

No Body

A Nero Wolfe Mystery

by

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Written 1997 Glenn Dixon

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One

Nero Wolfe, the famous fat detective of Manhattan, sits in his oversized chair enjoying a good cigar and talking to his sidekick: me, Archie Goodwin.

"Archie, I can't think of anything better than this Pantella 8 after gobbling down a gourmet meal. Its flavor and texture are exquisite."

"You're right, Nero. And the price is palatable, too."

"Yes indeed, Archie, and what do you think of the aroma?"

"It stinks." I said, not to Nero, whom I have never called Nero and never will. I was talking to Anders Gessel who was showing me, on his artist's drawing board, a Sunday comic style layout of me and Wolfe in our office. The layout was a sketch, in black and white ink, no color, and the drawing board was in a tenth floor office of a glass skyscraper that included the second largest advertising agency on Madison Avenue.

Gessel, with a slick face and slick pony tail down the back of his slick neck and clothes, adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses and said,

"Well, I know it might not suit you at first, but think of the possibilities. Cigars are hot right now, and lots of celebrities would jump at the chance to endorse them. It would certainly add an aura of sophistication to Mr. Wolfe's image."

"Look, Mr. Gessel, I'll be easy on you because we've just met. Mr. Wolfe doesn't endorse products: strike one. He doesn't smoke, and I haven't for years: strike two. You've made my nose too pointed: strike three."

"Of course, you and Mr. Wolfe would approve anything we do. Just because he doesn't smoke doesn't mean he can't endorse cigars. You'll find that I'm very tenacious with an idea once I have it, Archie."

"You can call me Mr. Goodwin, and you just don't get it, do you? Mr. Wolfe doesn't gobble his food, he savors it: strike four. I don't talk like that: strike five. I'm nobody's sidekick, including Mr. Wolfe: strike six. And Mr. Wolfe's opinion of advertising people puts you out of the game. Add that to the fact that I'm starting to dislike you, and you're out of the ballpark. Forget it, not a chance. I'd say nice try but it isn't even that."

Gessel looked at me a little oddly. My reason for being in the building had nothing to do with him, anyway. I had made an appointment to meet with George Rottfeld, who David Greeb of the

Times had called the Wall Street Whiz Kid, and who Rachel Tamms of the social page had named to her top ten most eligible bachelor list. The meeting was at ten on the twelfth floor of the agency, where Rottfeld happened to be a member of the board. At last count, Rottfeld was on the boards of two major corporations and two up-and-coming ones. Wall Street has its share of flash-in-the-pan kids, but Rottfeld seemed to be the real thing. He knew when a wave was coming and could ride the crest, but he also knew when to hunker down and play his cards close to his chest. At age thirty-four he had made more money than Steinbrenner could even dream about, and was still going strong. Gessel, a Vice President of the advertising agency, was on the board as well, so had found out about my appointment with Rottfeld. Gessel had taken advantage of my appearance to “put together a little idea I had”, and had asked the agency’s receptionist to send me to the tenth floor first.

Gessel tried a few more angles, but I had turned him off. Outside the office I gave Gessel’s secretary a nod and a look that said, I hope, that even though I didn’t approve of her boss, she was certainly okay with me. I didn’t want Gessel to collar me waiting for the elevator so I took the stairs, two at a time, to the twelfth floor. Gessel didn’t try to follow.

I was at the office building because my desk was temporarily unavailable. So was Wolfe’s. My desk, and other items in the office on the ground floor of Wolfe’s brownstone on West 35th street, had sustained some damage in the Skinner case, and were out being repaired and refinished. When the workmen came to haul the desk out, Wolfe had looked around and determined that the entire ground floor needed revamping, and had sent his desk out with the same men. Since then, the brownstone has seen a lot of traffic in the form of carpenters, floor finishers, painters, and others. I wouldn’t have minded it too much-- a lot of things, especially the dining room table, had seen their share of wear and tear-- but Wolfe left it to me to supervise and keep an eye on the work, and that had been more than a full-time job.

So I was looking for a change of pace when Rottfeld’s secretary called for an appointment. Normally we would have had Rottfeld come to the brownstone for the appointment because Wolfe will not leave his abode on business, and he likes to meet and size up any potential customers before he signs up to any real work. Wolfe likes his home, with its ten thousand or so orchids that he tends every weekday from nine to eleven in the morning and from four to six in the afternoon in the greenhouse on the roof. He likes his office, now torn up, but normally the home to his books and desk and custom-made chair and three-foot world globe in the corner. He especially likes his feed-bag, prepared in the form of gourmet meals by Fritz Brenner, Wolfe’s personal chef, and certainly one of the greatest cooks in Manhattan. Wolfe shows his appreciation for Fritz’s cooking by keeping a seventh of a ton of it tucked under his hide.

Wolfe also likes his work: being the greatest detective in New York, maybe the world, with a little help from me. He likes his work, but doesn't like it to interfere with the other things he likes better, like paying income taxes, so sometimes he needs motivation. The motivation is often provided by me, and also by the fact that it now takes about a half million dollars a year to maintain the brownstone, Fritz's and my salaries, and the orchids on the roof- tended full-time by Theodore Horstmann, who also doesn't come cheap. Adding the bill for the renovations means our upkeep would be a lulu for the year, and we had just gone through January without collecting any fees worth mentioning. Any business from a Wall Street tycoon would be welcome.

So as I ascended to the twelfth floor of the advertising building I wasn't too sore, even though I'd been held up by Gessel. Wolfe was worried that I would take a case 'not suited to our talents' so I had promised him I would get his approval by telephone before I signed up to anything.

Emerging from the stairs, I was confronted by a black-and-white lady with a two-foot nose and bright red curlers in her canary yellow hair. It was a wall-size advertisement for some computer gizmo, set up in front of the elevators to give some sort of shock, I suppose. I would have made a note to never buy whatever was being advertised if I had not been in too much of a hurry to figure out what it was. I was three minutes late for my appointment, and even though I wasn't too upset I don't like to be late to anything. I muttered "Okay, so I'm late. It happens." to myself as I stepped to the desk at the right.

The fellow at the twelfth floor receptionist's desk looked helpful, and recognized the name. "Yes sir, Mr. Goodwin, Mr. Rottfeld is expecting you in his office. Right this way." His voice was the same as the one who had made the appointment: Rottfeld's secretary.

He took me down a broad carpeted hallway that was lined with cherry wood and pictures of smaller advertisements along the same lines as the one by the elevators, and showed me through the double door at the end, into the anti-room.

Maybe you thought I meant anteroom, or perhaps something else. But anti-room was the only name I could think of right off the bat. I've been in lots of business hives, with their share of chrome and carpet and polished wood. I've seen offices decorated in anything from Victorian to Rococo Revival to Modern figure-me-out. But this room was something I had never encountered before. It was fairly large; large enough that you couldn't take it in at a glance, but not the biggest room I've ever seen. What set it apart from anything I'd seen were two things that you noticed as soon as you entered. The first item, dominating the room, was a large fireplace with a carved stone mantel embedded in the wall between two fully draped windows on the far side. Even though I generally don't like fireplaces, I was drawn automatically to it as soon as I entered, and went to ex-

amine it. It was the real thing, with pine logs burning brightly behind a brass chain-mail screen, and smoke rising merrily up the flue to who-knows-where above. There was no glass separating the fire from the room, and there were cinders on the tile floor in front. A pop from one of the logs scattered a few more sparks as I approached, making me wonder how in the world they swung the fire inspection.

The second item was the feeling the room gave you. Maybe Wolfe could find a name for the feeling, his vocabulary being what it is, but I sure couldn't. The atmosphere engulfed me as soon as I entered, and it was not caused by any one thing in the room--though the fireplace, and the smell of the smoke, so unexpected in a glass high-rise, did more than it's share. Everything: the furniture, the carved table in the corner, the subdued lighting, and the quiet punctuated by the fire crackling combined to give one a feeling that I could only describe as a combination of the blues and depression wrapped up in a package delivered with a comfortable chair, and an understanding smile and pat from your favorite aunt.

"Mr. Goodwin? Thank you for coming." A soft voice broke through the haze. I had been staring at the fire, not noticing the two men sitting in wingback chairs that faced the mantel. That embarrassed me. I like to feel like I'm in control of me, and it isn't in my job description for my brain to take a sidetrack without telling me first.

The voice belonged to Rottfeld, who I recognized from pictures I had seen. He was of medium stature, with all his short brown hair still intact, and fine features molded into a pleasant looking face. Not smug, but content. He was wearing brown corduroy pants, a red flannel shirt and sandals. A little unusual for the office, maybe, but the rules had changed over the years and besides, someone in Rottfeld's position could make his own rules. The fireplace certainly showed that. The pockets under his eyes, however, showed he had lost sleep, and his color was off a little. He put the book he had been reading on the small table next to him: *Portrait of a Lady* by James. I smiled and replied,

"Mr. Rottfeld? I'm sorry I'm late."

"It's okay. It happens." Which is just what I muttered to myself coming in, so I liked him right off.

"This is quite an office." I looked around as I said it, and took in some other things, notably the lack of a desk of any kind. It was just filled with comfortable chairs, and tables with lamps. Paintings covered a few of the walls, but most were bare. I'm no art expert, but the paintings, or at least their frames, looked expensive. There were a couple of large rugs on a hardwood floor. Not the Persian kind like Wolfe prefers, but one hooked with roses and light green leaves, and one that was

a rag-tied spiral. We had had one like it, not nearly as big, in our hall back home in Ohio when I was a kid.

“I like it. It is my refuge from the storm.” Rottfeld placed a slight emphasis on the word ‘storm’ and said it with a wry smile. Rottfeld continued, indicating the man to his right,

“This is Manny Marley, one of my attorneys. He’s here to take care of some preliminaries.”

Marley stood, about six feet even, and we exchanged greetings. Rottfeld remained seated. Marley’s accent and the face, as dark as I’d seen in a long time, said Jamaican, and the suit said Dreyfer’s on Fifth Avenue, at least a grand. Marley was pleasant enough but was all business, producing from his briefcase a triplicate form.

“This is a non-disclosure agreement, Mr. Goodwin. I’m sure you’ve seen these. As soon as we execute it, we can proceed.”

“You can execute it, all right.” I said with my best smile, and a palm turned upward. “As in tear it up. I don’t sign anything without Mr. Wolfe’s permission. Either you trust me and we talk without a signed paper, or we enjoy the fire a little longer and part company.”

“I’m afraid that won’t do. I’m sure that normally your professional discretion is more than sufficient for most circumstances, but if information we have were to fall into the wrong hands, it would be very costly and devastating.”

“Well, I’m sorry then. Let me watch the fire, and I’ll go. I’ll watch for any wrong hands on the way out.” I turned to Rottfeld. “Nice fireplace. How did you get it in here?”

“I’ve always liked fires,” he said. “It wasn’t easy, but I have a friend, a business associate actually, who can really get things done.” Rottfeld turned to Marley. “Manny, we’ll forgo the agreement for now. Mr. Goodwin’s reputation would not be what it is if he were not trustworthy.”

I liked Rottfeld even more. He was dealing with me directly, instead of just a hired hand of Wolfe’s, and had taken the trouble to find out how we worked, and who I was. Rottfeld got up, took the book from the table and placed it into a bookshelf between the fireplace and the window. Then he walked to the fireplace, to the right side where there was an ornate brass stand that contained the fireplace tools. He took the poker from the stand, drew back the screen using a pull-chain at the side, and fussed with the logs to get the fire going better. Doing it, he looked more like a Canadian fishing guide than a tycoon. As he replaced the poker, I noticed that it, too, was a work of art. Of fine brass and silver, engraved like some of the Japanese swords I had seen in museums. Rottfeld then took a matching broom from the stand and swept the cinders on the tile back into the firebox. Closing the screen, Rottfeld returned to his chair and I noticed that this time it was Marley who was staring at the fire.

Marley came out of it and put up a fuss on the paperwork, but we all knew that topic was decided, and he eventually gave it up.

Taking an offered seat that faced both them and the fireplace, I pulled out my notebook and waited for Rottfeld to clue me in. He sat for a moment, then started.

“For about a year now, Mr. Goodwin, I have been trying to set up a new corporation with people who I think are the best in their respective areas. Mr. Marley said certain information was confidential. Certainly the fact that I’m trying to do this has been the subject of rumors, but we’ve really managed fairly well to keep it secret. The negotiations have gone pretty well. Better than expected, really, until just recently. I’ve had trouble lining up the manufacturing end of things. There are many good manufacturing people out there, but one man is better than all of them. His name is Chuck Orr. His strength is his ability to cut through crap and get things done.”

A smile crossed Rottfeld’s lips, and he continued,

“He’s the one who got me my fireplace and this furniture. I don’t know how he did it. I’m not even sure I want to know. But he gave it to me for my birthday four months ago.”

Rottfeld leaned forward, and became animated.

“You will soon meet him because I’ve asked him to come. Then you will understand, Mr. Goodwin. He is a remarkable man. But like so many of us, his biggest strength is his biggest weakness, too. He is very stubborn, and negotiations with him have been hard. They would have been impossible if it were not for his wife, Carol. She was his secretary before he married her, and she has helped us in the negotiations.”

Rottfeld sat back, looked at the fire, and mused,

“She’s more than a secretary, really. She knows how to . . . um . . . ‘channel’ Chucks energy; how to make him see the light. And she has other talents as well. She has no title, but I’m planning to make her a senior officer in the corporation if we pull it off. We are at a very critical juncture, and time is of the essence.”

I looked up, because he had stopped talking. I expected Rottfeld to be looking at the fire, but he was looking at me, expecting a response. So I obliged,

“They sound like an interesting couple. I look forward to meeting them.”

“You won’t meet Carol. That’s our problem. She disappeared two days ago and no one knows where she is. Unless we find her today, or possibly tomorrow, I’m afraid things will get unmanageable. She couldn’t have disappeared at a worse time.”

Two days is not much time to find someone who has disappeared. It all depends on the circumstances, and how much the instigator, whether it is the disappearer or the disapparee, wants the situation to continue. I asked,

“What information do you have?”

“Not much. She has gone off before, whenever there was . . . um . . . a tiff between Chuck and her. They are both very . . . um . . . high-spirited.”

That was bad news. Wolfe won't get within a country mile of a marriage problem, and even though this one was pretty much up to me, I had to get Wolfe to sign up to it, and I didn't like it, either. I asked,

“Have the police been notified?”

“No. Yesterday we decided to wait and see, and calling you was the first action we have taken.”

I closed my notebook.

“I'm sorry, Mr. Rottfeld. Mr. Wolfe will not take jobs that involve marriage problems. I can recommend some good people as alternates.”

Rottfeld's eyes opened, then shrank. I got a flash from them that gave me an idea that it wouldn't be pleasant to cross paths with him, but he controlled the look and continued,

“I don't think this is exactly a marriage problem, Mr. Goodwin. Although it's possible that the situation was precipitated by such a problem, our only objective is to find Carol and get her back to the table. Also, this seems different than the past difficulties. She has always respected her appointments, regardless of her personal situation. Her absences were not prolonged. She is . . . um . . . overdue, if you will. Also, Chuck insists that if she isn't at her sister's apartment, which apparently she isn't, then he doesn't know where she is.” What he said didn't convey as much as how he said it. The muscles in his neck were twitching, and even though he spoke as if in control, I could tell it was an effort.

“Okay. I understand. But I don't think I could talk Mr. Wolfe into taking it. Don't you think it's time you confided with the police?”

“I'm sorry. We don't think the police will be able to help in this case. We need someone like you and Mr. Wolfe; who can keep things confidential and act quickly. We can't afford to wait any longer.”

“So what you need is for us to find and deliver her? No other chores?”

“That's right. I think we can handle it from there. But you must hurry.”

I finally sprung a question that had been wanting out from the beginning,

“Excuse me for saying so, but why are you trying to hire us? Why isn't Mr. Orr here?”

“Mr. Orr will be here, but he is . . . um . . . downplaying the problem. I’m afraid he doesn’t see the urgency. Since I am leading these negotiations, I have a direct interest in her presence. We shall miss our brass ring if we do not act.”

Rottfeld’s referring to a brass ring would have appealed to Wolfe. I said,

“Okay, I’ll try to get Wolfe to take it. I assume we’ll get full cooperation from all who may be able to help us?”

“Yes, I think so. Certainly from myself and Mr. Orr, and anyone else I can think of.”

“Okay. Let me call Mr. Wolfe and discuss it with him. It would also help if I could tell Mr. Wolfe that we already have a retainer.”

“Of course.” Rottfeld pushed a button hidden under one of the tables next to him, and his secretary came in.

“Jim, please arrange for a check to the order of Nero Wolfe, N-E-R-O W-O-L-F-E, for one hundred thousand dollars.”

I tried to control my face. While it is true Wolfe has collected a six-figure fee on several occasions, this is the first time anyone has offered a retainer so large for so small a task. It seemed like too much for the job, and I began to get a little suspicious of what we were getting into. Rottfeld didn’t get where he is by throwing money at problems on a whim. I decided that I would need to find out more, but it was time to get Wolfe’s take on the deal. Rottfeld’s secretary took the order without batting an eye, and left. I looked around, but there was no phone that I could see. An office without a desk or a phone.

“Do you have a phone I could use?”

