

**Not With
A
Whimper**

A Nero Wolfe Mystery

By Glenn Dixon

I have always tried to keep my reports as accurate as possible, even when they don't flatter me. But for reasons that will become apparent as you read this next case, I've made some parts of it up. I can't help that-- it was the only way I could do it. And if anyone presses me to tell which parts actually happened and which didn't, I'll tell them the whole thing was a big lie.

A. G.

One

Sergeant Purley Stebbins caught me on the seven-step stoop of the brownstone, the third step down.

Not that I was running from anything. On the contrary. I was about to look for a dive to park my carcass for the night, and the pens in the basement of the Manhattan South police headquarters would be as good as any place I could find at one that Thursday morning.

“Hi Purley.”

Stebbins made a sound, a cross between a grunt and a greeting, took me by the arm and said,

“Cramer wants you.”

“Sure. What took you so long?”

“I had a mess to clean up. Two messes.”

“Two? Not three?”

“No. That lady is going to be okay. C’mon. You won’t need that suitcase where you’re going.”

So Orr was dead but Connie wasn’t. Stebbins had been there when I walked out on Wolfe and the mess referred to. As I pulled my keys and mounted the stoop, I appreciated him for just stating the facts with no editorial.

Normally Fritz Brenner, Wolfe’s cook and housekeeper, keeps the chain on the door when I’m out, but not tonight. Why should he? Since Wolfe was out of the house there wasn’t anything or anyone worth protecting with the chain. So I had been able to get in, pack an overnight bag, and get out without waking him. I opened the door, set the bag on the umbrella tray at the bottom of the coat rack in the hallway, and locked the door behind me.

Stebbins took me to a black-and-white, double-parked in front of the stoop. I was a little relieved to get in and go, because the last thing in the world I wanted was to encounter Wolfe coming home. Cramer, chief inspector of Homicide South, must have finished chewing Wolfe out by now, and so he had sent his bulldog Stebbins for me. Wolfe was probably on his way to the brownstone, with Saul Panzer taking the place I normally occupy at the wheel of Wolfe’s Heron sedan.

Stebbins, having used up his quota of conversation for the night, didn’t say anything on the way in and that was fine by me. It was a tossup as to whether we were going back to the Madison Avenue building where the mess had been, or whether we were bound for police headquarters. That was decided when the uniformed cop at the wheel kept going south on Tenth Avenue: headquarters.

After Stebbins and I had checked in and rode the elevator to the third floor, he ushered me down

the hall and into Cramer's office. Cramer was there, writing something at his desk, round face as red as ever, with his white hair a little disheveled next to the part. He had his customary unlit cigar, now down to about two inches long, poking out of the left corner of his mouth. His suit coat had been shed and his tie loosened, but his vest was still buttoned. He looked up when we entered and put the paperwork aside.

"Come on in, Goodwin. Sit down. You must be pretty tired by now."

That made me wary. The only time Cramer ever treated me with that much consideration was when things had gone unusually well, or when he wanted something. This time I knew things weren't going well.

I glanced around at the chairs. Cramer's office was the only holdout from recent remodeling, and it still had a dark green linoleum floor with the old battle-scarred gray desk and honest wooden chairs. His overcoat and suit coat were hanging on a wooden rack in the corner.

"I'll stand, thanks." I shoved my hands into my overcoat pockets. "Did you want to talk to me? I was on my way to the Ritz."

"I'll bet you were. Stebbins? Why don't you go home now, and get some sleep. Get some for me, too. Report back sometime before noon tomorrow. And send in Takahashi."

Stebbins grunted and left. Cramer continued.

"I guess Stebbins told you what happened after you left."

"Enough."

"Yeah. So you know I could make a heap of trouble for you if I wanted to."

"Pooh. You saw it. Make a heap of trouble for Wolfe instead."

"I don't have to."

Cramer pulled the cigar, pointed the wet end at me, and continued,

"That was the last one. Wolfe is finished this time, and there's nothing I can do about it even if I wanted to, which maybe I don't. Dunning is in her office now. She was home, but when she heard what Wolfe had pulled she came right back in. That woman doesn't waste any time when it comes to these things."

"Good. Wolfe deserves whatever he gets, as far as I'm concerned. Pulling his license is too good for his kind."

"To hell with pulling his license. Dunning wants to file charges. Manslaughter."

"Well well well. While I fully appreciate your dedication and willingness to see justice done, especially in this case, Wolfe didn't slaughter any men. Or women. He has others, such as yours

truly, do it for him. You won't be able to pin that or anything else on him because he's a genius, remember? He has B's, C's, and D's working for him that do his dirty work. The C's and D's don't even know who they are working for. That was Orr. When he strangled Garre he was a C or a D, take your pick. I was a B. I knew I was working for Wolfe but couldn't do anything about it. So he walks, or sits, and others take the heat, or maybe the cloud, depending."

