pulling up. I'm so nervous I can almost hear the feet on the stairs. Although I know it's not cool at all, I want to get in my truck and drive right down to the park and see what's happening.

I make myself wash up the dishes, instead, and put them away. Not exactly normal behavior, but normal is way beyond me. What I've definitely got to do is get to the Bargain Barn on time, which means eleven for the start of our shift. And when Timmy asks how the fish were, I got to be ready to give him a wink and say how I had a tough night and how I'm hoping to get out this evening. I'll maybe put my rod in the cab, too, and stop on the way home, though I'm pretty sure now that I don't want to be anywhere near the river.

I get my Bargain Barn badge, comb my hair, and fart around until

I'm almost late. At the last minute, I gotta go around by the park. All the way, my mind's busy rearranging things. I've almost got myself convinced it's a normal day and I'm driving to work, when I see the cop cars. There's two of them and they're not hanging at the Donut Shack with their coffees and cigarettes, and they're not up watching the road work north of the new intersection. They're the front men for a big van and some other cars that are pulled onto the grass. I slow down enough to see a loose square of yellow police tape and a sort of canvas screen and a lot of activity right at the edge of the park. Everything goes black for a second and then I'm past it and it's all true: there is no alternate life, just the one I'm in, and there's no way to get back to the river and to do it all again differently.

I expect to see troopers in the Bargain Barn lot, too, but, of course, they don't come til later. Which gives me time to get calmed down a bit and think things over. When I first get there, of course, I'm in a panic. I have to stand by my truck for a minute, thinking, be calm, be calm, everything's normal. But I don't feel real, never mind normal, til Timmy starts hollering from half way across the lot. He'd been at the stream and caught three beauties—the liar. Probably none of them bigger than my brownie, and I want to say that, but instead, I says, "I got wasted last night," and give him a wink. "I'm going to try the stream after work."

"It'll be S.R.O.," he says. Timmy's tall, taller than me, and he'd be good looking if he'd spring for a haircut and wash oftener than once a week. He's got these round blue eyes and little wire glasses that make him look more alert than he really is. "Christ, half the town was there."

"You're lucky you got anything," I says, "with all the competition."

"It's skill," he says, "I've got the touch. Like you, you've got it for other things." And he laughs and I laugh, too, and we walk in with everyday cool. Lou's leaving as we're punching in, and we stop to tease her for a few minutes, with her giving it back in Spanish and English combined. Lou's a Peruvian gal with a new green card who works the early morning shift. She's dark and built low

to the ground like Danny's Chevy, but that's a bad thought, cause I see the truck and the garage and walking back from the river where I haven't been. I feel myself stop smiling, and Lou says, "You okay, Jeff?" cause she's a nice gal and knows we don't mean any harm.

"He's hung over," says Timmy.

She says something in Spanish, and I says it's maybe the flu, before Earl yells that her husband is waiting outside with the produce truck. 'Adios' to Lou. I start on orders from the Norwich branch store, while Timmy and Earl lie about their fish. It's past noon before Morrissey comes bustling back to where the Hitachi VCR's are stored. Timmy's been sneaking a smoke, and I figure Morrissey'll have a shitfit, but he doesn't even notice the Marlboro haze mixing with the usual new metal, formaldehyde, and synthetics smell.

"You seen Michelle?"

"Naw," I says. "Isn't she at the desk?"

He's not pleased.

"I punched in on time," I says. "I've been getting orders ready."

"What about you, Longdon?" he asks Timmy. "You seen Michelle?"

He shakes his head and Morrissey barrels away. "Damn," Timmy says. "She's out and we didn't even know. We coulda blown off the whole morning."

"And who'da punched you in?" I says. Timmy doesn't think more than one step ahead even if he is a college student. Me, I'm always looking down the road. Right now, I'm figuring Morrissey will piss around asking everybody in the warehouse, like we're going to know where Michelle is, then he'll call and pretty soon we'll have the cops. That's just what happens. Round about 1:30, Morrissey's back with a couple of troopers. One's dark with a yellow, kinda sunken face. He looks like he's got acid indigestion as a permanent thing and he's chewing on an unlit cigarette. He has this notebook where he's writing down everybody's name and address and did we ever see Michelle outside of work and all this crap.