“Through that door. Dial nine to get out.” Rottfeld indicated a door on the wall left of the fireplace. I went through it, and found the desk. It wasn’t an executive desk, though, just a standard issue secretary’s desk with cubbyholes. Cubbyholes above the desk, which was against the wall. Cubbyholes on both sides of the desk, and on all the walls. Everything was cubbyholes, including where the desk drawers were supposed to be. No filing cabinets, no furniture, except the chair and desk, and cubbyholes, each one crammed full of papers of one sort or another. The desk had a small computer screen, and a phone, and plenty more papers.

I picked up the phone, dialed the number I knew best, and got Fritz, our chef and phone man when I’m away. Fritz’s kitchen was the only room on the ground floor that was spared from the remodeling.

“Hi Fritz. Me. How’re things?”

“Archie, you know I cannot work with these people around. *Mon Dieu!* My sauce will have plaster dust in it, and the smell will ruin his palate. He is not taking it well.”

“Well, it serves him right. It was his idea, and what did he expect? I hope he chokes on the plaster dust.”

“Archie, you do not mean that. I know you and your jokes. But you respect him as I do.”

“Fritz, you’re a jewel, but I do mean it. He deserves to suffer a little. Anyway, I need to talk to him. Can you switch me up?”

Fritz switched me to the plant rooms, where Wolfe was tending the orchids with Theodore.

“Yes?” Wolfe was curt. He had never learned to answer a telephone right, and he doesn’t like being interrupted when he’s with the plants.

“Me. I’m in a cubbyhole, off a room you would like. Mr. Rottfeld has just given us a retainer, one hundred grand, to find and deliver a missing person.”

There was a pause at Wolfe’s end, then,

“Why would Mr. Rottfeld give such a large retainer if less would do?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he has so much money he’s lost track of how much it’s worth. Maybe he hates money and tries to get rid of it.”

“Pfu. The rich and their wealth are never at odds. This is flummery, Archie. Can’t you tell by now when you’ve been hoodwinked?”

“My hood is just fine, thank you. The retainer is real, so is the job. But you’re right. I suspect there might be some complications I haven’t been told about, possibly marriage related.” I didn’t want to let that last part out, but knew what would happen if he wasn’t informed. He would quit cold.

“Refuse it, Archie. We can afford skepticism, and need not wallow in the bogs of the forlorn.”

“We can’t afford skepticism. Not after your fit of energy got us into the construction business. I will take it with the condition that you can withdraw if we get too close to a marriage war.”

“No, Archie. We will pass this one up. We have no workplace, and any task that demands such a large retainer is surely flagitious.” Wolfe’s tone was final, but I wasn’t through.

“Look. It will be good for you to get off your stool and do some real work. How many days have you worked this year? Only one.”

“Two, Archie.”

“Nope. One. You started after midnight, and ended before midnight the same day. A long day, I grant you, but only one.”

“Archie, I won’t tolerate you and your wretched nits. There will be no agreement.”

“Fine. I’ll do it myself. I like rescuing damsels in distress. You told me to use my intelligence and take this job if it looked okay, and I’ll give four to one it is. Looking at Rottfeld, I think he would jump out of his twelfth story window if we don’t help him. I’ve never seen anyone so desperate.”

“Pfui. Let him jump. That is ultimately the only solution open to those who blunder into marital tangles.”

“It’s not his wife, he’s not married. It is the wife of a colleague. Her name is Carol Orr, wife of Charles or Chuck. I haven’t met him, but am about to, apparently. It’s strictly business. He needs to find her because her negotiating skills are necessary to strike a deal they have going.”

“Bah. Negotiating skills? You *have* been hoodwinked, Archie. Mr. Rottfeld is in love with her. A confounded triad. Instead of one potential squabble we’ll have three. I’ll have no part of it.”

His tone was final. It was time for some quick thinking, if we wanted work, i.e. money. I replied in a contrite voice,

“I’m sorry, sir. My mistake. I erred.”

Wolfe so seldom gets any admission of fallibility from me that he has not learned to handle it. He became paternalistic.

“Archie, we all err. It is part of our human condition. We are all impotent pupa swept within a river of whimsical circumstance.”

“Yes, sir, but that’s not what I meant. I erred because I already accepted Mr. Rottfeld’s retainer on your behalf. It has been deposited into your bank account. All one hundred thousand dollars.”

“Bosh.” The paternalism was gone. “You’re nowhere near our bank. Don’t think you can gull me into accepting that commission.”

“It’s true, sir. Electronic transfer. The funds are in your account now. Call the bank and see.”

There was a pause. The tone of his voice, when he finally responded, told me I had pulled it off.

“They can put money into someone’s account that way?”

“Yes, sir. All they need is the number, which I gave them.”

“Transfer it back, Archie. I still say it’s futile.”

“I can’t. I can put money into your account, but I can’t take it out without a check, signed by you. You will have to sign a check for me.”

I could almost hear his head working. Wolfe didn’t like work infringing his pastimes of reading, eating, and time with the orchids; but even worse, he hated parting with his money. A client in his office may or may not mean money. A check made out to him, signed and on his desk is almost his money. But once the deposit has been made, it *is* his money, and he is obliged to earn it. The one

hundred thousand dollars was now his. I waited for the inevitable sigh as he resigned himself to the work.

Judging by the sound on the phone, he had let out enough carbon dioxide to keep the orchids healthy for a week.

“Very well, Archie. Get the details, and bring home a full report. Let us hope this is not what I think it is, or we shall both regret it.”

I rung off and heaved my own sigh. It was a long shot, but the bluff worked. Now I had to find out if we really could electronically transfer the retainer. As I exited the cubbyhole with its clutter and fluorescent lighting, I entered the anti-room and its walls covered with fiery shadows that were playing hockey, silently skating around the still figures cast by the soft lamps.

I was alone with Rottfeld. Marley had gone. I said,

“Okay. Mr. Wolfe and I are on the job. I will need lots of details. When is Mr. Orr expected?”

“He is outside now, waiting for me to call him in. I have also invited his attorney, Mr. Garre, and one other who may be able to help.”

“Okay. Good. Let’s get started with all of them. Oh, and the only way I could get Wolfe to sign up was to say he already had the retainer in his account. Is there a way to electronically transfer it?”

“I don’t know.” You’d think a man who deals with money daily would know something like that. “Jim should be able to do it, I think.”

Rottfeld signaled for his secretary by pressing a button under the table next to his chair, and we gave him the request and account details. Rottfeld then asked his secretary to invite the others in. A moment later the door opened and in waltzed Bruno and Buster, the dancing bears from the Bering and Son’s Circus.

Only these bears were wearing suits, and had huge smiles on their faces. They were sure big enough to be bears, though. Both of them were muscular, in their middle forties. The bald one was over six feet four inches tall, and the tall one was a couple of inches more. Their suits weren’t off the rack, and I felt sorry for the tailor. There are just certain objects that weren’t designed to wear suits. Phone booths are one, and they were two more. It’s a matter of slack. For a body like each of these had, you had to make the suit too big just to give enough leeway to move.

“I’m Chuck Orr.” The tall one. Texas accent. He indicated his partner, “This here’s Chester Garre. Pleased to meetcha.”

Instead of Bruno and Buster it was Chuck and Chester. Just as bad.

“Likewise, pardner. I’m Archie Goodwin.” Orr’s grin got bigger. I knew Texasese.

Orr offered a huge paw, and I took, knowing I would need to give as good as I got. I think it came out pretty even on the handshake-pressure scale, but I was putting my best into it, and he was just enthusiastic. Garre gave me more of the same medicine.

Rottfeld smiled and broke in. “Mr. Orr is our can-do man, Mr. Goodwin, and Mr. Garre is his attorney. They hail from Texas. They were both wrestlers in their college days.”

“A and M!” Chimed Garre.

“SMU!” Echoed Orr.

Right there, in front of the fireplace, Garre dropped his briefcase and crouched into a wrestling stance, facing Orr. Orr, who had no case, crouched and with a low growl grabbed Garre’s elbow with one hand, the back of his neck with the other. Garre responded similarly. I knew that was some sort of standard wrestling hold, but didn’t know what it was.

Of course, they were just having fun, but the power in their grips, and the bulging muscles under their coats, and the grunts and groans revealed that some real energy was being used up-- more in one minute than Wolfe uses in a day.

They staggered around in that grip, stepping one way, then the other for a few seconds. I glanced at Rottfeld-- his face had a look of resignation. He had obviously seen this display before. Myself, I’m all for enthusiasm, having plenty of it myself. But it should be kept running in the squirrel cage where it can do some good, not blowing its spout when it doesn’t need to. Finally, Orr staggered into the fireplace tool stand, and knocked it over. Their grip broke, Orr bent over to pick up the poker and said,

“Sorry, George. Guess we shouldn’t do that here.”

“No harm done. But yeah, settle down a little, okay?”

“Sure. So you’re Nero Wolfe’s man, eh, Goodwin? I’ve always wanted to meet him. What’s he like?”

“Well, among other things, he’s stout. Always has been, always will be.”

“Chester and I like that, that’s for sure. Guess you want to know about Carol, huh, Goodwin? She’s my baby-doll. Couldn’t get along without her. Been missing her a lot.”

It was my turn to say something, but I had noticed that one other man had entered during the wrestling match, and was staying back a little. It was my old friend Anders Gessel, the advertising vice president who loved cigars whether he smoked them or not.

Rottfeld introduced him.

“Anders will be our marketing man when we get going. Here on Madison he’s known for his great ideas.”

“Yes. I’ve seen one. Let’s get started. There’s no time to lose. If you’ll all take seats around the fire, please?”

Orr finished fixing the stand, and took the seat closest to the fireplace. Garre and Gessel sat, and I sat in the seat Marley had, next to Rottfeld, and pulled my notebook.

“Okay. I’m going to ask you a lot of things. Especially you, Mr. Orr, since you know your wife best. The best thing to do is just to answer, and not dilly-dally. If some of the questions seem irrelevant or impudent, try to swallow your resentment and just answer anyway. It will go easier that way.”

I started in. With a group like that, especially the two bears, you never know what kind of progress you’ll make, or what you’ll encounter, but they were all very cooperative, and businesslike in contrast to the introduction. Both Orr and Garre were plenty talkative, holding nothing back. Garre, of course, didn’t know as much about Carol as Orr did, but he knew plenty and piped in when he knew the answer, regardless of who I was talking to. Among the assortment of things I learned was that Orr and Garre had wrestled at invitationals and in-state tourneys, and had become fast friends. I got the feeling that the score between them had been pretty even. Orr had hired Carol Wright as a secretary two years ago, and they had been strictly business at first, but he finally “took a hankering” to her and persuaded her to tie the knot about the time Rottfeld had started the negotiations. The main thing I couldn’t figure was Orr, who seemed to be cooperating more as a favor to Rottfeld, than out of serious concern.

“I think she’s just out at her sister’s,” Orr said. “She goes there whenever she has a tough row to hoe. They’re like two peas in a pod, those two. Her sister comes over to our place a lot, too.”

Garre broke in,

“If you’re headed there, good luck. Her sister is a tough nut to crack.”

But Orr and Rottfeld had both phoned the sister, Connie, before I had come onto the scene, and she had said Carol wasn’t there. She was worried, too.

I tried to find out if there was anywhere else Carol could have gone, but everyone drew a blank. Parents were in the West, and hadn’t seen her. No other close relatives or friends. The only time Carol had ever spent away from Orr was when she stayed with Connie, who was single and had an apartment in West Manhattan near the park.

After about an hour, my intelligence guided by my experience and my stomach told me that it was time to wrap up. Gessel had added practically nothing, although he was willing to help. I asked Orr if he had a photograph of Carol, and he produced a wedding shot from his wallet. If the snapshot was any indication, I could see why Orr had gone after her. Her blonde hair combined

with her strong chin and intelligent eyes gave the impression she was someone worth considering for any job, from secretary to executive to wife, just on the principle that one should always have the most attractive and functional surroundings. As they got up to leave, Gessel said,

“Did you see the ads on the walls and in front of the elevators, Archie? They are mine, and are among the most successful in the industry. I could make Wolfe a famous man. Ask him to think about it, will you?”

I lied that I would, just to get rid of him. Wolfe hates the word “ad”, and if this guy had made the black-and-white lady, we could both manage without him.

Orr and Garre left with my thanks, and I was again left alone with Rottfeld.

“What do you think, Mr. Goodwin?”

“Sorry, that’s Mr. Wolfe’s department. I just run the errands. I’ll give him a report and we’ll get started. But before I do, I would like to ask you a couple of personal questions if I may.”

“Certainly. Anything to help.”

I paused to phrase the question just right and decided I couldn’t. If I have a subtle side, it needs to speak up more so I know about it. I just fire questions and try to catch the ricochets-- the sly stuff is for the boss. I asked, straight out,

“Are you in love with Mrs. Orr?”

The room had been a little warm from the fire, and Rottfeld’s face was a little flushed. But the color drained and his eyes became wide and wary. No trouble catching that one.

“What does it matter if I am?”

“I’m afraid it matters a lot. It makes things more complicated. We’ll skip it for a harder one. Is she in love with you?”

Rottfeld’s eyes flashed,

“Of course not! She’s in love with Chuck, dammit!”

I let him settle a little. Sometimes not saying anything can be the best way to get something. Rottfeld got up, went to the fire, and added a log from the brass holder at the left. He put a hand on the mantel and turned to me.

“Look, Goodwin. I’ll admit I’m in love with Carol. And it sure as hell complicates things. If only I had met her two months before she married Chuck, instead of two months after, things would be a lot simpler. It’s driving me absolutely crazy, not knowing where she is or what’s happened to her. For all I know, she could be lying under a bush somewhere. Chuck doesn’t know a thing about my feelings. He’s too thick-headed about those things. Carol, well, maybe she does and maybe she doesn’t. I don’t know. But it wouldn’t matter. She’s married to Chuck, and as far as

she's concerned, that's that, regardless of any problems they may have. All I can do is sit in this room and feel sorry for myself."

Rottfeld went back and plopped into his chair. He continued,

"That's just the way it is, and I can handle it. But not knowing where she is, or whether or not Chuck has hurt her or something is eating me alive. I haven't made a single trade since she disappeared."

That was bad of course. Worse yet, I hadn't made any trades, either. Rottfeld's voice rose,

"What are you going to do now? Now that you know what it's like? I'll tell you, Goodwin, if you don't get out of here and start looking, quick, I'll probably pop something. You don't need anything from me now, you got it all and then some. You just need to get started!"

My subtle side sensed that it was time to leave. I bid Rottfeld good day and told him I'd keep him informed, and exited the anti-room into the world of carpet, chrome and garish ads.

Two

Out on the street it had snowed, or maybe rained, and wet the sidewalk. The tops of the buildings were obscured by clouds to the West, but the sun was coming from the South, shining through the skyscraper canyon and warming the cement, sending wisps of vapor up around the feet of the always-present swarm. I decided to hoof it to West Thirty-Fifth where Wolfe's brownstone was, because it was just about as fast that time of day, and I could keep busy with some calls on the way.

The first was to Lon Cohen of the *Gazette* who now has a corner office, bigger than his boss', and goes by no title I know of, although he used to be the city editor. Lon's always good for information as long as it's tit for tat. He's also good for a sawbuck or ten at our Wednesday night poker games at Saul Panzer's place. It took about three minutes to get through to him.

"Hey, Archie! How's my favorite cockroach?"

Which was the word he had used last Wednesday when I walked away with his fifty. Scuttlebutt had it that he had collected the largest bonus in the history of the paper for his exclusive on the Skinner case, so I think he was having pang of conscience and wanted to even up with me.

"Just creeping along Madison. Any bodies turn up lately?"

"Nobody that I know of. Nothing too hot right now. What you got going?"

"Sorry, Lon. My information is highly confidential, and I must take pains that it doesn't fall into the wrong hands. Like yours. But seriously, could you check and see if any corpses, or otherwise, of a female, thirty-one, five-six, about 130 pounds, blond hair, blue eyes, going by the name of Carol Orr have turned up? I'm in a hurry, so go have lunch first."

"Who's Carol Orr?"

You just can't talk to a newspaper man without getting a question in return.

"Just the facts please, Lon."

"Sure, Archie. Hold on a sec."

It was more like five minutes. I should have told him to call back. With cell phone rates what they are, that hundred thousand wouldn't last too long.

"No. Nothing. Not in any of the buroughs, or in the counties. C'mon Archie, you got to let go of something. Did your desk get fixed? That would make the second page, I think."

"Nope. Nothing fit to print yet. And stop begging. I swear, you have the conscience of a mosquito."

The next call was to the brownstone. Wolfe would be down from the plant rooms, but not at lunch yet. He would probably be supervising the operations downstairs.

But he wasn't downstairs. Fritz said,

"He is in his room reading, Archie. I am to bring his lunch up to him. Saul is here with the workmen."

The son-of-a-gun. Saul Panzer is the best foot operative anywhere, and gets three times more than any other detective in New York, Wolfe excepted. To waste his talents supervising the remodeling operation was a crime. I told Fritz,

"Okay. I'll be home in time for lunch."

The next call was to have been to Saul, to tell him we have something going and to stay in touch, so I skipped that and left a message with Fred Durkin's answering service. Fred's become a pretty good all-around operative over the years, but is best at tailing and other chores that keep his dome from overheating.

I stowed the phone and settled into stride. I was definitely going faster than the traffic, which was crawling in caterpillar waves, exhaust plumes showing where movement was.