My reference to the letters of the alphabet was purely for Cramer's benefit. Cramer had once heard Wolfe describe a crime organization using those letters to describe the hierarchy. The organization was run by a man named Zeck, and Wolfe had outsmarted him. I mentioned it because Cramer had thought Wolfe wouldn't be able to tackle Zeck, and because I really did feel like I had been manipulated. I had just killed a man, presumably by accident, but Wolfe had known what would happen. Cramer reinserted the cigar and chewed a little.

"Look, Goodwin. I know better than to try to take Wolfe on, but this time it's out of my hands. Dunning thinks she has a case based on established patterns, previous times when Wolfe pulled stunts like that. Heaven knows there are enough of them. Personally, I don't think she has a chance in hell, and that if she tries it she'll get burned."

"She'll get burned all right. And you too. You know Wolfe. He'll have both of you for lunch. Cooked by Fritz. I'll admit that Dunning would be a little tough and stringy, but you would be a gustful delight.

Cramer regarded me, then said,

"Yeah. I would at that."

We were interrupted by a knock on the door. Cramer called come in and the door squeaked and admitted an Asian man in police uniform, age between 21 and 60. It's always hard to tell with those guys. It was the first time I'd seen him, but then I don't know all the officers on the night shift. Cramer straightened the papers he was working on and said to the slanted eyes,

"You can take this over to Dunning, Takahashi."

"Yes, sir."

Cramer scrawled his initials on the last page, stood, picked up the sheets and told Takahashi,

"Bring back a copy for me."

"Yes, sir."

When Takahashi had left, Cramer sat down and said,

"Don't get me wrong, Goodwin. I might just agree with Dunning. This time. Wolfe has to stop parading around like he owns this town."

“That’s funny,” I admitted. “Wolfe parading. I’d love to see that. He hates to walk from the office to the dining room.”

Cramer grunted. He didn’t look like he was going to say any more. So I started for the door.

“Wait, Goodwin.”

“Why? What does this have to do with me? You pulled me in here, and it wasn’t to tell me about Wolfe. Are you going after me, too?”

“I could go after you, Goodwin. Don’t think I couldn’t. Not just with Orr, and leaving the scene of that crime. You know damn well there have been other things. But I don’t feel like it-- hell, I saw what happened. I know how you’re feeling. You think Wolfe made a jackass out of you. So all I want from you is your statement of what happened. I want to know what happened to set up that stunt, and how much Wolfe knew.”

Cramer continued,

“As I see it, Wolfe was guessing tonight. He not only had no evidence, he was shooting completely blind. You would know, Goodwin. If Wolfe sicced Orr on Garre and you on Orr and all he had to go on was what he revealed in that meeting, he was guessing. If we can prove he was guessing we should have enough to at least pull his ticket.”

There it was. That’s what he wanted. Cramer wanted me to finger my former boss. I asked,

“Was Wolfe guessing? Did Garre kill those women?”

“Of course he did. Didn’t Stebbins tell you? We went to Garre’s apartment and there they were. Orr’s wife with her skull bashed in and that Burns woman, strangled. Both of them laying in Garre’s bed like they were taking a nap. Spookiest thing I’ve ever seen, and I’ve seen a lot. I don’t know what Garre was planning to do with them.”

Cramer leaned back with a squeak from his chair, and ran his fingers through his hair.

“But the fact that Wolfe guessed right doesn’t alter the fact that he was guessing. Your statement could help establish that.”

“Oops. If you want me to go on record to that effect there are problems. First of all, I have no idea what Wolfe knew. Do you think he tells me the recipe before he char-broils it? Second, even if I knew I couldn’t tell you. At the time, he was my boss. So even though I want to, I can’t. My loyalty to him extended to the second that poker hit the wall and served notice to him. I should give him two weeks, but he knew what would happen. Didn’t you notice? He wasn’t surprised a bit.”

“Yeah, I noticed. He sat there like the goddammed sphinx while you did his dirty work for him. But hell, that’s happened a good half-dozen times before. I’ve seen you mad at Wolfe and just

swallow it. Why did you blow up this time?"

"This was different and you know it. Orr was innocent of any wrongdoing until Wolfe had him go at Garre. And Wolfe knew the only way I would be able to stop someone Orr's size was to kill or maim him. Wolfe just didn't want to be bothered with that case anymore, the lazy bum."

"Yeah I got that. But I got more, too. You're not telling it all, Goodwin."

"I'm not? How would you know? Did that psychic you were going to hire finally come through for you?"

Cramer got up from his chair and put his hands on the desk, leaning over at me.

"You may think I'm stupid. I don't know. But I'm not stupid. Not when it comes to you and Wolfe, anyway. I know you two better than you know each other. I know exactly what happened. You pushed Wolfe too far, didn't you? You did something that rattled his chain, and he took it out on you tonight. You stepped over the line, didn't you, Goodwin? And now New York is down four decent citizens."