The other one's Lieutenant Stankus. Now I know him so well I can even tell you which teeth are capped and how often he gets his

hair cut. At that time, all I see is this big, smooth faced blond guy who doesn't look so much grown as machine tooled. He's all business and about as warm as a ball bearing. I can tell right away he's the boss and the brain and the one to watch out for.

"Water Street?" he says and he looks at his partner who's writing this down without any expression.

"Seventeen," I says. "It's a two family." Like he's interested in my living arrangements and not in the fact that I'm only blocks from the park. I feel sweat running down my back.

"Convenient for the river," he says. I know he's not thinking about fish. "Get out fishing much?"

"Yeah," I says. "I'm hoping to get out tonight."

"Not this morning?" he asks.

"Naw. I've had this upset stomach," I says, and I look at the assistant who gives a little grunt. I'm expecting more, but he just nods and takes my phone number and moves on to Timmy, who's stupid enough to want to know why they're asking. Mr. Machine Tool gets a chance to shoot him down, and I go back to work. I'm checking off another order, when I remember that all Michelle's notes and invoice copies are still in my fishing vest. My heart stops, bang, like it's on a pneumatic brake, and then it starts again so fast I'm all over sweat. I want to say I'm sick and bug off home and have a bonfire. I know that's craziness, but I don't get hold of myself til Timmy comes over to bitch about the troopers.

Course no one gets much done even after law enforcement leaves. Little knots of guys are talking behind the shelves all over the Barn. Out on the loading dock, they're asking the drivers if they've heard anything and do they remember Michelle, the gal with the pink tinged eyes who used to check the invoices. I clam up, seeing I'm barely supposed to have known her, but I'm listening a lot, cause anything I learn is maybe something that can help me.

Pathetic, huh? I didn't realize the way the universe is rigged for guys like me. It's like the trout don't know there's a string and a hook attached to the spinner. I see that's the way life is: if it's after you, you may get some slack or you may not, but the hook's always

there and sooner or later you'll get pulled up short. I was still on the slack then and thinking all the time. I learned some things, too. Like Earl had actually gone out bowling with werewolf eyes. I flash on Friendly Bowl: Michelle is carrying the big black purse where my life is crackling and rustling among the invoices and Earl—beard and flannel shirt and Pearl Jam hair—is toting two bowling balls in those new pastel colors. I can hardly believe it. Earl's the quietest guy in the Barn, yet he's got this secret life where he dates werewolves and takes them bowling. I want to lean over and tell him everything, like we've got this secret in common, like he'd understand everything.

Then I swallow hard because he's going on about her friends in Providence. "She ran with a rough crowd," he's saying now. "You know what I mean?" Earl's not big on details. He gives you the frame work; you gotta put on the siding.

"What sorta rough crowd?" I says.

"There's this guy one night when I go to pick her up. Vito's his name or something like that. Italian name." He pauses and we're all waiting.

"So what, he's Italian?" says Tony, who's Italian-Polish.

"He has a big car," Earl says, not wanting to give offense, "and Michelle tells me she never has to worry, because Vito is her friend. See, he's something in the rackets. I don't know what. Collects from restaurants, maybe, cause Michelle says he takes her to all the nice places."

We're impressed by this. As much by the fact Earl's put more than four words together, as by this evidence that Michelle, too, had another life. "Life After The Bargain Barn" goes through my mind, cause I'm beginning to feel silly and feverish. I'm in the most trouble I've ever been in, and when I'm not feeling so sick I want to die, I'm cracking up. Then I remember the invoices. I see the machine-tooled lieutenant opening the door to my apartment and putting one of his clean, smooth hands into the pocket of my fishing vest and pulling out disaster.

Meanwhile, the others get busy pumping Earl, and Mike men-

tions he'd seen Michelle around town with a red haired guy. We chew on that until someone notices it's time for the local news, and we hook an extension cord into a Sony reject. We're not supposed to run the stock, but when Morrissey comes over all he does is bitch about the picture.

Earl bangs on the box, bringing up the governor shaking hands on a tax break with some executive extortionist. After the commercials, we're promised "Woman found dead in River Trail Park" like it's some treat. Earl says, "Oh, shit," and the others all start talking—of course, they didn't already know. I can't say a thing; the commercials are just a blur. You know the way people say something must be true because they've seen it on tv? That's how I feel. It's like I could almost have forgotten the whole thing; even after the cops came, I'd had hopes she'd just been hurt. Then I hear the news on tv and it's suddenly official.