Fritz had taken lunch up to Wolfe when I arrived at the brownstone. I ate with Saul at the kitchen table, and discussed the case with him. Saul has a small frame and a big nose, and always wears the same cap and wrinkled brown suit, but he could pass for anything from a garbage collector to a college professor just by the way he talks and acts. He is one of the few people in New York whose memory is better than mine, so I always try to get his take on what we are doing. Wolfe would not normally permit business discussions at the table, but he was not there, and that was not the table. I finished fairly quickly because I was anxious to get out looking, and wanted to take the chance that Wolfe would be willing to take my report during his coffee.

Wolfe has an elevator in the brownstone, but it's too slow and small for me. Mounting the steps to the second level, knocking on Wolfe's door and getting a curt "Come in," I found Wolfe in a foul mood.

"Confound it, Archie! This is intolerable! I cannot taste my food with this stink in the house! I've told Fritz to bring nothing but cheese and crackers from now on. They will be the only things edible."

"It's tough all right," I admitted, surveying the leavings of duck and a half dozen other dishes on his small breakfast table in the corner. And the beer and glass, which he always has, chilled, whenever he isn't eating. "But I have a report."

Wolfe didn't reply, but leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes most of the way. That was the signal to start, so I dug in, starting with a description of the room and Rottfeld. I skipped the conference with Gessel. I can remember, verbatim, conversations lasting several hours, so the session with Rottfeld and the bears was no trick. Although it didn't appear Wolfe was listening, he was actually taking in every word I was saying, and passing each one through his incomparable tangle of nerves, which always gave us the answer we needed. I finished with the phone call to Lon, and said,

"Okay. You were right about Rottfeld being in love with Mrs. Orr, sure. But it's still just a find-and-fetch. We don't have much to go on, but I have Saul and Fred notified and we can start as soon as you give us something. Any questions?"

Wolfe's face had taken a slightly odd look, and the corner of his mouth had turned up slightly, a sign that something had pleased him greatly.

"Archie, that room you have described is remarkable. Tell me. Does that building have kitchen facilities?"

I couldn't believe it. The words had taken a wrong turn somewhere, and had become mixed up with the signals from his stomach. Just after a meal, no less. I gritted my teeth and said,

"Yes, sir. The Teak Room is on the top floor. A four-star restaurant. Andre Domengeaux is the chef, and he's giving Rusterman's a run for their money. By the way, your deduction skills are as amazing as ever. I never would have guessed that Mrs. Orr was hiding out in that kitchen."

Wolfe opened his eyes and looked at me.

"Archie, how long have you and I been associated?"

"Too long. Seventy years if it's a day."

"Pfui. Stop prattling. But we have been together some time, and long ago we agreed that for us to survive, we would put up with each other. You would tolerate my desire for certain comforts that I deem necessary, and I would ignore your obtuse sarcasm and nattering. Do not upset that balance with your confounded dregs, or I shall be forced to abandon this endeavor for my house in Egypt. Mrs. Orr is at her sister's apartment, hiding out from something or someone. That is manifest. You will soon embark on your charming quest for the damsel. But first, we must see to my half of our bargain. I wish to see and feel that room. I wish to dine there, on a meal prepared by Fritz, and taste my food once again."

Wolfe leaned back, laced his fingers over his stomach, and started instructions.

"Please call Mr. Rottfeld and tell him that we wish to set up operations in that room. It will be our temporary headquarters. Invite him to dine with us this evening, and to invite Mssrs. Garre,

Orr and Marley. Do not mention Mr. Gessel unless Mr. Rottfeld does. Arrange for Fritz to use Mssr. Domengeaux's kitchen, and tell Fritz to make preparations. You will go to Miss Wright's apartment and invite Mrs. Orr and her to join us. Use your magnificent skills to assure acceptance."

Wolfe stopped talking. But I didn't start. Eventually, Wolfe said,

"Archie? Did you hear?"

"Yes sir. I'm sorry. I was waiting for more instructions, like having Mayor Giuliani wait our table."

"I don't think that will be necessary, Archie. We'll have Fritz do it as usual. Hopefully the elevator in that building is fast enough to convey the food before it cools."

There was no use arguing. Wolfe was already leaning back with his eyes closed, lost in a world of anticipation. As I got up to leave, Wolfe mumbled,

"We shall leave as soon as I finish with the plants. Fritz will need to go without delay..."

On the way down the stairs, I considered the approach to take. Of course, his instructions were unreasonable, but they often were. Of course, I was sore at Wolfe, but I often was. What concerned me more was the glassy stare Wolfe had given me at the end. He was showing signs of relapse, when his mind decides it has never heard of things like work, clients and fees, but concentrates solely on the more important things, like the next meal. I didn't want to push Wolfe over the brink, so decided I would try my darndest do what he wanted. At least if he was with the clients he couldn't very well ignore them.

I went to the kitchen, sat at the table and pulled the phone closer. Fritz normally has a wall phone, but we had put one of the office desk phones in for convenience. The first call was to Rottfeld's office, and he was in, waiting for me to call.

"Goodwin? Any news?"

"Not yet, but there has been a lot of nervous energy applied. Mr. Wolfe would like to move his base of operations to your office. It will make things faster and more convenient, if it's all right with you."

"My office? But I thought Mr. Wolfe never leaves his office."

"He doesn't. His office left him. It's out for refurbishing, and he is officeless, which would mean homeless to Mr. Wolfe, except that his orchids are still here. He would like to come this evening and dine with you in your office, if possible."

"Well, I . . ."

Rottfeld's voice was cut off by a booming voice in the background. Orr.

"What's Goodwin want? Has he found Carol yet?"

Rottfeld had muffled the phone, but that came through anyway. They talked a little more, but I couldn't make it out. Rottfeld's voice returned,

"I suppose that would be all right. We could have a meal sent down from the Teak Room upstairs. Jim can arrange it."

"No sir. Mr. Wolfe wouldn't want to impose on your hospitality, so we are trying to arrange for Mr. Wolfe's personal chef to prepare the meal."

"Fritz Brenner?"

Rottfeld really had done his homework. Either that, or he liked food too and knew the experts.

"Yes, sir. I'm about to call Mr. Domengeaux and try to arrange it. Pleased invite Mr. Orr and Mr. Garre to dine with us. Also Mr. Marley, if possible."

"All right. I'll get Jim to do it. What about Anders? I'm sure he'd like a meal prepared by Mr. Brenner as well."

"By all means." Wolfe couldn't get it his way all the time. "We'll shoot for seven, but it will probably be closer to eight. Also, may Mr. Wolfe invite a couple more guests?"

"Carol? Have you found her?"

"He found her already? Where? At Connie's?" Orr's boom again.

"No sir. I'm sorry, but we have only just started, really. I promise that the guests, if they come, will be agreeable."

"Okay. The more the merrier. Something we could use right now."

"Oh, and Mr. Rottfeld, one other thing."

"Yes?"

"That picture. The big one in front of the elevators. Could you have it removed temporarily? I'm afraid Mr. Wolfe would find it indigestible."

"The one with the curlers? Mr. Gessel would be upset. He won an award with it."

"Yes sir. Chalk it up to eccentricity. But believe me. We'd all be better off if she were gone."

Rottfeld paused, "I understand. I'll see what I can do, but I can't promise anything."

"Good enough. Thank you. Good-bye."

"What's he want?" Orr. I could still hear his boom even though the handset was halfway to the cradle.

Muffled voices, then the boom,

"Hell, I'll take care of it. Never liked it myself."

I rung off.

I swiveled to Fritz, who was putting some venison steaks into his special marinade.

“Fritz, do you know Andre Domengeaux?”

“You still make the jokes, Archie. Do I know the President? Or Counselor Delamurez? I know of them, but couldn’t think of meeting or talking to them. It is the same with Domengeaux, only more. He created the *Domengeaux Paté*.”

Fritz was always too modest. I said,

“We’ll, if things go right, you’ll be meeting him, talking to him, and cooking in his kitchen tonight.”

“No, Archie! I could not do this! I would need much time to prepare! He is a very great man, Archie.”

“Sorry, Fritz. Wolfe’s orders. He wants you to use the Teak Room’s kitchen to prepare a meal for him tonight. About eight people in all. I’m calling him now.”

Fritz slapped his forehead and shrugged his shoulders, and began muttering something in French while he scurried around the kitchen. I got the phone book, looked up the Teak Room, and dialed. It was answered by the reservation clerk, but I could tell from the noises in the background that the phone was in the kitchen. When I asked for the chef, the voice asked who was calling, and I said,

“Archie Goodwin, of Nero Wolfe’s office. Please put Mr. Domengeaux on.”

“I’m sorry sir, he is very busy right now. Could I help you instead?”

I was peeved. I hate paeans who think they are doing their boss a favor by making it difficult to get through. But I kept my resentment in, and told the voice,

“Look, just tell him it’s Fritz Brenner, Nero Wolfe’s chef.”

“Fritz Brenner? Is Mr. Domengeaux expecting your call?”

I was about to give the clerk a piece of something, like my mind, but that was the last I heard from him. There were muffled voices again, then another voice with plenty of nose that sounded excited, but I couldn’t begin to write what it said because it was in French. I was able to pick out Fritz’s name, though, and figured it was Domengeaux. I said ‘hold on a sec see voo play’ and handed the phone to Fritz, who was reluctant to take it.

What ensued was in French, but my assessment was that it must have been some sort of mutual admiration discussion. Fritz was very deferential as always, but was blushing and bowing as well, which meant he was having trouble taking the compliments he must have been getting. After a while, Fritz hung up and turned to me.

“I am to leave right away Archie. Mr. Domengeaux was very considerate, especially when the notice is so short. But the venison steaks won’t do, and I don’t have time to prepare anything else.”

Fritz made a very French, or Swiss, gesture of resignation, and said, not to me,

“What am I to do?” and began muttering in French again.

I told Fritz he'd have to take a cab because I was going to pick up some guests, and got out of the kitchen. Sometimes Fritz's modesty is just too much to handle.

Three

Walking to Ninth Avenue to flag a cab, I considered the situation. I couldn't figure how Wolfe could be so sure about where Carol Orr was. He'd been right about Rottfeld's feelings, and maybe he was right about this. But if he was, I was going to have a hard time with the fathead. It was bad enough taking him on any normal day, but when he has a couple of scalps under his belt he becomes supercilious. Also, there was the matter of the fee. If all I had to do was go to Connie Wright's apartment and persuade Carol Orr to show up to dinner, we couldn't very well justify a thousand C fee, and some of it would have to go back. Deciding how much would go back was going to be a lulu.

Arriving at the apartment building, within view of the park, I looked up at the twin towers. Orr had not known his sister-in-law's address--that's just too much to expect from a man. But when he said, "You know, it's the one with the two towers and the skywalk", I did know. I had been there several times on business, and a couple of times otherwise. I had once given an ex-football player a kidney punch, my best punch, halfway up the left side. The building was built at a time when architects were grappling with style. The two towers themselves had a definite art deco flavor, but the first three stories, including the mezzanine, were done in some sort of neo-classical style, complete with ionic columns topped with opened scrolls.

Despite the different styles, the building was one of the nicer ones on the West side. One thing that helped, not, was the glass-enclosed skywalk that had been added between the towers near the top. I don't know what pencil jockey had designed it, but it didn't fit in with anything at all. The building was also showing signs of age, especially the left tower, which had a dark scar up the inside wall, made by steam coming from a pipe on the roof of the pedestal.

I had decided not to call ahead, mainly because I didn't know what approach would work with Carol's sister, and there was a good chance I had a wait coming anyway. But I wasn't worried about how I was going to get in. There was enough foot traffic on the main floor that all one had to do was wait until a small group entered, and go in with them. The single attendant was kept busy doing other things, and you could usually get by without trouble as long as your timing was right. I entered through the main doors, which were surrounded by bright tiles, and found what I needed to get in-- a couple, both older than the building, headed for the inside door. I helped the lady in like I'd been doing it all my life, even called her Mom, and the attendant didn't give us a second glance. The lady even thanked me--I'm not sure she would have made it on her own.

I was lucky, or at least it seemed that way. After the third ring at apartment 2002 the door was opened by Carol Orr herself. I put up my best smile.

“Mrs. Orr? My name is Archie Goodwin. I’m working for Mr. Rottfeld and your husband.”

“I’m Connie Wright.” There was no return smile, “I don’t know where Carol is.”

If they weren’t twins, someone got the order mixed up. Connie was the girl in Orr’s wedding photo. Funny that Orr didn’t mention how much alike they looked. From the expression on her face, I had got off on the wrong foot, which probably couldn’t be helped, but I didn’t like it anyway. I recovered without my face showing too much surprise and continued,

“I’m sorry, Miss Wright. I’m sure you realize it’s a natural mistake. I work for Nero Wolfe, the detective, and we have been hired by your sister’s husband and Mr. Rottfeld to find your sister. I’m hoping that you will invite me in to talk about it, if not for their sakes, then for yours. I understand you are quite close to your sister.”

“Yes, we’re close, but I don’t see how I can help. I know hardly anything.”

“You never know. Once Mr. Wolfe found a missing person with just a laundry mark to go on. Why don’t we talk a little and see what comes of it? I promise I won’t bite.”

She looked at me, showed a trace of smile, and said,

“All right, come in. But I’m afraid I won’t be good company.”

The door opened directly into the living room that was furnished simply, with functional furniture that left plenty of room to move. I approved of that, since of course the real view was out the window. Glancing around, I considered where Mrs. Orr might be hiding, since that was what she was doing, according to Wolfe. The floor plan of the apartment was similar to the others I had seen in the building, and I figured she would either be in the bedroom, or the kitchen. The kitchen was off the left, and I could have seen it if I walked to the other end of the living room, so my money went on the bedroom, which was past the kitchen.

I sat on the single sofa, and Connie settled into the chair next door. She was wearing a simple navy blue dress with white fluting and a high curved neckline that flattered the lines to her strong chin. I pulled my notebook, more to give me a little time than anything, because I didn’t quite know what tack to take. Likely, all the obvious angles had been covered, so I started,

“Look, Miss Wright, we might be able to clear this up and find your sister today, or it could take a lot longer. It all depends. But it’s likely I may need your help more than once, more than just today. I suggest we start by getting on better terms. You are certainly welcome to call me Archie, Miss Wright.

The emphasis I placed on Miss was a hint, and she picked up on it.

“Of course. You can call me Connie if you wish, Mr. Goodwin.”

Okay. So she was letting me know with her eyes and words that it might be fun to come out and play if circumstances were different, but for now it was just business.

“All right, Miss Connie. I’m going to ask you a lot of questions, because that is how we detectives detect. Some will seem pretty silly, but please bear with me. You never know what might turn up.”

I asked the usual questions, about Carol’s habits--what she liked, and where she liked to go, then I began to ask questions about Connie herself. Connie was employed by Jauntre’s on Fifth avenue, which explained why a working girl would be wearing such a nice number. Connie had decided to take the afternoon off because of the situation with Carol. No current social activities to speak of, but enjoyed going to movies and such with her sister. But there wasn’t anything to start an opening with, and I was hitting a lot of dead ends

My heart wasn’t in it, because it kept telling me all I had to do was go through the kitchen to get my answers, and of course I was watching to see how sincere she was. She seemed very concerned, and willing to do anything to get her sister back. But finally, when I started in on her employment for the third time, Connie became exasperated and said sarcastically,

“I’m surprised, Mr. Goodwin, you must be awfully smart. Do you really think Carol is at the dress shop?”

That irritated me. There is a time and place for sarcasm, and this wasn’t it. I closed my notebook. “Okay, Miss Connie. We’re paddling without oars, and we both know it. I’ll tell you something. My boss, Mr. Wolfe, thinks that Carol is right here, in your apartment, hiding from someone or something, and he’s batting a thousand today. Let’s suppose that I get up right now, and walk through the kitchen into your bedroom. What would I find?”

I’d like to say she handled it well, not missing a beat, but from the way she reacted you’d think I’d set a snapper to her tail.

“Don’t you dare go in there! This is my apartment, you weasel!”

I got up and moved closer to the kitchen, and I’ll be darned if she didn’t come after me with her nails deployed. I grabbed her wrists barely in time, pulled her close, and pinned her arms behind her.

“Settle down, okay? I’m not going in there just yet. I’m just making sure no one goes out your rear exit, which I couldn’t see from where I was. And by the way, I’m not a weasel, I’m a cockroach today.”

We were close enough that I could smell her perfume. I held her for a moment, then gave her enough grip so she would remember me, and let her go. She backed up a step, rubbed her right wrist, and looked at me with passion, the wrong kind.

“All right, Miss Connie. You can try using your nails to stop me from going in there, or maybe a knife from the kitchen, or you can sit down, with me standing here, and tell me about it. It’s your choice, but don’t take too long deciding.”

Connie thought she was going to have another go at me for just a moment, then she collapsed on the sofa and started sobbing.

“Oh, Archie, it’s terrible! You don’t want to go in there. Believe me, it would be for the best if you just left and forgot Carol is here. Isn’t there anything I could do to make you change your mind?”

So Wolfe was right again. I felt sorry for her-- it was obvious Connie really cared for her sister, and wanted her left alone. I glanced at the rear door, then took a step toward Connie.

“Look. I may be a cockroach, but even cockroaches have hearts, I think. I can’t just go away and forget all this happened--I have a job to do, and I have to do my best to get Carol found. But suppose we go in and talk with Carol. Once I learn the circumstances, I might be able to help somehow. You never know. Once I actually sewed a button on a lady’s dress for her.”

Connie was stubborn, and tried various things on me, including threatening to call the police. But we both knew she didn’t want that. I was firm and she eventually realized there was no way I would leave without seeing Carol, so she finally led me to the bedroom.