When our local Action Team comes back on, we've got this smart looking reporter who acts like she's been electrified. She's got a bright red coat on and a scarf and she's holding a mike like a black ice cream cone, licorice flavor, maybe. This is her big moment with a real corpse in the background, and she's so excited I think she's maybe going to take a bite right out of the mike and short the circuit and ruin her teeth.

One part of me sees that and wants to laugh. The other part smells exhaust fumes and Michelle's body and feels the stiff wind and the cold, hard railing of just before. Just after is lying behind the tv reporter. They've got the area roped off like it's some kind of shrine, and there's a green tarp over Michelle. It kinda bothers me that they've left her lying on the walk. The stroller is there, too, tipped on one side, so I guess the kid tried to climb out after all. Lots of police and technical people are walking around, plus tv reporters trailed by big guys shouldering cameras.

"...shock to the community," the Action reporter says, then she's shoving the black, fuzzy mike in a trooper's face, and he's basically saying, "no comment". The camera swings away like it's got a mind of its own and peers down the slope. I break a sweat, thinking

footprints and evidence. In the voice over, the trooper mentions “no witnesses at this time”, which gets my breath back. “We’re asking the community to come forward,” the Action reporter says in those low, hollow tones tv people get when they’re being concerned and serious.

I’m hoping they’ll tell us more, but they don’t know much. Michelle’s dead, the kid’s okay, and we’ll have interviews with the families on the late night show. Morrissey gets up and switches off the set. He wants us to go back to work but his power cord’s so frayed, he doesn’t have the energy to say so. I wonder about him and Michelle for a moment and whether he’s going to wind up taking some heat. Earl’s pissing and moaning about having gone out with her—he’s just understood the troopers will be back to question him sure. Timmy’s saying the red-haired guy must be the one, and Morrissey is still standing there looking like last winter’s snow.

Maybe he’d of said something and maybe I would of—it was that kind of moment—but the driver from the Norwich store arrived and saved my ass. He’s standing on the loading dock yelling about his order and why the hell are we fucking with his schedule, typical driver’s crap. I tell him where he can go and then where the order is. Like all he had to do was ask, cause it’s all ready for him and has been since before the troopers came. Of course, by now the driver’s got to know everything, so I tell him what we saw on tv. There’s half a dozen others willing to fill in the rest with what they know and don’t know, too. I hadn’t realized Timmy was so creative; that’s maybe how he’s making it through college when he’s barely got sense enough to find his way between the Sonys and the Akais.

Anyway, I say enough not to look odd and no more. I tell myself I got to make it through the shift and start watching the clock big time. The dial’s like a guy with a bad hip. The second hand hitches from one dot to the next until the minute hand takes pity on it and hops to the next number. By quitting time, I’m about crazy between watching that damn clock and thinking about the invoices in my fishing vest, the troopers coming back, and the late night news show.

For one thing, I know Mom will call as soon as the Bargain

Barn is mentioned or maybe before, since it happened near where I live. That's the kind of thing will get her fussed. I'll have to say how Water Street is a safe neighborhood though, no, it's not as safe as hers and Dad's. They live out on the other side of town where the lots are bigger and the houses are all single family. They have a big field next to them and the community college, making it one of the nicer parts of this deadass town. Mom gets it in her head periodically that I should come home and live for a spell to save up money so I can get out of renting once and for all. Lucky my Dad is all for having me "be independent" as he puts it; I encourage that. I'm not bothered by renting except for the money involved, and going home would mean giving up nights with the *numero uno* Red Gal and certain other things.

Now, of course, I'm really thankful I'm not living at home. I may get by lying to Mom on the phone but never in person. And it would be worse for them if I got caught there. You know how the news is; it would be like it was their fault, because I was still living at home and all that. I think again about Seattle or L.A. or Chicago or somewhere. And soon. But not too soon. A month maybe. I'm wondering if a month is too soon, when Timmy comes and says he and Earl're going to stop at the Little River. I find myself saying my rod's in the truck, and I've got no choice but to follow them as soon's we're punched out.