Carol had been listening, of course, but when we entered she was on the bed, her face buried in a pillow. She had on jeans and a blue sweater, nothing on her feet. Connie sat down next to her and started playing with Carol’s hair as she talked.

“This is Archie Goodwin, Carol. He’s come to find you. I tried to stop him, but he knew right where you were. I’m so sorry.”

Carol turned her head away, and said,

“It’s okay, Connie. Mr. Goodwin, I just want to be left alone, okay? I’ll be fine in a couple more days. I just need time.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Orr. My instructions are to get you back into negotiations as quickly as possible. That’s what I have to do. But I can do other things too, like make sure whatever it is you’re hiding from doesn’t bother you anymore. You know you have to get back there quick.”

“You don’t understand. You can’t understand. I know I have to be back there, but if I were to go back now, terrible things would happen.”

Wolfe had been right, but now it was my turn. She wasn't looking away from me because she hated the sight of my face. No female hates the sight of my face. I went to the bed, sat at the head next to Connie, and reached for her chin. Connie didn't try to stop me. I gently twisted her face towards me and leaned over the bed to see the side she had been hiding. Carol resisted at first, but then resigned herself, turned over and let me see the whole thing.

It was a work of art. Fully ripened into Technicolor, four oblong black and blue marks made by four huge knuckles, starting just below her earlobe and ending right at the lips. Carol didn't say anything. The look on her face was just a vacant stare, mixed with fear.

I had seen that look before, on the face of a lady lost in the subway, painted by some guy named Tooker.

I let out a low whistle. It was now obvious why Carol was hiding. If Rottfeld had seen the damage, no telling what would have happened to the negotiations, and to the guy those marks belonged to. But I wasn't sure who had done it. I had seen two sets of paws that could have done that kind of work, so I asked,

"Did your husband do this?"

"Of course he did." It was Connie talking. "He doesn't know his own strength. I wish I could knock him upside the head and give him a taste of his own medicine, the big galoot." Such unrefined talk, from such a refined looking woman. Connie had her fists clenched, and was staring at Carol with a resolute look, her lips in a damn cute pout. Shirley Temple without the curls. I had one more question for Carol, though.

"Did you deserve it?"

Connie's hand was fast but I was expecting it, and caught it a good foot away from my cheek. I turned to Connie and snarled,

"Stop with the violence, sister. I bruise easily. My mother taught me to never hit a lady, but I've been around the block a few times since then, and have met some dames who could use a good whack. With some it would not only be deserved, but therapeutic."

"How . . . dare you!" Connie was having trouble getting words out. "I want you to leave this instant. How . . . *dare you!*"

I gave her arm enough of a squeeze that she pulled back and I let go.

"I'm not liking this any better than you, believe me." I turned back to Carol. "Okay. So you didn't deserve this and your husband's a louse, or a weasel. Is your face all that's keeping you from showing up, or is there more?"

"My husband's not a weasel," Carol said. "He loves me and I love him."

That was no surprise, of course. I already knew from Rottfeld that Carol would stand by Orr until the ship sank.

“Sorry. Okay. Your husband’s a great guy. But you didn’t answer my question. If those marks were gone, wiped away right now, would there be anything to keep you from life?”

“No. I could go back. But the marks are here, and I just have to wait.”

A notion was forming. I asked,

“What if we were to cover the marks with makeup? Could you show up then?”

“I tried. I either show, or look like a painted lady. They could tell right off something was wrong. If there was even a hint that something was wrong, it would be terrible. I can’t risk it”

“I’m not talking ordinary makeup. So you’re saying that, if by some miracle, the marks were not detectable in any way, that you could rejoin your husband and the others.”

“I suppose, but it’s no use. It can’t be done.”

“Don’t be so sure.” I knew there might be hope. I went to the phone beside the bed, and dialed a number I knew well.

I got Mimi, Lily Rowan’s maid, and she went to fetch Lily while I kept an eye on Connie, who seemed to be settling down a little and comforting Carol, but whose glances at me were as passionate as ever. Lily Rowan’s ancestors had been members of the Tammany gang and had accumulated their share of Manhattan-- Lily lived in a piece of it on Park Avenue. I had met her in my bullfighting days, and things had clicked, or maybe stampeded would be a better word, between us. We go dancing at the Flamingo whenever the urge hits, but it had been a while.

“Escamillo! You have saved me from *ennui*.”

“I don’t know who Enway is, but tell him that if he lays a hand on you, he’ll have to answer to me.”

“Ah, Archie, I love it when you’re possessive. Come scratch my back. I have an itch I can’t reach.”

“Later, pigeon. This is business. I need the name of the best makeup artist in Manhattan.”

“You’re no fun when you’re working, you know. Theatrical or beauty?”

“Beauty. With your looks, I figured you’d know the best.”

“Archie, I’m hurt. You’re not even supposed to know a woman uses the stuff. I’m supposed to look like I come by it naturally.”

“Naturally. You do. But I was hoping you’d know anyway. Someone who is a real miracle worker.”

“Well, it so happens that I do,” Lily sounded miffed. I had been with Lily when I had seen Tooker’s painting. It was one of the times she had tried to culture me by taking me to museum mile. “Jill Smith. She has a shop down the street, on Fortieth and Park.”

“Jill Smith? Not Madame Orczy or something?”

“Really, Archie, you’re pushing it today. Jill Smith. She’s the best, ask anyone. You have to book an appointment twelve weeks in advance.”

“I don’t have twelve weeks. Can you pull some strings for me? It’s an emergency case.”

“Some woman finally gave you what you deserved, huh? I don’t know how well she does on men, although these days she probably gets her share.”

“It’s not for me, gnat. Like I said, it’s business. And it’s important. Can you get me in?”

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe. I’ll have to call Jill and see. Where can I reach you?”

I told Lily to call my cell phone and promised a personal call later, then hung up and turned to the girls.

“Okay, I don’t know if we can get in, but we’re headed for Jill Smith’s salon. A reliable source has told me she can work miracles.”

“Jill Smith?” Connie, eyes wide, and some of the vitriol dissipating. “You’re taking Carol to Jill Smith?”

Carol and Connie exchanged a meaningful look. They knew who Jill Smith was.

“If we can get in, you’re both going. You, Connie Wright, and you, Carol Orr, are cordially invited to dine this evening with Mr. Wolfe and myself at Mr. Rottfeld’s office. On a meal cooked by the famous chef Fritz Brenner. Mr. Rottfeld and others will be there, but you two will be the guests of honor.”

“I don’t know.” Carol was hesitant, but her face was showing some interest in life again. “My face has to be perfect, believe me.”

“It is. It will be. Look, I’ll cut you a deal. If, after your makeup you don’t think it will work, we’ll bring you back here and you can hibernate some more. But if you look okay, you and your sister promise to come to dinner tonight at Mr. Rottfeld’s. Even if the makeup doesn’t work out, you will have had a free treatment by the best in the business.”

Carol looked away, but I could tell she was interested. She whispered, to no one in particular,

“Jill Smith . . . I suppose we could try. But I have nothing here to wear.”

That was enough for me. I turned to Connie, who was next to me still sitting on the bed and said,

“Okay, we’ve got to move fast, or we won’t make it on time. We’ll go to the salon, and then afterward both of you can pick up something to wear at Jauntre’s. The dresses will be compliments

of Mr. Rottfeld through Mr. Wolfe. An employee discount will be compliments of you, Miss Connie. Have you got some sunglasses and a scarf or something? We need to keep Carol under wraps for the time being.”

I knew Wolfe would be upset at my promising to shoot the wad on makeup and two outfits, but he wouldn't be paying. The cost would go on the expense account as restitution expense, with instructions that it was to be paid by Charles Orr.

Connie went to her dresser, rummaged a little in the top drawer, and produced a red and yellow silk scarf that would do.

“I have sunglasses in my purse. I hope this works.”

“Me, too. Okay, Mrs. Orr. Put on the scarf and the sunglasses, get some shoes on, and we'll be off. You too, Connie. I should know in a few minutes if we can get into Jill Smith's salon, but let's assume we can and start now. Time's awastin'.”

I went out to the living room to give the girls some privacy and me a look at the park. It was ticklish. Although Carol's attitude had improved dramatically, whether she would follow through was still touch-and-go. There was still plenty of resentment from Connie, but she seemed to be basically for Carol's getting out. I would be able to tell more about their attitudes by how long it took them to get ready. In the meantime, I needed to cook up some ideas to keep them set for going to dinner that evening. When it comes to getting reluctant females to cooperate, Wolfe thinks I have no peer, and I like to let him keep thinking that. But delivery of Mrs. Orr in good condition was still not certain by any means.

I didn't have to think up ideas for long. Not five minutes had passed before Carol, in scarf and sunglasses, and Connie appeared, ready to go. “Let's get out of here,” Carol said, “I'm tired of looking at walls.”

Lily's phone call, confirming our appointment with Madame Smith, came while we were traveling through Central Park by taxi. She said she had to pull a lot of favors to get it, and I ended up promising to take her to the Flamingo club for dance and dinner on Saturday. I don't like to mix business and pleasure, but extra measures seemed called for in this case, and the prospect of an evening out with Lily was by no means distasteful, especially since the Flamingo had booked the Clouds of Joy band. They had a pianist named Mary Lou who could bebop better than anyone on the planet.

Four

We arrived at Jill Smith's salon at three forty. The traffic hadn't been too bad, and we were making good time. The place was swank, as you might expect, with no signs of any business activity in the reception area, just a well-dressed brunette who was doing a good job showing the shop's wares. Upon hearing my name, she smiled and said we were expected, and ushered us into an office just inside the door in back of her. The office walls were covered with pictures of women's faces. All ages, colors and varieties, none with even a trace of makeup.

A little later, the proprietor came in wearing a blue smock and jet black hair, done in a bun. Of course, I was interested in how the best artist in Manhattan did her own makeup, but that question was quickly settled. Her face matched the pictures. She didn't have any makeup at all on. Not a smudge. I'd say she was in her late forties, but with nothing to hide the wrinkles I may have guessed high.

"How do you do, Mr. Goodwin? I'm Jill Smith. I'm sorry, you caught me in the middle of doing my own face. Miss Rowan is one of our most valued clients, but she didn't have to call. I would have made accommodation for a request from you personally. How may my staff and I help you?"

So makeup wasn't the only talent she had, and it sounded like Lily hadn't had to pull too many strings, something I would have to take up with her later. I turned to Carol and Connie and said,

"This is Carol Orr, in the scarf, and her sister Connie Wright. The scarf, Carol."

Carol removed the glasses and scarf, and brushed a wisp of hair back from her cheek.

Madamme Smith jumped from her chair and came around the desk for a closer look.

"Oh my! You poor dear! What brute did that?"

I'll be damned if she didn't cast a discrete glance at my knuckles. But I passed the test no problem, as her expression softened and she put her arm around Carol.

"Don't worry, hon, we can fix you up just fine. I'll take care of you personally."

"That's very decent of you," I said, "Oh, and whatever you do to Carol, could you do the exact same thing to Connie? It would be much better if their makeup matched exactly."

That was my ace-in-the-hole. Even if Carol's makeup looked out of the ordinary, if Connie's was the same I figured it wouldn't be as noticeable. Jill said sure and ushered the girls into a booth that was through the door to the right. She told the girls to make themselves comfortable and re-entered the office, closing the door behind her.

“Mr. Goodwin? Could I have a word with you please?”

“Sure. Fire away.”

“This seems to be a matter for the authorities. That woman has been battered.”

“I know. But she’s very close to the person who did it and doesn’t want the authorities involved.”

“Of course. It’s nearly always that way. But I have a responsibility, legally and morally, to report this to someone. Whoever did that shouldn’t get away with it. We can hide the marks on her face, but not on her soul.”

So I was dealing with a poet-moralist. But it didn’t eat me because despite what I had said to Connie earlier I was feeling the same thing. I knew that we were only covering the real problem, and that this was really no solution at all. I would fulfill my obligation to our clients by delivering Carol on time, but what then? The whole thing could blow up again the very next day. I’d seen times when the social service people had helped in such matters, and other times when they screwed things up worse than they already were, and I wasn’t ready to shoot craps with the authorities just yet. I couldn’t even threaten Orr because someone his size wouldn’t take a threat seriously, even if it could be backed up.

It was a dilemma. Maybe there was no way out, besides Wolfe’s suggestion of jumping out a window. But I still had hopes that something could be done. I smiled and said,

“I agree with you. I don’t intend to evade the authorities. But this is not the right time. As soon as those sisters are finished here, they are going to Jauntre’s and then to a gourmet meal. That experience will be much better for Carol’s soul than a trip downtown with the police, don’t you think? Tomorrow, well, tomorrow we’ll see. But I give you my word that I’ll make sure the person responsible for this is held accountable, at the right time and place.”

She wasn’t so sure, but after I reassured her some more she acquiesced, and opened the door to the booth. Madame Smith invited me to watch, but I said I’d wait in the reception area. The booth was already too crowded.

“It has to be perfect,” I said in parting.

Madame Smith gave me a withering look. “It will be, of course. You just go wait outside, honey.”

I was darned, and said so to myself under my breath as I left for the lobby. It doesn’t matter if the shop is in the best block of Park Avenue, or in the most rundown tenement of the Bronx, there’s an unwritten rule that all beauticians are required to call their clients honey.

Five

Back in the shop's reception area, I got permission from the brunette to use the phone and dialed Wolfe, who would be up in the plant rooms. His *yes* was even more curt than before.

"Me. In a beauty salon on Fortieth and Park. You won't recognize me when next you see me."

"What a rare and wondrous event that would be."

"Thanks. Same to you. You were right. Mrs. Orr was at her sister's place, but she is damaged goods. A black-and-blue mark, matching perfectly Orr's knuckles, on the left side of her face. A beaut. That's why she was hiding. No telling what will happen if Rottfeld finds she's been hurt. We are having the damage repaired, or covered rather. If it comes out okay we'll be to dinner. I'm calling to say I won't be back in time to take you to Rottfeld's office."

"How long will the treatment take?"

"No telling. Maybe half an hour, maybe two. But after this we're going to Jauntre's, the dress shop where Connie Wright works, and getting them outfitted compliments of Mr. Orr. That will take the rest of the evening, and I won't have time to cross town and get you. Have Saul take you."

Wolfe had strange ideas about mechanical devices, and transportation in particular. One reason Wolfe doesn't leave his office on business is because it usually means he must use some sort of mechanical conveyance, which he is convinced will decide to fall apart at the most dangerous moment. The strange thing is, even though his fear of motor transportation borders on mute hysteria, the fear doesn't extend to his elevator in the brownstone, which he uses regularly without qualms or even a second thought. I've never been able to figure it. I suppose that since his fear is irrational, it can be irrationally selective as well.

The only way Wolfe will consider traveling in a car is if I am at the wheel. I think it's because he thinks my reactive instincts will kick in just in time to avert the disaster when it inevitably comes. Although he has let Saul Panzer drive him on occasion, he will only do so if it's really necessary. Wolfe drew in a breath and said,

"No, Archie. Saul has other business, and has left here. Fritz is at Mssr. Domengeaux's kitchen, I presume. You will need to return here to take me to Mr. Rottfeld's office. Assuming the makeup treatment is successful and that you have reported circumstances accurately, Miss Wright and Mrs. Orr can be left with instructions."

"I'm not so sure. They might change their minds if something happens, or even if nothing happens. I'd feel better if I stayed with them. Take a taxi."

I could imagine him shuddering.

“Pfui. Two attractive women with new outfits and faces, not willing to give men an opportunity to strut? They will be there. The largest problem is to defuse the situation that precipitated this, if it can be done at all, and that is not our concern. Leave them instructions and return here as soon as possible.”

The connection went. I was nowhere near as sure as the fat genius was, but I decided to wait a little, then check on the girls to get another take on the situation before I backed out on the shuttle job.

After staring at ladies’ magazines for about three days, or maybe it was fifteen minutes, I got up and went through Jill Smith’s office to the booth and found that things had changed drastically. Madame Smith was well into their treatments, and the marks on Carol’s face were already gone. Carol had a mirror in her hand admiring the results.

“It’s amazing. I never would have believed it could be done. I can’t see anything.”

I gave Madame Smith a pat on the shoulder and said,

“You’re a jewel, honey. Give yourself a bonus. How much longer?”

“Really, Mr. Goodwin, these things take time to do right. And I have to show Mrs. Orr how do it herself until her marks heal. I can’t say how long. Maybe an hour more.”

I regarded the girls. They were animated, smiling. In a few minutes they would be giggling. I decided there would be no problem leaving them alone. By the time they finished in the dress shop they would be able to fly to Rottfeld’s office.

“Okay, ladies. I’m off on a second career. I’m going to be a chauffeur, not that I want to. I’ll stop by Jauntre’s and make payment arrangements. You girls go there and shoot the works. Complete outfits for both of you. Only don’t get identical outfits. You’re hard enough to tell apart as it is. Dinner will be served at Mr. Rottfeld’s office at seven. Don’t be late. Do either of you have a phone?”

Carol said she did.

“Use it if anything comes up to change plans.” I jotted my number on a page torn from my notebook and gave it to Carol, getting her number in return. “Any other questions?”

“No, Archie.” It was Carol. “We’ll be there, and thanks. Thanks in advance for the dresses too. I really think this will work.”

I turned to Connie, sitting in a smaller chair on the far wall of the booth. She wasn’t as exuberant as Carol. Grudges must be nursed. But she did look me in the eye and mouth a thank you be-

fore I turned to go. I decided it might be worthwhile to work it so that someday I saw a look of passion in that face, the right kind.