We're on the river til dark. A couple of other guys leave just as we arrive, so we've got room to pull Earl's truck and mine and Timmy's junker Chevy in by a farm gate. Right there the river's not much bigger than a good sized stream, but it's swift and carries a lot of water. The fields one side belong to a sheep farm and several dozen woolies with bare faces and yellow snake eyes are tanking up on grass. Some have new lambs with them, light and frisky looking without their mother's thick coats.

The farmer's got an electric fence strung up for them, so we work the other side, climbing over big fallen trees and looking for good spots on the muddy bank. We stopped at the package store

on the way, and I've had a couple brews to take the edge off. I'm basically just going through the motions, which the fish must know cause I don't get even a nibble. Timmy's the only lucky one; I guess Earl, like me, has got things on his mind. Finally, the light starts to go, and I climb back onto the road to try my luck casting off the bridge on the sheep farm side. The sun's already behind the dark hills, but overhead the clouds are pink and the west is pink, too, and the stream is reflecting pink all through the little marsh and the darkening pasture. I wish with all my heart it was yesterday, though I know that yesterday I would of just said it was a nice night. I wouldn't have had any sense that here is something important, something I could lose, something I've already lost.

Minutes later the stream goes dark, the April night that's been turning cool goes cold, and we pack it in. First, though, we gotta sit on the back end of Earl's truck to finish off the beer. Earl and me, we're pretty quiet, but Timmy talks enough for all three of us. He's got the touch with trout, he's got a paper due, his chemistry course's a ball buster, etc. etc. Finally, Earl says he's hungry, which is the first sensible thing I've heard in half an hour. Since Timmy's paper's due the next day, he goes home to eat cold pizza and write. Earl and me wind up together at the country store, ordering meatball grinders just so's we don't have to face our own apartments. We sit outside on the store porch and work our way through big soft rolls with meatballs and red sauce. I'm glad it's Earl cause I don't feel like I have to talk.

When we're almost done eating, he says, "They're going to question me again, aren't they?"

"I guess so," I says. "Maybe. They may find who did it quick."

"I hate talking to cops," he says.

"You'll need an alibi," I says, "for—this morning." I can feel my gut tighten. I'd almost mentioned a time. Earl does that to you. He never asks questions but you're tempted to tell him things just the same.

He doesn't say anything for a minute. Earl's thought processes are slow but sound. "The pisser is I was on the river," he says.

I feel myself getting nervous. The big silence Earl carries around with him is suggesting bad things. “So was half the town. Timmy said.”

“Naw, I mean the river through town.”

“Yeah? See anyone?”

“That’s just it. I went early. It was pretty quiet. A few people out, that’s all.”

There’s no way to ask, “Did you see me?” so I don’t say nothing and try to keep a grip until Earl gets ready to say whatever it is he wants to say.

“I was pretty far downstream,” he says at last.

“By the trout hatchery?” I asks, forgetting Earl lives north of town.

“Naw, not that far. Above the bridge.”

“Well,” I says, “the park’s below the bridge. You weren’t down by the park, were you?”

Earl takes so long to answer that in the normal course of things I’d of fallen asleep.

“Not til later,” he says. “I was going along, you know, trying some of the pools when I heard the sirens. I didn’t want to get mixed up with anything.”

“Anyone see you?” I asks again.

He shrugs. He looks worried and miserable—about like I feel. “I don’t know. Who’s to say it was someone from the river?”

“No one at all,” I says. This is an idea I definitely do not want to plant in his mind, cause Earl holds an idea like superglue. “But still, it might be better if someone saw you fishing.”

“That’s what’s bugging me,” he says. “I’m coming down stream, right, and I see this guy going up the bank.”

“Well, then,” I said, “they’ll find him. You heard them asking for people to come forward.”

“What’s bugging me,” Earl says, “is I don’t think he noticed me. It was foggy as hell this morning and he was in a hurry.”

“Where was this?” My mouth’s gone dry right down my throat.

“You know where the fence is broke by the feed store?”

“Is there an opening there?” I says. “I’ll have to remember that.”

“Yeah,” he says.

“Anyone you know? You could call him.”

“Naw,” Earl says.

“Know him again?” I asks.

He shrugs and gives me a look. “Naw,” he says, “I didn’t see his face. Too foggy.”

“Tough,” I says.

“Yeah,” he says now, “cause first I thought it was you. If it’d been you, I sure wouldn’t have to worry so much.”



































