Six

With the errand to the dress shop and the cross-town traffic it was after six when I got home. Wolfe would be down from the plant rooms, presumably getting ready in his room. I called the garage and told Jonnie to get the Heron sedan ready. The Heron was old when Wolfe bought it, and was now practically an antique, but it was the only sedan with a back seat Wolfe liked, so we had kept it in perfect condition. I have my own car that I use when the occasion requires. On the way up to my room I knocked on Wolfe's door to tell him I was home, got a grunt in return and proceeded up to my room.

I decided the occasion warranted something special and quickly hosed off the body, scraped the whiskers, and put on my white dinner jacket and hand tied black bowtie with a linen shirt made by Bill Jones. I didn't wear my newest shoes, though, because my older black Pinchots would be more comfortable for the dancing I was hoping to arrange. Looking in the full-size mirror mounted on the door to my room's bathroom, I decided that one of the ten most eligible bachelors in New York would be getting a run for his money tonight.

I finished just in time to hear the doorbell ring. Jonnie with the car. As I started down, I heard Wolfe's elevator door close and the mechanism start. I got to the front door, and took the keys from Jonnie before Wolfe arrived. I had time to help Wolfe with his overcoat.

It's really too bad Wolfe doesn't go out more often. With his brown-black jacket and necktie, mohair coat and ruffled British admiral's hat he looked quite dapper and would turn heads anywhere. If Wolfe ever decides to quit the genius business, he could rent out as a dandy for duchesses. With a yellow muffler and Australian bloodwood cane Wolfe cut quite a figure.

You'd think someone with Wolfe's build and bulk would be awkward going down the steps and getting into the back seat of the sedan, but Wolfe is really quite graceful, needing no help from me other than to shut doors when he is through. Jonnie knew I liked the Heron warmed up when it comes, and it was ready, purring like a kitten. I pulled into the street, deciding to circle around and take 34th all the way through, even though there was construction on Seventh Avenue.

I can drive the Heron so the ride is as smooth as a baby's behind. But it wouldn't be good for Wolfe, who sits in the back seat with a grim look on his face, hand grasping the strap on the side, waiting for the unavoidable accident. Wolfe thinks I deliberately look for a hole in the road just to irritate him, but he's wrong. I look for a hole in the road for two reasons: to let him know the car won't fall apart on a whim, and on the theory that everyone's cells need to be jostled occasionally

just so they appreciate the status quo. The construction on Seventh was ideal for the purpose because the road had an unpaved section that had washboarded.

It was a doozie. Couldn't have asked for better. After we were through, Wolfe muttered from the back seat,

“Archie, you did that deliberately.”

“Sorry sir. Your tax dollars at work.”

“Please drive more carefully. I wish to arrive intact.”

“Yes sir.”

Those were the only words we exchanged until we arrived at the building. I swung into the loading zone in front, opened the door for Wolfe, and gave the valet the keys to park the sedan.

Inside, when we exited the elevator on the twelfth floor, I was pleased to see that my request had been entertained and the picture was gone, replaced by a nice green tree in a pot. As I escorted Wolfe down the hall he didn't seem to notice the pictures on the walls.

Inside the anti-room, Wolfe looked around appreciatively. The carved table had been moved to the front of the fireplace, which had a fire burning merrily, and the soft chairs had been put against the walls. Some nice wooden straightback chairs had been obtained from somewhere and placed around the table. Rottfeld had even found one larger than normal for Wolfe.

Rottfeld was there. No one else had come, but it was still a little early. He had changed to a black jacket and bowtie, and looked very suave. I introduced Wolfe to Rottfeld. Wolfe shook Rottfeld's offered hand, which Wolfe doesn't like to do, but it was Rottfeld's room. After pleasantries, Wolfe said,

“A fine room. Comfortable. I commend you. You should come see my office when the work is finished. May I look at your books?”

Rottfeld said of course and Wolfe started wandering over the titles. I told Wolfe I would go up and check on Fritz and got a grunt in reply.

Upstairs in the kitchen Fritz had little time to talk to me. He was being kept busy giving orders to and answering questions from the cooks and Mssr. Domengeaux, who Fritz introduced to me. Domengeaux had persuaded Fritz to oversee the braised beef with wine sauce for the Teak Room customers in addition to the downstairs meal, and word had been spread that Fritz Brenner was in the kitchen. Orders for the beef had surpassed what was prepared, and Fritz was discussing what to do now with Domengeaux. I knew I would hear plenty about it the next day, but for now things seemed more or less under control, so I returned to the office after telling Fritz how to get to the party.

Orr and Gessel had arrived in my absence, and Wolfe was standing by the table and fireplace talking to Orr. Just as I was thinking I might get stuck with Gessel, Marley and Garre walked in, and I had a chance to introduce them to Wolfe. When one of the waiters from upstairs came down with a refreshment cart and started filling drink orders, Rottfeld used the opportunity to get me aside and ask what progress had been made. I told him that there had been some developments, but that we weren't ready to report yet. That didn't sit well with him at all, and he started pressing me. It came to the point where he was realizing I wasn't going to budge, and would either have to give it up or get nasty, when his eyes darted over my shoulder, and he gasped and nearly dropped his drink.

Carol or Connie, I didn't know which, dammit, had entered the room. The dammit I uttered under my breath because there was only one of her, not the two promised. She had some bundles under her arms, and Garre and Orr went to her and helped her with her packages and coat. Rottfeld was too dumbstruck to move.

"Hi Connie," Orr said. "This is a surprise, but glad you could come. Is Carol coming?"

"She is." Connie replied. Then she said something, just to Orr, that I couldn't catch. Whatever it was took Orr by surprise, and he watched her with a puzzled look as Garre introduced Connie to the others. Wolfe bowed slightly to her, but didn't offer his hand. When they got to Rottfeld and me, Rottfeld finally recovered enough to blurt out,

"You're Carol's sister? You look just like her!"

"We've been told that." Connie said with a smile. "Carol will be here soon. I think I'll leave it to her to tell where she's been."

"You mean she's coming to dinner here?"

"Yes, Mr. Rottfeld. Hello, Mr. Archie. How do you like the dress?"

"It's swell." I said with youthful vitality. It was a strapless velvet dress designed to make men strut. "Can I take you to the prom?"

"Maybe later. I came to eat, and I'm starving. Carol said to start without her, she might be a little late."

Wolfe doesn't like his meals interrupted by latecomers, but he wasn't the host, and Connie's words had set Rottfeld to action. He invited the guests to sit, starting with Connie, indicating chairs. But I took Connie's arm and steered her to a corner to ask,

"What happened? Where's Carol?"

“She said she’d be here. She promised.” Connie lowered her voice. “But I’m worried now, Archie. I’m not sure I should have let her go. But she was so insistent. She said there was something she absolutely had to do.”

“What something?”

“She didn’t say. I assumed she was going to see Chuck, but he’s here. Now I’m worried. What’s happening?”

“I don’t know.” I was worried, too. Something was wrong. The base of my spine had started tingling for no reason that I could see. “Why didn’t you call?”

“Carol didn’t call you?”

“No.”

“She said she would. She had the phone and your number, and I saw her start to use it after she got into the cab.”

“When did she go?”

“Just after the salon. She looked great. Perfect. So it wasn’t that. She was looking forward to coming here.”

I gawked at her. “She went right after I left? She could be anywhere in the state by now.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Archie. She just said to pick out a dress for her, and that she would find someplace to change here. I know what she likes. Then she took a cab. I don’t know where. She just told him to go up Park.”

“There’s nothing else you remember?”

“No. It wasn’t a big thing at the time Archie, or I would have called. Now, I’m scared.”

“Me too. But the others are waiting. Let’s go sit down and eat, and hope Carol shows.”

Wolfe had been watching us. Everyone had been watching us. So I steered Connie to the place Rottfeld indicated, and went back to the corner, where Wolfe joined me as the others were seated by Rottfeld. I explained the situation to Wolfe and said,

“I don’t see what we can do besides wait. I could try her phone. Maybe I could get Fred and Saul to cover Connie’s apartment and Orr’s place.”

“Saul is at a bar mitzvah and unavailable. Get Mr. Wyatt instead.”

I stepped into Rottfeld’s cubbyhole to start phoning. First was to Carol’s phone, but the recording said she was either out of area, or the phone was turned off. It was a mess. Something inside me kept wanting to blame Connie for not phoning, but the fact was I had given the number and instructions to Carol because she had seemed more receptive to them at the time. It was a dumb

mistake, and I don't like making dumb mistakes. Chances were pretty poor that Carol would turn up at Connie's or her apartment, but they would be better if we moved fast.

Fred was at home, and lived only five blocks from Connie's, so I gave him Carol's description and told him to make sure she wasn't in the apartment, then watch for her and call if anything happens. Steve Wyatt, who we have used on occasion for tailing jobs, had a cell phone and could make it to Orr's place within a half hour. While I was talking to Steve, Rottfeld came in and started in on me as soon as I had rung off.

"What the hell's going on, Goodwin? Where's Carol? And why didn't you tell me Connie was Carol's twin?"

"I don't know where Carol is, but she said she was coming. I've seen her, and she is doing fine. As for Connie, if she's Carol's twin, they sure don't want the fact advertised. They like to be treated as their own women, I suppose. Besides, I don't see what difference that makes or why you would need to know."

"You think things were complicated before? Now I can't even tell which way is down, dammit. I waste my life pining after something I can't have, and here comes someone who I can't even tell from Carol. She looks the same, she talks the same, and she's unattached. She's not the same, and I know it. But how do I handle it when I can't even tell the difference?"

He had it bad. And he was wrong. I had seen several differences in the two. Connie was more spontaneous, as her hands had shown, while Carol thought things through more. But there was no reasoning with a man in that state.

"I can't help you there. You're just going to have to figure it for yourself. But don't think that Connie is just sitting around waiting to be plucked. There have got to be a lot of men on her string. You have to decide if you are going to be loyal to your romantic notions of lost love, or if you are going to go for the real thing, and you're going to have to decide fast. Good luck, brother. Come on. People are waiting."

Seven

The dinner was a bust.

The food was fantastic. Fritz outdid himself with the beef, and Domengeaux himself came down to serve a salmon and egg frappe that was superb, and got raves from Wolfe and Orr.

The conversation was excellent, ranging from the Jamaican slave trade, which both Wolfe and Marley knew well and discussed in animated detail, to worldwide economics, which Orr and Wolfe discussed at length. It had been Orr's major in college, and he knew what he was talking about, even giving Wolfe a run for his money on whether the exploitation of cheap labor in third-world countries was beneficial. Wolfe asserted that no industry that exploited workers was moral or beneficial in the long run, and Orr countered by challenging Wolfe to name a single country whose standard of living was not raised by trade with the West, whether workers were exploited or not. Wolfe could not, but claimed that the same could be accomplished without exploitation. The discussion was spirited and interesting. At one point, Connie became involved and talked at length of the living conditions of Chinese women who worked the factories there. Even Gessel added some intelligent comments at points, and Rottfeld got sucked into the conversation once.

Rottfeld spent most of the time stealing glances at Connie, though. Probably trying to decide whether to be loyal or active.

Everything was great, but it was a bust because Carol didn't show. As time went on, the conversation became more strained, and the anti-room began to take its effect. Connie fell silent and began staring at her plate and pushing her food around. That made Rottfeld sour and dark. Finally, the only two who were still going at it were Wolfe and Orr. The fire had died to embers and Rottfeld hadn't bothered to stoke it.

I quietly excused myself and went to the cubbyhole to call Steve and Fred. No news. Fred had knocked many times on Connie's door and was parked at the end of the hall in a chair, watching it. He had brought tools for the Careliss lock on Connie's apartment, but I had told him not to use them just yet. Steve gave the same story. Quiet on both fronts. I rejoined the party.

Connie was the first to break, during coffee. She turned away from the table, got up and started sobbing at a painting next to the fireplace. Rottfeld jumped up and tried to do something, but she turned away from him. That interrupted Wolfe's conversation, as he stared wide-eyed at her. Wolfe cannot stand to be in the same room with a crying woman. He turned to me and whispered,

"Confound it, Archie, where is that woman?"

“I don’t know. If I did, you can bet I wouldn’t be here.”

Wolfe pointed a thumb at Connie.

“Is she going to calm down?”

“I doubt it. It will only get worse. We need to find Mrs. Orr.”

“Then do so. Now. Take Miss Wright with you.”

“Right. Which direction? China? Jamaica?”

“Pfui. Start at Miss Wright’s apartment. That seems to be her haven. She may be hiding out there again.”

“What about you? How will you get home?”

“I shall wait until Fritz is finished and summon Saul. He should be available by then. Confound that woman. She has ruined the evening.”

I was trying to figure which woman he meant as I excused myself, got Connie’s coat and packages, and gently escorted her out of the room.

Rottfeld followed us out. I told him that there was nothing he could do, just sit tight and await developments. During the whole thing the only person who didn’t seem concerned was Orr, damn him.

Eight

Connie had settled a little by the time we exited the elevator on the ground floor and I told her where we were headed. I think she was calmed mainly by the fact that we were doing something, and not just playing like there wasn't a problem. We caught a cab and traveled in silence across town.

As the cab pulled to the curb in front of the towers, two things happened at once. I saw Fred on the curb using his cell phone and trying to flag a cab, and my phone rang. I told the driver to stop and open the front door for Fred, who saw us and jumped in.

"She took off like a bat out of hell. Caught the elevator just right. She was down to the ground floor before I even got an elevator."

"Who?"

"Carol Orr. Came out of the apartment with a yellow and red scarf and sunglasses. Tan overcoat, jeans and black pumps. She musta had trouble getting a cab because she was just taking off when I got down here. She's headed North, Checker number 8462. Maybe a block ahead."

I told the driver to move it, North, and step on it. I introduced Fred to Connie. Fred is bald and burly and gruff, and can intimidate someone when called for, but don't let that fool you. He goes with his wife to visit the widows in his neighborhood every Sunday night just to make sure they're doing okay.

Sorry. Truthfully, he doesn't go that far, but he is a pretty nice guy once you get to know him and he's so loyal to Wolfe that he spent a night in the hoosegow on two different occasions because he wouldn't tell the cops what case he was working. Telling wouldn't have rocked the boat any, but Wolfe hadn't told him he could tell, so he didn't. Fred looked at Connie, then at me, and said,

"Must be a twin, huh?"

Connie was on the edge of hysteria. She said nothing to Fred, but turned to me and said,

"Archie, what's she doing? She doesn't know anyone or do anything up this way. What's she doing?"

I ignored her, except to give her hand a pat and told Fred,

"Watch the right turnoffs. I'll take the left. Keep your eyes in front, too. Hey Ali."

"Sammy." The driver, who had a small black beard, pointed to his license on the visor.

"Okay, Sammy. We have to find a taxi. Checker 8462. One hundred dollars if you catch up."

“I shall try, but I will not speed. It is Ramadan and I obey the law. The rest is up to Allah. We find the taxi or we don’t. It is in Allah’s hands.”

Great. Twenty thousand hacks in New York and I had to get the one who couldn’t be greased. Fred asked,

“You want me to motivate him, Arch?”

Now I’m all for the law, as long as it doesn’t put me out of a job. And religion is okay too--anything to better mankind. But I resent someone practicing it when my dimes are ticking through the meter. I told Fred,

“Wait a second. So you are Muslim, Sammy?”

“Ah, yes! Sammy brightened. You know the Moslem religion?”

“A little. Is it true that if you die with the name of Allah on your lips you will go to paradise?”

“Yes. That is true.”

I leaned close to his ear and said, barely audible through my teeth, “Okay, fine, Sammy. Then you have two choices. You can either speed this crate up and find that taxi, or you can repeat Allah over and over again. What’s it going to be?”

I had to admit he had a brain. He glowered at me through the rearview mirror when the implication of what I had said set in, but he did speed up to a good clip and even made a move on another car that I don’t think I would have tried myself. We were headed North, past eightieth. We had caught glimpses of a checker taxi ahead, but could never get close enough to check the number, or even catch who was in the back. Whoever was driving it, though, was making time as well as we were. Fred was saying he could phone Checker and see if they would patch him through to the taxi, and I said go ahead.

A fog was coming in from the North river, and we wouldn’t be able to see too far ahead if we continued like we were. Connie was over the edge. She looked around in nervous jerks and kept repeating ‘what’s she doing?’ I finally said,

“Look, Connie, you’ve got to compose yourself. Answer some questions. Are you sure Carol doesn’t know anyone up here?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Why are you so nervous? Is there something you haven’t told me?”

“I don’t know, Archie. I have this terrible feeling. Carol said yesterday she felt like killing herself, but I didn’t believe her.”

I grabbed her shoulders and pulled her around so I could look at her full face.

“She what? She said she wanted to kill herself? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Oh, Archie, I would have told you, but I didn’t think she was serious. Now I don’t know, I don’t know. Why is she doing this?”

I settled her into the corner. That did it. Connie’s not phoning me when things changed might be excusable, but not mentioning Carol’s remarks about killing herself meant Connie didn’t have enough judgment to make passionate looks worthwhile. Rottfeld could have her for all I cared.

“Just stay put while I think of something. Fred, you’re sure that was Carol Orr?”

“Hell, no.” Fred was dialing the Checker number. “I didn’t even get a look at her face. But she came out of that apartment and wore a red and yellow scarf. With leaves like you said. She had the right build and wore the right clothes. She was sure in a hurry.”

“Okay. Look, is that her?” A Checker cab was turning right ahead. We were headed to Harlem.

A keen memory is essential for a detective, and I’ve got the best. But it has its drawbacks. I’d just as soon forget that trip, with Connie passing in and out of hysteria, Fred frantically trying to persuade the cab company to stop that cab, or at least patch him through to it, and me trying keep an eye on the cab. The strange thing was, for all we knew, Carol could be doing nothing more than going for a Famous Freezie at Howie’s. It all ended when, just as Sammy made a move behind the cab close enough to verify the number, it pulled to the right and stopped halfway across the 142nd Street bridge. The scarf I had seen earlier jumped out, and the woman under it climbed the railing, and dived into the river as casually as if she were taking a Sunday swim. No hesitation or glance to us, even though we were yelling at her.

I was so on edge that I might have gone in after her if Fred and I hadn’t been busy holding back Connie, who had the same idea. The fog was in heavy now, and there was a mist over the river; so we could see nothing. The traffic drowned out any sounds.

I told Fred to call emergency, and I dialed Wolfe. No one was home, so I dialed Rottfeld’s office. Orr answered with his boom, and said Wolfe was still there.

“Quite a guy, that Wolfe. Said he once built a fireplace using rocks he dug out of a mountain with his fingernails. Here ya go.”

“Yes?”

“Me. On the 142nd Street bridge, above Harlem. Carol Orr, or a reasonable facsimile, has just jumped off the bridge into the river. Connie is a basket case. Do I go in after her?”

“Confound it Archie! Your propensity to create a calamity is unequalled. You can do nothing. Leave there and come get me. I have called Saul and he will not be able to come for another hour. I wish to go home.”

“Thanks for the helpful suggestions. A woman has gone kervorkian, another has lost her sanity, and you want me to play hackie.”

“Kervorkian? Stop butchering the tongue.”

“You’re just jealous because you didn’t coin it.”

“Bosh. Jealous of your hideous vulgarisms? But that woman has not committed suicide. The Harlem bridge? Pfui. If she wanted to kill herself, she would be more romantic about it. The Brooklyn Bridge or the Empire State Building, I should think.”

“I saw her go over, for crying out loud. That water’s got ice in it so she’s gone by now, barring a miracle. And the Empire State Building has barriers.”

“Pfui. There are no barriers to the determined soul.” Wolfe sighed. “But I suppose you feel you must stay to see what outcome there is. Don’t take long. I assure you, Archie, anything there would overrun your modest faculties.”

I snorted. “Thanks so much, Mr. Wolfe. Your incredible brain has come through for this poor impotent pupa once again.” I hung up.

The Checker cabbie was there, wondering who was going to pay him. I asked him a few questions, and all he could add was that his passenger had been in a hell of a hurry, which was perfectly normal for New York. “Hurrying to her funeral,” he said. “who woulda guessed?” Sammy was doing some sort of religious thing over the water.

The purse, left on the back seat of the cab, was the same one I had seen Carol carrying, but I didn’t want to disturb it. So I paid the cabbie myself and told him to stick around for the cops, then called Steve Wyatt and told him to go home.

Connie wanted to go looking downstream and I decided to humor her, which was a mistake. We couldn’t see a damn thing, and I ended up ruining my shoes and pants when I slipped on the bank about fifty yards down. The water was cold as, well, ice. The cops and paramedics had arrived by the time we got back, and were upset that we had left the scene. I pointed out that the scene was moving Southeast at five miles per hour, which they didn’t appreciate. I got rude with a lady cop when she said they weren’t going to call out the search crews until the morning because it was too late anyway.

A perfect evening, all in all. As good as the ride to the bridge was, the ride home topped it. Connie had got it into her head that if I hadn’t shown up that afternoon everything would have been okay, which was probably true, so she was passionate again: nursing her grudge and some newly formed bruises on her wrists. When we arrived at her apartment I offered to stay with her and help

with anything she needed. She was very gracious, articulate and refined, considering the circumstances.

“Go to hell.” She said as she got out of the cab.

Nine

Saul had called and said he was at the office building and would take Wolfe home. When I arrived at the brownstone after dropping Fred off and asking him to report in the morning, it was about two on Wednesday AM. There was a light on in the hall, so I rang and Fritz let me in.

“Hello, Archie. I am happy you are here. We just arrived. I rode home with Mr. Wolfe, and he is not happy. Archie, why is it that every time I prepare a meal away from home something terrible happens? Am I what is known as a *gianques*?”

I think he meant jinx.

“Probably. That explains it all. It wasn’t because Mr. Wolfe and I screwed up, it’s because of you. If I were you, I’d lock myself in the basement and not come up tomorrow.”

“Maybe so.” Fritz mused. “But he must be fed.”

“My eye. He could use a fast more than anyone I know.”

“No, Archie. I know you are upset, but he needs us. Do you know what Mr. Domengeaux said? He said he would like me to be his partner. Me! It is a wonderful honor, Archie. But I cannot leave Mr. Wolfe, because he needs me and I am obligated to him. He needs you too, Archie, just as you need him.”

“The hell I do. Fritz, you’re a great cook, and a wonderful guy to have around. But your sense of duty is way overwrought. I’m going to bed, or maybe to give him a piece of my mind. Good night.”

The light was on under Wolfe’s door, so I knocked, and got a “Come in, Archie.” Wolfe was standing next to the bed in his yellow shirtsleeves, no tie.

“Good evening, sir. I trust your ride home was more pleasant than mine?”

“Archie, I’m sorry for what happened, but it couldn’t be helped.”

“Right. It was essential that I give you a ride to dinner instead of keeping tabs on her.”

“Pfui. We had no inkling that she would skedaddle. There have been many times when altering our course may have prevented a death, but we are not prophets, Archie. I would say that, on balance, we have prevented far more deaths through our efforts.”

“Maybe so, but it eats on me anyway. What are we going to do now? I’ve got Fred coming in the morning.”

“Nothing.”

I gaped. “What? Nothing?”

Wolfe went and sat down in his chair. “What is there to do, Archie? If that woman is dead, there is no one to deliver. Our task is finished.”

I sat on the bed. “The hell it is. I can’t figure it. You said she didn’t commit suicide. Okay. Maybe so. Maybe they are triplets. But we have to find out what happened.”

“No, Archie. I know you are muddled right now. But if you were seeing more clearly you would realize that there can be no satisfactory conclusion to this debacle. It is best left alone.”

“But we have to find out what happened so they get their money’s worth. Use your noodle. If we’re lucky, Rottfeld will fall for Connie and everything will turn out okay.”

“No. I don’t have to find out what happened. I know now. With the training I have given you, you should know too, Archie. But you have obviously been addled by those women. I can talk to Fred in the morning. I can send Saul on investigation. But it won’t resolve things to anyone’s satisfaction.”

“Then we refund the retainer.”

“No. We keep it. We found her. The rest was beyond our control.”

I gaped at him again. “What? You’re keeping a hundred grand retainer for this shoddy piece of work? What happened to your obligation to your client?”

“Pfui! What client? What retainer?” Wolfe bellowed. “You may have a client, Archie, but I don’t. I saw no money! I endorsed no check! All I have are invisible ciphers buried in a nameless sarcophagus in a lost catacomb. I know you and your tricks, Archie. There was no retainer in my account when you persuaded me to join you in this mess. It doesn’t exist.”

Damn. I should have realized that Wolfe would need to see something tangible.

“It’s there, all right, and we’re obliged to earn it. If you don’t believe it now then you sure will when you have to sign the refund check. And you will have to sign one. We can’t keep a hundred grand for what we did. I’ll go earn it myself if I have to.”

“Pfui. You wouldn’t live long enough. There will be no refund. Telephone Fred and tell him not to come.”

I couldn’t believe it. This was the worst Wolfe had ever treated a client. I was beginning to feel some of the frustration Inspector Cramer, head of the Westside Homicide Department, always feels when he deals with Wolfe.

I gritted my teeth and said, “I must say, sir. That this is low, to treat a client like this. This is the lowest you’ve ever gone. If you lived in Death Valley your damn elevator would have to go down instead of up.” I turned to go.

“Rift!” Wolfe said to my back.

I wheeled around. “Huh?”

“The Rift Valley, Archie. In Israel, where the Dead Sea lies. It is fully one thousand feet lower than Death Valley. Perhaps I shall visit it one day. If you must speak metaphorically, Archie, use the precise symbol.”

The closest Wolfe would ever get to the Rift Valley was to run his finger along it on his newly refinished globe that was due to arrive tomorrow, or rather, today. I swear, sometimes I think Wolfe’s head needs to be moored to the top of the Empire State building. I turned and left. Wolfe said “Good night, Archie” to my back, but I didn’t reply.

Later, in my pajamas in my room, I sat down at the table that held my manual typewriter, poured a drink out of an old bottle of rye from my closet and pulled the phone to call Fred. I started dialing, then decided it was the wrong number and dialed Saul. His service answered, and I left a message to come in the morning. Somehow, I’d arrange it so Wolfe would earn that money. I hung up and began trying to figure the mess. The rye was no help, though. What I really needed was a smoke.

Ten

I could hear the sirens of the rescue crews rushing to look for Carol's body. But something was different. Everything was hazy, and my head was pounding. I was trying to yell to the workers that they were looking in the wrong place, and the stupid sirens weren't stopping.

I should have been having a dream something like that when the alarm rang at eight o'clock and I awoke. But instead of having last night's suicide in my head, there was nothing but wisps of cotton. If there is some way to wake me gently I don't know what it is. I take a good eight and a half hours of sleep every night, and am surly if I don't get it. That morning, I was way short. I have no trouble going to sleep once I'm in bed, two minutes average. But it took three drinks of rye and the stroke of three to get me to feel like going. Now it was eight o'clock. Too early for me, but not for the workers downstairs, who had already started arriving and making noise.

I knew I had to get down there. Most of the basic work was done. The painters had finished except for some details, like the gold trim around the ceiling of the office. And some of the furniture was due to arrive. I got up in one wretched heave, and headed to the bathroom.

Downstairs, Fritz wished me good morning and I said so that's what it was, and began on the juice and griddlecakes with alfalfa honey he set before me. After the second glass of orange juice and first cup of coffee I began to emerge from the fog, but was not entirely sure I wanted to.

"Mr. Rottfeld has been calling." Fritz said once I looked human. "He is very anxious for you to talk to him. Mr. Orr has called, too." I'd call them when I felt like it.

I cut breakfast short because the sparkys had finished and wanted me to inspect their work. The old hidden microphone in the office, wired to a cabinet in the kitchen, was out, replaced by three video cameras, embedded in the walls at various angles to take in the entire office. A fourth was in a wall in the front room. The lenses were nearly invisible, having been placed in the center of dark wooden scrolls that were part of the trim in the rooms. The signals came through on the cable that went through the house, so we could tune the cameras in on any TV, including the one in Fritz's kitchen.

The metal detector, which Wolfe had ordered after someone took pot shots at me in the office, was buried in the molding around the front door. A neat trick. The only thing visible was a display mounted behind the door that I could glance at as someone entered. The display turned out to be much better than the beepers at La Guardia. I went to the basement and brought up a cardboard box containing the assortment of weapons that I normally keep in the bottom right drawer of my

desk, and had the technicians choose various items to conceal on themselves and walk through the door as I watched the display. The technicians were having great fun, posing as gangsters and loading up with guns, knives, blackjacks and brass knuckles. The display did a good job of not only showing how much metal a person was carrying, but where and what it was. I got good enough at reading it that I could not only tell a gun from a knife, but I could almost tell the caliber of the gun.

By the time I was finished with the door, I was anxious to see if any progress had been made at the river. I decided I'd better call Rottfeld first, though. His ciphers may be invisible to Wolfe, but they were plain enough to me. Rottfeld was at the river, and a search was just starting. Connie was there, and Orr was with him, as usual. Rottfeld was pretty upset and anxious, but I had decided that if he didn't hint that we had botched everything, neither would I, and after he told me he would call if anything was found, and after I told him likewise, I hung up.

The rest of the morning was occupied with the workers. At about ten the furniture van came by and men started bringing in the desks and chairs. The dining room table was not due until Friday, as it was a particularly difficult job. My desk looked good as new, with the corner repaired so it was nearly invisible, and the new finish covering the various scratches and dents made over the years. The only damage remaining was a single bullet, buried in the top. I had wanted that as a memento, so they had varnished it in, and covered the top of the desk with glass.

The chairs, including Wolfe's custom oversized, his favorite, had been covered with new leather. The globe had been refurbished and was now mottled with mountains that you could feel. The painted political boundaries had been updated to be current, at least for the rest of the month.

It was beginning to look like a room again, but there were still items missing, like the safe and the yellow chairs and sofa, which were out at a different company. I was interrupted once by the phone, which was still in the kitchen. It was Lon Cohen of the *Gazette* who had noticed Carol Orr's name in the suicide story, and wanted to know how I was involved. It was obvious after a couple of questions that he didn't know anything, so I gave him a reply that was gracious, articulate and refined, and hung up.

Fred and Saul arrived together a little before eleven, and I got a chance to try the metal detector for real. They were both carrying pieces, and I showed them how they looked on the display by going through the door with their weapons while they watched. When the fun was over I ushered them into the office and brought a chair from the kitchen to supplement the red leather chair that had arrived. They appreciated the changes, then Saul said,

“Tough break, Archie. Last night.”

“It wasn't a break, it was a screwup.”

“Nah. No one could have known.”

“The chauffeur should have. You got it figured?”

“What’s to figure? Didn’t you see the whole thing?”

“Sure, but something’s not right. Wolfe says he’s got it and that I should have it, but I’m so addled I don’t even know what he means.”

“Well, let’s ask him when he comes down.”

“Sorry, he’s done with this job. His rate is now a hundred G’s per day.”

“Oh. A relapse?”

“No. He never even got started.”

“How can we help, Archie?”

“I don’t know. I’ve got one idea, but I’m not sure it will work. Just play along.”

The last remaining painter, who was working on the gold trim, was in the front room at my request. I went to the kitchen and called up to the plant rooms and told Wolfe that his chair, desk and other items had arrived. Wolfe said that was satisfactory, which meant he was pleased beyond endurance. Then I gave Fritz some instructions and got some beer for Saul and Fred, and some milk for me. Fred doesn’t like beer; it gives him a headache. But I’ve never been able to get him to discard the idea that it would insult Wolfe to refuse it.

After a few sips and some banter, the sound of the elevator came, and Wolfe entered. When he saw Fred and Saul, he stopped, looked at me and said,

“What is this, Archie?”

“Just some items that were delivered. Take no notice.”

Wolfe glared at me but said nothing. He went around to the wall in back of his desk and arranged the orchids in the holder, then walked over to the globe and began inspecting it, probably running his fingers through the Rift Valley. After a moment he went to his desk and inspected it, then the chair, rubbing the leather with a pleased look on his face. It had been too long since he had sat in it. Finally, Wolfe muttered “satisfactory” and sat in his chair with a sigh. He closed his eyes for a few moments, and it was quiet. Then Wolfe turned to me and opened his eyes.

“The mail, Archie?”

“Still in the kitchen.”

Wolfe reached under the desk to push the button for Fritz.

“Sorry sir, the buzzer isn’t hooked up yet. And Fritz is out.”

“Fritz? Out? But it is only an hour until luncheon. Where the deuce could he be going?”

“On an errand, sir. For shoe polish. Lunch will probably be delayed.”

Wolfe's eyes opened wider and then closed into slits of suspicion. "Shoe polish?"

"Yes sir. Herrod's black. The kind you like."

"I need no shoe polish. What the devil is this, Archie?"

"Sorry, sir. I got my favorite shoes wet last night and thought I would try to rescue them. Fritz was kind enough to go for the polish, although he might be thinking it's for you. You can have whatever I don't use."

Wolfe regarded me, his lips in a tight line. His finger was starting to make small circles on the arm of his chair, a sign that he was angry enough to spit.

"When is Fritz due back?"

"Soon. He only had to go to Macy's. But I told him to call before he returned. He may have another errand to do, depending on circumstances."

"Indeed. What circumstances?"

"Well, Saul and Fred and I are tied up on the Rottfeld case. No telling how long it will take. None of us can break free right now to take care of trivialities like running errands." I regarded Wolfe with one eyebrow raised. He hates that look, because he can't duplicate it. The corner of Wolfe's mouth twitched as he watched me, but he retained his composure.

"I see. So this is how it is. I shall tell Fritz to return immediately when he calls."

"Sorry, sir. The only working phone is in the kitchen."

I tried to imagine Wolfe trying to beat me to the phone when it rang. Very comical. Of course, he wouldn't even try. He had been anticipating sitting in his chair for so long that he wasn't going to leave it, especially since it would mean I had got the best of him. Wolfe tried another angle, namely the angle that intersected Saul.

"Saul. Get the mail. And beer."

This was a critical point. Saul had never disobeyed an instruction from Wolfe, except when his intelligence guided by his experience told him to do otherwise.

"I'd be delighted to, sir." Damn him.

Saul paused, then continued,

"As soon as you settle your differences with Archie." Bless him.

Wolfe glared at Saul, then turned to Fred.

"Fred?"

Fred had never disobeyed an instruction from Wolfe, period. Even when he should have done differently. He was looking like the church meeting had gone on too long, and his tie was cinched too tight. He swallowed, looked from Wolfe to me, then dropped his eyes.

“Likewise.” Was all he could say, and it was a whisper.

Wolfe leaned back and closed his eyes, his finger continuing to make circles on the arm of his new chair. His perfect moment, with his chair and his book and his beer, had been ruined. I expected him to start bellowing, maybe to fire me. It wouldn’t be the first time. But finally, when he spoke, his voice was low, quiet, slow and deliberate.

“Then it is mutiny, Mr. Goodwin.”

“Yes sir. Call me Mr. Christian.”

Wolfe paused. Making a supreme effort to control himself, or maybe just saving up for the earthquake. Finally he spoke, even slower.

“Very well. What are your terms?”

“Nothing much. Just give Rottfeld and Orr what we owe them.”

Wolfe’s voice rose slightly in pitch and took a slight mocking tone. “And how do you propose I do that? Raise Mrs. Orr from the dead? Deliver her body?”

“No. Besides, I thought you said she didn’t commit suicide. Just find out what happened and give our clients an explanation. I think they deserve to know. Carry this to a resolution. Let me report. Let Fred report. Figure it out.”

Wolfe said nothing. Instead, he leaned back, closed his eyes, and began a small lip movement, barely perceptible, out and in, out and in. He was thinking. Deeply; about something. Chills went up my spine. Wolfe was engaging in the task at last. Saul looked at me and winked. Fred just kept his head down.

The phone in the kitchen rang, and I went to answer it. It was Fritz. He had been very puzzled at the timing of the errand I had sent him on, and was now wanting to come home.

“I will not have time to prepare the dressing properly, Archie.”

“It’s okay now. Come home as fast as possible.”

On the way back into the office I stopped at the fridge and made Wolfe a tray with beer and the mail. Wolfe was still exercising the lips, so I put the mail, and the bottle and glass on his desk, and sat in my chair to wait. We were all quiet, watching Wolfe, which was silly. When Wolfe was thinking that deeply very little could disturb him.

Finally, Wolfe came forward and opened his eyes. He saw the beer, poured a glass and let the foam settle to just the right height to cover his upper lip, then drained half the glass. He looked for a napkin in the upper right drawer of his desk, found it empty, and pulled out his handkerchief to wipe the foam off his lip. Finally, he turned to me and said in a businesslike tone,

“Very well, Archie. We shall finish this. Report.”

I started with yesterday's visit to Connie and Carol, and went on with the visit to the beauty salon. I left out the items at the dinner that Wolfe knew about, but included the conversations he hadn't heard. The trip to Harlem was tough to go over again, but I got through it without choking on my tongue. After I was finished, Wolfe had a couple of questions, mainly about the bridge and the water. Then he turned to Fred and said,

"Fred. Go over what you saw at the apartment building. Start with your arrival."

"Yes sir. Sorry sir." Fred was still feeling guilt about his decision to stick with Saul and me.

Fred knew the routine as well as we all did, but had a little trouble rattling off the details. But Wolfe knew how to tickle someone's memory better than anyone I know, and deftly had Fred recreating the scene in the hallway of the apartment, and everything that was happening, minute by minute. It's always a pleasure to see how Wolfe draws details from people, but it was even more satisfying now that Wolfe was finally working. Wolfe caught it about twenty minutes into Fred's report, when Fred was describing how he'd knocked on the door of Connie's apartment for the third time, and gone to sit in a chair at the end of the hall when there was no answer.

"What do you remember next, Fred? Recall that you looked at your watch about five minutes previously, so it would be about nine fifty-five."

"Yes sir. Well, I waited about three minutes, then the elevator bell rang, and a lady stepped out. Dark hair, good looking from where I could see. Wearing a blue parka and jeans. About five seven. Maybe one thirty pounds, but not sure because of the parka. Maybe thirty years old. She went down the hall."

"Of course she did. Which apartment did she go to?"

"No sir. She went down the hall that goes to the left off the elevator."

"Ah. Indeed. And what is down that hallway?"

Fred fidgeted.

"Um. I don't know, sir. She just went down that hall."

"And didn't come back?"

"No sir. That's the last I saw of her."

Wolfe turned.

"Saul?"

"Yes sir. Mail is delivered to each floor of that apartment. That hallway contains the floor's mailboxes and connects to the back hallway. The back hallway goes to the emergency stairs, and to the rear exits of the first three apartments on that level. Another hallway where Fred was sitting

covers the rest of the apartments. I would say she entered one of the apartments from the rear. If Miss Wright's apartment is the second one on that floor, it would be accessible from that hallway."

Saul didn't miss a trick. He likely had memorized the floorplans of every Manhattan apartment larger than Wolfe's girth.

"Ah. Indeed. Thank you Saul. Was this woman carrying anything, Fred?"

"Yes sir. A large black purse, and one of those shopping bags with the cord handles. The bag had something in it."

"Did she look at you, or do anything unusual?"

"She looked at me, but if she made a face or something I didn't notice. She just turned down that hallway."

"How much time passed between this woman's arrival, and when the woman with the scarf emerged?"

"About nine minutes, I think. I checked my watch when I was waiting for the elevator. It was five after ten."

"Could you tell the color of the woman's hair under the scarf?"

"No sir. The scarf covered it all."

"And she didn't look at you?"

"No sir. She just headed for the elevator, and fast. Some people had just got off, and she caught it just as it was heading back down. I didn't have time to catch her."

"Archie, you have been in that apartment. Is it possible to hear the elevator's bell from inside?"

I knew where Wolfe was headed.

"I don't think so, at least not easily. The door is substantial. But the door is also recessed about four inches and opens into the apartment. She could have opened the door all the way without Fred noticing, and could have watched for the elevator. She didn't even have to listen for the bell. If Fred came to knock again, she would have heard him coming in plenty of time to close the door again."

"Very well. Satisfactory. Archie, are there not swimming garments that insulate one from cold water? Wet suits, or something similar?"

"Yes sir. Wet suits. There are lots of different kinds."

"Would it be possible to wear a wet suit under one's clothing such that it wouldn't be noticeable to a casual observer?"

"Sure. There are some pretty thin ones. I know where you're going and I'll be damned. That's why she went to that bridge; it's close to the water. While it would be very uncomfortable to jump

into a freezing river without covering the hands and face, I think that someone with a wetsuit under their clothes could survive the Harlem river long enough to swim to the far shore and get out. It would be hard, though. Whoever jumped in would have to be an expert swimmer, in good shape. They would also need to have made arrangements to warm up right after they got out. Is there a place to get out on the far shore? I don't know, it was too foggy last night to see. I'd have to check. But there is a park on the near shore, and while Connie and I checked it, we could have easily missed someone in that fog."

"There are a couple of places on the far shore within swimming distance of the bridge." Saul. "One's a dead end, fenced off, but last time I saw it the fence had big holes in it. You could have a car parked there, and no one would know the difference."

Wolfe drained his glass, then closed his eyes. I said,

"I still don't get it, though. It sounds like it wasn't Carol Orr, but someone else. Someone with dark hair. Where does she come in, and how come she had Carol's clothes? You want me to go to the bridge and check that far shore?"

Wolfe opened his eyes and turned to me.

"No. That would be a waste of time. We can let the police do that. Saul, Fred. We need to know the identity of that woman. Our hypothesis is that she deliberately posed as Carol Orr to fool us, her taxi driver, and the authorities into believing Mrs. Orr committed suicide. A shoddy attempt. The Harlem river, indeed."

Wolfe started giving instructions. His assumption was that someone who knew Carol was involved. Just as Wolfe was starting to give details of how to proceed to Saul, we were interrupted by the bell. Fritz. I went to the hallway and let him in, no knives from the kitchen on his person. Then the painter in the front room had some questions, so I spent some time with him. When I returned Saul and Fred were up out of their chairs. Saul said,

"Half a grand, Archie. Same for Fred."

Since the safe was gone I had put many of our valuables in the safe deposit box Wolfe has at the bank. But we had some cash that I was keeping in a shoebox in my closet, so I mounted the two flights in about six seconds, and came down with the cash for Fred and Saul, and with another five hundred for me. I helped them with their knickers, saw them off, and went in to Wolfe.

"Okay. The bloodhounds are loose. Where do I start?"

"Nowhere. I need you here."

"Here? How come?"

“Archie. You are in no position to complain, after that charade you instigated. You will stay here to supervise the restoration, and to restock our desk drawers. You will eat lunch with me here in the office. This evening, you will take me to Rusterman’s, where we will dine on rack of lamb, escargot and cheddared Brussels sprouts. You will also arrange to have everyone who was at dinner last night meet in Mr. Rottfeld’s office at nine this evening.” Wolfe’s voice became a thin, sarcastic whine, which he knows I hate. “You asked for a resolution, Mr. Christian. You shall get it. But now, I will have my book from my room.”

I bit my tongue and went for the book. Wolfe knows I can’t stand Brussels sprouts. I’m not crazy about snails, either. If snails were meant to be eaten by man they wouldn’t dissolve when salted.

Eleven

We were in the Heron again. This time I decided to take thirty-sixth; Wolfe had already experienced his jostle for the day. The afternoon had gone fairly smoothly, except that Wolfe was more curt with Fritz than he needed to be. Wolfe had decided Fritz hadn't enough time to prepare what was planned, and we dined on cold meat and sturgeon, and crackers and cheese. That was just as well, because Wolfe still would pinch his nose periodically, and twice wondered out loud when the paint smell would dissipate.

I had plugged our office phones in, and placed them on our desks just before Wolfe rose to go up to the plant rooms at four. No sooner had I done so, than they rang, with a call from Saul. Wolfe told me that no record would be needed, which meant I was to mind my own business and not listen in; on the theory that when the crisis comes the less I know about what's going on, the more I will react with my instinct, which Wolfe trusts, instead of my brains, which he doesn't.

Arranging the conference for nine was about as easy a trick as I've ever had. One call to Rottfeld, who was still at the bridge. Nothing at all had been found, which was no surprise to me now. I told him there had been developments, and that Wolfe wanted everyone who had been at the dinner to be at Rottfeld's office at nine sharp. He was so anxious to learn something that he said he would arrange to get everyone there, even Connie. I couldn't tell if he was volunteering to get Connie just to be helpful, or to be active. The rest of the afternoon I spent carting boxes of books up from the storeroom in the basement, and trying to figure out what had happened to Carol and why she was being impersonated. I made great progress--on the books, at least. The bookshelves had never looked better. The case had never looked so dismal.

We arrived at Rusterman's at seven-ten, and went to the private room on the third floor, where Gorchay waited on us. He had taken over as head waiter after Felix had died from smoking one cigar too many. Wolfe is part owner of the restaurant, and still eats there about once every other month to make sure things are running smoothly. It is still a four-star restaurant, but is not as good as when Wolfe's friend Marko Vukcic ran the place. If you want to know how the snails and vegetables were, ask Wolfe. I had a steak, and it was just fine, thank you. Wolfe was actually amiable and conversant during the meal, despite the trick I had played on him that morning. At one point, he even spread some *Domengeaux paté* on some hard tack and gave it to me. He had tasted it the night before and liked it so much that he had arranged to have some at the table at Rusterman's.

When the meal was over and we were sipping coffee, Wolfe complimented Gorchay,

“Satisfactory, Gorchay. And now, if you will please ask Mr. Brenner to come up that I may congratulate him?”

I stared at Wolfe. He had given Fritz the afternoon off. But Gorchay didn’t bat an eye, said of course sir, and left. A few minutes later, and Fritz came through the curtains of the booth.

“Good evening, Fritz. A satisfactory meal. Thank you.”

“Thank you, sir. But how did you know I was here?”

“The tarragon, of course.”

Fritz’ eyes dropped. He and Wolfe would never agree on how much tarragon to use.

“Of course, sir. I hope it wasn’t too annoying.”

“No, of course not, Fritz. But why did you arrange to prepare our meal? You had the afternoon at liberty.”

“Yes sir. After last night, sir. And this morning. I felt that I must prepare a meal that was not a disaster.”

“I see. Well, you did so. Superbly. Now go home.”

“Yes sir.”

In the sedan, on the way to Rottfeld’s office, my phone rang, and Saul asked me to put Wolfe on. Wolfe made a face. It takes all his will and concentration to hold the car together, sitting grimly with his jaw set, his hand holding desperately to the strap. He doesn’t like to talk on the little cell phone I carry and doesn’t like to talk while he’s moving.

All I caught was Wolfe’s end of the conversation, which was a series of grunts and a few short questions. They were either talking about what Saul had accomplished, or about how the Yankees had blown game two of the World Series, it was the same at my end. When Wolfe gave the phone back I asked,

“So is Saul dating our mystery woman?”

“No. He cannot find her, confound it. It’s just as I suspected.”

The light on the phone showed a message had come in while Wolfe had been talking. I punched the numbers to play it. Wolfe absolutely will not talk or listen to an answering machine, calling them grotesque liaisons. It was Fred, just asking to call, so I dialed his number and gave the phone to Wolfe. This time it was about how the Yankees had blown the first game. Wolfe ended by telling Fred to call Saul, so their opinions must have differed. I personally think it was the clutch plays Henderson had blown early in both games. They had set the tone for the rest of the show.

We were a little early for the meeting, which was a good thing because we had a surprise waiting for us. Or rather, it was a surprise to me but not to Wolfe, who had obviously invited them. Inspector Cramer of Homicide West, and Sergeant Purley Stebbins were there in chairs, waiting for Wolfe. No one else was there. Wolfe, in another fit of energy, must have called Cramer himself from the plant rooms.

I didn't get it. Wolfe never invited Cramer and Stebbins in until he was ready to show his hand and give them something to take home with them, like a murderer. But Rottfeld's office wasn't technically in their jurisdiction, and as near as I could figure we were as close to a murder as the Yankees were to signing a contract. Cramer, solidly built with white hair and a round red face hated cigar smoking as much as the rest of us, but like Gessel he loved cigars. Cramer chewed on them. He had one now, poking out of the corner of his mouth, constantly in motion. You could always tell how agitated Cramer was by how much the cigar moved around his mouth, and how often he pulled it and put it back in. Whenever Cramer is dealing with Wolfe, his red face gets redder, and the cigar does a dance any Broadway chorus girl would envy.

"Wolfe, we need to talk. Now."

"No sir. I told you on the telephone that it would be to your advantage to come, but as an observer only. You will take a passive role or leave."

"Passive. Me. Right. You've got to give me some idea of what this is about. You haven't told me a thing. Is it about that woman who killed herself in front of Goodwin last night? If it is, I don't get it. It sounded like nothing special except for the fact that Goodwin was there, which always makes it suspect. Did he push her?"

Wolfe paused, regarded Cramer, and then said,

"Come with me, Mr. Cramer, and we'll discuss it. Archie, if you'll arrange things?"

Wolfe took Cramer to the cubbyhole, opened the door and looked in. He saw that there was no chair in there big enough for him, and settled for one in the corner of the office. Cramer pulled up another chair and they began speaking in low tones. I started working on arranging the chairs for the conference. Stebbins pitched in. The quintessential New York Irish cop, he was bulky with a no nonsense attitude, and the ability to get anything done, as long as brains weren't involved. Stebbins generally thinks about as much of private dicks as he does the gum on his shoe, but he has never been quite sure about me, because he thinks I might make a good cop someday. He had been amiable lately, mainly because he thought he had pulled a fast one on me in the Skinner case. He didn't talk much, though--he never does--he just acted put out like he always does.

We arranged the chairs in two rows at an angle facing out from the right of the fireplace. Wolfe and my seats were side by side near the back wall, facing the other chairs. I tried to find the oversized chair that Wolfe had used the evening before, but it wasn't in the office, and Rottfeld's secretary, who had come a couple of times to tend the fire, didn't know where it was. The biggest one in the office was a little small for Wolfe's taste, but would probably do.

Nine o'clock came and went with no other arrivals. Cramer, in conference with Wolfe, had begun raising his voice, but finally gave up with a disgusted snort. As he passed between the chair I'd set for Wolfe and the wall, he sidearmed what was left of his cigar toward the fire. It arched perfectly, splitting the crack in the screen, landing right in the fire and was consumed. Strange. When Cramer is in our office and tosses his stub into my wastebasket he invariably misses, and it's half the distance.

Wolfe came and sat in his chair, made only a slightly disagreeable face, and began watching the fire. Cramer, still with a scowl, sat in the chair nearest me on the front row. Stebbins stood. The others finally arrived, in a single group, just as we were settling in for a wait. The detective business gets its share of depressed people, but this bunch copped the prize. Connie had obviously not slept, and hadn't even attended to her face, which still had yesterday's makeup, now in streaks and blotches. Helping her with her things, I asked how things went at the river, and didn't even get an answer. Rottfeld was upset, angry and distrustful; more so when he saw Stebbins, in uniform, and Cramer. He went immediately to Wolfe and began demanding explanations. Wolfe merely let him shoot off some steam, told him who the visitors were, then said explanations would come soon enough, and please be seated. Rottfeld didn't like it, but decided to wait and see, and took the chair nearest the fireplace on the front row. Garre, Morley and Gessel were quiet and sullen. I seated Connie behind Rottfeld. Garre had taken the chair next to her, so I put Marley and Gessel to his left.

The bunch was depressed, all right, but the biggest change had been wrought in Orr. He looked like he had shrunk three suit sizes. That, coupled with the way he moved, more from rote than will, made him one of the most pathetic figures I'd ever seen. It was difficult to believe that this was the same man who just yesterday had dismissed the notion that there was anything wrong with his wife. He just went to the chair I indicated, between Rottfeld and Cramer on the front row, sat, and buried his face in his hands. Surveying the group, I was impressed at how well they blended with the anti-room.

I was beginning to feel bad about things. If Wolfe was going fishing, he wasn't going to get any bites from this group. He'd be lucky to get a nibble. But something was starting to churn inside of

me, too. The room was getting uncomfortably warm from the fire, the steak in my stomach had turned to lead, and my head was letting me know it didn't appreciate the hours it had put in. I took my seat next to Wolfe. Wolfe likes to make an entrance, but that had been impractical, so he just shifted in his chair, cleared his throat for attention and started.

"Miss Wright, and gentlemen. I would normally not thank you for coming, since it was at Mr. Rottfeld's request and should be left to him. But I do thank you, in consideration of the trying circumstances under which you now labor. We were all here, last night, for what should have been a festive event. But the absence of Mrs. Orr ruined the evening. We are here today to see if we cannot bring the person responsible to task. I will ask some questions of some of you, and you may humor me by answering them. The answers are immaterial, however; you need not provide them if you don't wish to. I already know why Mrs. Orr did not come last night, and why her body was not found in the river."

Wolfe surveyed the group, but got no reaction.

"Before I begin though, let me introduce Mr. Cramer, the Chief Inspector of the West Manhattan Homicide Department. Many of you may know of him already. He is here because I suggested to him that it might be in his interest to attend. This is not an official visit; as of this moment, at least, none of you are suspected by him of having committed a crime. I'm sure Mr. Cramer will let us know if his interest becomes more than casual. Mr. Cramer. Would you like to say anything?"

"No. It's as you said."

Cramer turned to the group.

"I'm not here officially, and none of you are suspected of anything. As you may know, Mr. Wolfe and I have cooperated on many occasions, most recently when the District Attorney was killed. Something Mr. Wolfe said to me made me think it might be a good idea to be here. That's all. I am here by Mr. Wolfe's invitation, but if any of you have a problem with that, I will leave now."

Cramer waited, but no one said anything, so he settled back in his chair and started mangling a new cigar. Wolfe leaned back, closed his eyes halfway, and began speaking in a low conversational voice.

"Miss Wright, I have a few things to say to you, so I wonder if you would do me the favor of changing places with Mr. Garre. I don't like to strain my neck. If it's agreeable with you, Mr. Garre? Thank you."

Wolfe waiting for Connie and Garre to make the switch, surveyed the group, then started.

"Mr. Orr. How long have you been married?"

At first Orr didn't react, then his head came up and he looked at Wolfe. He thought he wasn't going to answer, then lost control and blurted,

"Six months! Just six months! And now she's gone. My baby-doll. I don't get it. What did I do wrong? For her to kill herself, I mean. Sure we had our moments, but everybody does, don't they? I don't get it."

"Mr. Orr. Your wife did not commit suicide. Miss Wright. Your sister did not jump off that bridge."

Connie, who had been watching Wolfe with disinterest, now responded.

"I know she didn't."

Wolfe's eyes opened.

"The devil. How did you know?"

"There was always something wrong with the way it happened. It's been bothering me. Whoever it was last night dived into the river. Carol can't dive. Neither can I. We can only jump feet first. Neither of us swims very well."

"Indeed. And why wait until now to inform us of this observation?"

"I only realized it on the way here."

"Hmph." Wolfe, made a face, then addressed the group. "But Miss Wright is correct. The person who jumped from the Harlem bridge last night was not Mrs. Orr, but instead was someone posing as her. We will get to her later. But I'm afraid I have bad news for you. At this moment your sister, Miss Wright, and your wife, Mr. Orr, is almost certainly dead."

Connie's eyes filled with tears. She dropped her head and muttered,

"I know that, too."

Wolfe was surprised and peeved.

"How the deuce would you know that?"

"Because I've felt it. Since yesterday before dinner. We always knew when something happened to each other."

Wolfe shuddered.

"Preposterous. But whatever her source of illumination, Miss Wright is once again correct. Before I detail what has happened, I wish to establish a background. Please be patient, and deign to answer my questions if you will."

Cramer broke in.

"Are you saying that suicide was faked?"

"I am."

“And that Mrs. Orr is dead? Killed? Murdered?”

“In due time, Mr. Cramer. Remember your passivity. If you continue interrupting you will be asked to leave.”

Cramer didn't like it, but he didn't like anything Wolfe did.

“Okay. For now. But just one more question. Do you have any evidence to back up what you said?”

“A few items, but nothing as definite as evidence in the legal sense. No.”

“Wolfe, is this another one of your damn charades?”

“You've asked two questions, Mr. Cramer. I'll not answer the second. Sit quietly. Or leave. Or make this official and arrest someone. Anyone. Perhaps your luck will run better than your intellect.”

Cramer ignored the dig. He didn't like it, but knew he had to take it, so he parked the cigar in the corner and slowly settled into his chair, watching Wolfe suspiciously.

Orr spoke up. Pulling his head up.

“Wait a minute. Where's Carol? She didn't jump off the bridge, but she's dead? What's going on?”

“All in due time, Mr. Orr. Bear with me. If you are innocent of wrongdoing, you will cooperate.”

“I haven't done anything wrong.”

“Good. Then listen and learn.”

Wolfe, seeing that Cramer and Orr would behave for the time being, took in a breath and let it out as a sigh. A pause, then he started by asking Orr about his courtship with Carol. I gave Wolfe a surprised look. The tingle in my spine, which had been coming on and off all day, was now all the way up my back, and was making the hair on my neck stand on end. This was no fishing expedition. Wolfe was weaving his web, spinning a trap for someone. His low drone, the way he skirted the real issues, going quietly back and forth, from one subject to another, was setting the tone for a strike to come. It was wrong, and my head was telling me so. We weren't ready for this. Wolfe had no murder, no evidence, no body. Yet there he was, carefully, patiently working someone into a cocoon of complacency while Wolfe watched for the moment when his vitriolic tongue would find its mark.

I was uncomfortable. My head and my stomach were worse. Both were in a race to see which would explode first. The anti-room was hot and dim, the flames of the fire adding to the room's oppression. I wanted to interrupt Wolfe, or to get out for some air, but knew I had to stay, taking

every word Wolfe said in my own brand of shorthand, in my own brand of notebook, fulfilling my own brand of duty. Occasionally Wolfe would be interrupted; a snort from Cramer, or a question from someone. He would patiently wait, survey the damage, then backtrack and begin building again. Instilling a sense of pride in Orr for winning Carol's hand. Probing the relationship between Orr and Rottfeld, between Connie and Orr, between Orr and Garre. Setting someone up. But who?

Wolfe's circling tightened. He began to slowly move in.

"Mr. Orr. You had an altercation with your wife, which caused her to skedaddle to Miss Wright's apartment. What was it about?"

"None of your business."

"You're right. I'm sorry. Were you aware that Mr. Rottfeld was in love with your wife?"

Rottfeld reacted. His eyes flashing, letting Wolfe know what it was like to get on his wrong side.

"You goddam liar, Wolfe. You're fired! Get out! Now!"

"Can it, George." It was Orr. "Hell, I've known about it for months. She liked you, too. That's what the fight was about. Not that she wanted a divorce or anything. She was always loyal to me. She'd just gone a little cold, that's all. I didn't like it. Nothing against you, I know you couldn't help yourself. That's why I built this room for you, so's you could mope in it."

Rottfeld was furious, and mortified. He needed to say something, to order someone, to throw his weight around. He finally settled on Marley.

"Marley, take everything Wolfe says. He's going to the cleaners."

Marley was too sensible to argue. He just turned to Rottfeld and said,

"Okay, George. It's under control. I'll handle everything."

"Do so." Wolfe broke in and started again. "Mr. Orr, do you know a Miss Cheryl Burns?"

"Sure. I went to school with her. She came to New York when Chester and I did. Had her over to the house a few times. How do you know her?"

"By inquiry. Was she a good swimmer?"

"The best. She was on the swim team at SMU. Almost made the Olympic team. What are you getting at?"

"I'm getting at the person who jumped off the Harlem bridge. It was almost certainly Miss Burns. I have two good men looking for her. One, Saul Panzer, is better suited to finding someone than anyone alive. Mr. Cramer can attest to that. Mr. Panzer found her name, but cannot find where she is. She is absent from her normal routine. Do you know where Miss Burns is, Mr. Orr?"

"No. Why would I know that?"

“Someone here does know where she is, and that knowledge is guilty knowledge. Mr. Orr, you have been very cooperative, considering the circumstances. You deserve to know what happened to your wife without delay. It should be manifest now. Your wife was killed at the hand of someone in this room. Possibly accidentally, but I doubt it. Miss Burns went to the Harlem bridge and simulated a suicide. Why? To cover the fact that your wife had been killed; also to establish an alibi, or rather to make an alibi unnecessary. But Miss Burns didn’t know this. She was just doing a favor for someone. That favor cost her dearly. It has almost certainly cost her life. This person who killed your wife, and who put Miss Burns up to her charade has a history of violence. Isn’t that true, Miss Wright?”

My mind went back to Connie’s fingernails. But fingernails and murder were two different things.

“I don’t know what you mean. The only one I know with a history of...oh my gosh! Chester did it, not Chuck! He is a violent man. I should have known it was he who hit Carol! And he killed her too?” Connie turned to Garre. “It was you, wasn’t it? You hit her. What else did you do?”

Garre was smiling. He had been cool through the whole thing.

“C’mon, Connie. You know me better than that. This Wolfe guy is shooting wind. Lies.” He turned to Wolfe. “Keep talking, Wolfe. I’ll sue you into a hole so deep you won’t be able to climb out.”

“I shall. Miss Wright is correct again. You struck Mrs. Orr on the face, didn’t you, Mr. Garre? It was the bruise from that strike that forced her to hide from you, Mr. Orr. You have been blind. Although your wife may have liked Mr. Rottfeld, it was Mr. Garre who circumstance cast into her life. Your best friend, Mr. Garre. Consider. Long hours of negotiations, of wrangling, of late night sessions at your home. And who was with her always? Not Mr. Rottfeld. He was surely involved, but not full time. Mr. Rottfeld had not even met your wife’s sister. Not you. You had other work to occupy your time. No. It was Mr. Garre who had the advantage of time with your wife. A man you trusted implicitly. But he could not resist your wife’s obvious attractions, and tried to woo her in his clumsy way. Mr. Panzer has found things about Mr. Garre, Mr. Orr. He had previously attempted to win Miss Connie Wright’s affections when you were courting your wife. Miss Wright, Mr. Garre did court you, didn’t he? And how did it turn out?”

“I should have seen it. Of course it was Chester who hit Carol.” Connie was on the verge of tears. “He wanted to possess me. Like I was a thing or something. When I resisted he hurt me, and that was the end. I should have known he would go after Carol. And Cheryl Burns worships him. She’d do anything for him. You...*beast*, Chester!”

For a moment I thought Connie was going to do her nails, and she did, too. But in the end, she collapsed into her chair and started sobbing. Wolfe looked to me for a solution. I looked at him, deadpan, and said,

“Sorry. No go. Just ignore her and let her cry. Hopefully she’ll be okay in a minute.”

Garre regarded Connie coolly. “Connie, make sense. Carol was always loyal to Chuck. You know that.”

Wolfe took my advice, ignored Connie and addressed Garre.

“She was loyal to Mr. Orr. She was indeed. And that’s what infuriated you. She may have lost affection for her husband, but she had none for you. When you realized you couldn’t have her, you did just as you did with Miss Wright. You hurt her and forced her into Miss Wright’s bunker. But Mrs. Orr made a fatal mistake. Yesterday, Mr. Goodwin took her to a beautician. The treatment emboldened her enough that she felt she could face you. She told you yesterday that if you didn’t clear out, she would tell her husband everything. Isn’t that so, Mr. Garre?”

“No. None of it’s true. I don’t know where you’re getting these crazy ideas.”

“Crazy ideas? Indeed. Then explain sir, why, at the dinner last night, you did not contribute to the conversation. A person so loquacious that Mr. Goodwin could not control your blather yesterday morning. I noticed your silence. A guilty silence, Mr. Garre. You couldn’t tolerate Mrs. Orr telling your husband what had happened, so you killed her. Then to cover your sin, you employed Miss Burns to simulate Mrs. Orr’s suicide. Dressed in Mrs. Orr’s clothes, with the scarf you found in her purse, along with adequate credentials to establish the victim’s identity, you sent Miss Burns, whom you did indeed possess, but did not desire, on a mission to establish your alibi. Did she do it only because she was obsessed with you, or did you offer some other enticement? No matter. She did it, and convincingly, while you were here. If I were not involved, it would have been recorded as another unfortunate soul who couldn’t cope with the vicissitudes of life. But I am involved. Miss Burns, having adroitly accomplished a great act for you, was rewarded with her own malicious death. I now force an accounting. Where are their bodies?”

Garre paused, not quite so cool.

“I’m not saying anything.”

“A wise strategy. You are guilty of murder, but also of something else even more despicable. A man may be justifiably kill someone in unusual circumstances, but the betrayal of the trust of a life-long friend is without parallel in debauchery. You have betrayed Mr. Orr. You have stolen that which was most precious to him, that which he rightfully won through great effort.”

I cast a glance at Cramer. When Wolfe started, he had been impatient. But Cramer knows Wolfe nearly as well as I do, and he knew what was happening, and that Wolfe was up to something. His cigar had stopped. He was perched at the edge of his seat watching Wolfe, with occasional glances at Garre. Stebbins had discretely moved to a position behind Garre.

Wolfe had closed his eyes, and the group was watching Garre, who had started to show signs of faltering. I was sweating now, shaking a little and had to force myself to keep the notes up. The fire had died to nothing more than shimmering embers. I watched Cramer watch Wolfe. Eyes back and forth, first on Wolfe, then Garre. Then Cramer's eyes hit on Orr, and they widened. Cramer saw what was in Orr's face, jumped up, and yelled at Wolfe.

"Cut it, Wolfe! Now!"

But it was too late. Cramer's yell set Orr off. Orr stood, hands in giant fists, looked at the ceiling and yelled,

"Carol! Carol!"

It was the roar of a wounded animal. Orr spun around to Garre and snarled his name. Garre's eyes filled with fear. Garre stood and jumped upon his chair in preparation for Orr's onslaught. Orr mounted his own chair, and started over to the back row where Garre was. Connie could see what was happening and stood up to get out of Orr's way, but didn't make it in time. Orr swept Connie to the floor with a giant paw and jumped to her chair. Connie's head hit the table at the end of the row and she was out.

"Archie, stop him!"

It was Wolfe's bellow. Sure. Stop him how? Wolfe had planned this, let him do it. I started up and said to Wolfe through my teeth,

"Right. I'll get a steam roller."

Garre and Orr had their hands around each other's necks, but this was no wrestling hold. I hurled the front row and looked up at them towering above me. Their faces had lost any show of passion, and were now changing to the involuntary mask that accompanies a death grip choke-hold. Stebbins was behind Garre, hugging his leg and trying to force him away from Orr. I decided to pitch in and hit Garre's other leg with my shoulder, my whole body behind it.

That did it. Garre's chair toppled over and his head fell into the fireplace, knocking over the firebox and spilling coals, which erupted into flame, onto Garre's head and Orr's hands. Garre's hands had flown free when he hit, but Orr kept on choking through the smoke and flames, oblivious to everything but Garre.

Stebbins tried to sweep the coals away from Garre with his fingers, found he couldn't, and grabbed the broom from the tool stand. The poker hit my hand and I swung it at Orr's head to stop him.

The poker stopped him all right. It was heftier than I thought it would be, and Orr's skull was thinner than I figured. The dent left in Orr's head after he collapsed on top of Garre showed I had done some real damage. Stebbins stopped sweeping and stared at me. The acrid smell of burning flesh assaulted my nostrils. The anti-room decided to switch East and West on me and started to do it, so I looked to Wolfe to get my bearings.

But Wolfe was sitting back in his chair, his eyes closed. I had seen the look on his face before. On the panel of a Sunday comic strip, black-and-white, no color, with a balloon that said,

"Ah yes, Archie, and how do you like the aroma?"

The script called for me to answer,

"You're right, Nero, and the price is palatable, too!"

But I'd had it with the famous fat detective. He may have been right about Garre and Orr and all the others, but he was wrong about me. Cramer, who had been crouched with the others over Connie, now started to Wolfe to give him a piece of his mind. But I wanted my peace first. I sidearmed the poker at Wolfe. The poker arched across the room and embedded itself in Wolfe's face--the fiery shadow-face that was bobbing up and down, laughing and taunting me from the wall behind Wolfe's chair. The *whack* of the poker hitting the wall brought Wolfe's eyes open and Cramer's cigar to the floor. Wolfe showed no surprise as I calmly walked past Cramer and the others, picked up my overcoat and fedora from the chair next to the door, and went out of the anti-room into the meretricious hallway. No body followed me.

I went to the neon cartouche marked *EXIT* just past the elevators. Wolfe takes elevators: I would take the stairs. Inside the fire door, on the landing, I was accosted by a black-and-white lady with bright red curlers and canary yellow hair, leaning against the railing.

I put my fist through her left nostril. The *whack* reverberated up and down the staircase as I started down to the streets.

THE END.

There it is. My mother, who has proofread everything I've written since I've been in grade school, said this is what comes from hitting a lady. She's right, of course.

So were Wolfe and I finished for good, or was I just sent out for refurbishing, like the furniture?

Of course, you don't need to ask that. Since you're reading this, it shows you're somehow connected with the human race, so you already know the answer.

A. G.