Four decent citizens like hell. And the last thing I wanted was for Cramer to get a whiff of Wolfe's and my dirty laundry. So I did the only thing I could do. I stepped to the wall, sat in an honest chair, gave Cramer an honest look, and told a barefaced lie.

"You're wrong. I didn't do anything."

"Ha. See how well I know you? I knew you'd say that, too."

Cramer rounded the desk on my side.

"So you won't give a statement."

"Not without Wolfe's say-so. And I'm not in the mood to ask his permission."

"You'd better reconsider, Goodwin. If you don't give a statement you'll have to clear out of here or I'll make your life so miserable you'll wish you had put a hole in my skull instead."

"That could still be arranged. But at least you've made up my mind for me. Up till now, I wasn't sure where I would go. Now I know. Wolfe may retire, but I won't. I'll buy that brownstone that's for sale up on 37th. I'll raise mushrooms in the basement and read comic books all day. And I'll hire a fat assistant to do my footwork, and irritate him to death with big words. And every day, all day, we'll think up ways to make your job more scintillating."

That did it. Cramer blew up.

"Goodwin! If you don't cooperate I'm coming after you, too! And when I'm done, you won't be even be able to get a license to be on a leash in this town!"

I'm not kidding. He really said that. Cramer paused a second, grunted and continued,

“Despite what I said I still like my job, Goodwin. I’m good at it. The murder rate in my jurisdiction is down. One third Chicago’s. Hell’s kitchen is cleaner than it’s been in a long time. I like to think I had a small part in that. But do you know what’s going to happen in exactly six-and-a-half hours?”

Cramer was leaning over me by now. Too close.

“Uh, no.”

“Well, I’ll tell you. That phone. That one over there, the second one, will ring. It’s tied right into the Mayor’s office, and he will be on it. He’ll ask me how my family’s doing. He’ll compliment me on the Skinner case. Then he’ll get to the real reason he’s calling. It will be about last night. What happened, he’ll ask. How could we have prevented this, he’ll ask. He does that with every damn killing in my jurisdiction. Only this time it will be different because I was there. What will I say? That I saw it coming? I did, you know. . . I just didn’t know who or when. How could it be prevented? That’s easy. Get Wolfe off the street. Or out of his office, whatever. I’ll look like a damn fool, telling the mayor that the man who solved Skinner’s murder is responsible for two killings under my nose, maybe four. But that’s what I’ll have to say because it’s the truth.”

Cramer had removed his cigar and canned it. Now he was more than close. He was leaning over, his nose no more than three inches from my eyes. His right index finger was pushing the tip of his nose in.

“Do you see this?”

“See what?”

“My nose. Ever wonder why it’s so flat?”

Cramer’s nose flat? I would have chosen other words. Bulbous, for example. I took a look at it. I had no choice. Tiny rich red capillaries running in rivulets throughout. Here and there a mottled patch of purple. Small but noticeable cellulite bulges, harbingers of greater things to come. A hair or two protruding from the nostrils.

For once I was speechless. With my head back, pinned against the wall, and my eyes crossed, I was speechless.

Cramer finally straightened.

“I’ll tell you why it’s so flat. It’s because Nero Wolfe has pushed it in so goddam many times. So many times I’ve lost count. Do you think I like it when he phones to say he has it? Do you think I enjoy rounding up suspects for him? Going over there to watch him make a ninny of me as he grandstands?”

“Pish tosh,” I had found some words again. “I like the way that sounds, so I’ll say it again. Pish tosh. You didn’t have to cooperate.”

“Right. And if I didn’t, Wolfe would have the DA and the newspapers there to say he had solved the case, no thanks to the police.”

“Well, I’m sorry. Truly I am. Maybe both you and Wolfe should take one of those sensitivity training classes. You know, where they practice being nice to others. You could learn not to call wops names. And Wolfe could learn how to solve murders you can’t without stepping on your toes in the process.”

“Huh. A lot you know, Goodwin. I’ve had those things. They’re required here. Look at the good they’ve done me.” Cramer circled back to his chair.

There was a knock at the door. Takahashi came in when invited, and handed the copies to Cramer. Cramer told him to stay.

“So what’ll it be, Goodwin? I’m not supposed to make deals; that’s for the DA’s office. But I won’t come after you if you help us with Wolfe.”

“Sorry. Even if I wanted to I couldn’t. And now I don’t want to.”

“Fine. Great. I’ll give you a night to think it over. Takahashi, put Goodwin on ice for the night.”

“Yes sir.”

Takahashi came and stood before me, waiting. Sure enough, I wasn’t going to have to find a place to stay for the night. I decided not to make a fuss, gave Takahashi a smile and got up. As we were leaving the room, Takahashi turned to Cramer.

“Inspector Cramer?”

“Yes?”

“What does that mean, ‘put Goodwin on ice’?” Does it mean to put him in jail or something?”

Cramer sat there, staring at Takahashi. For a good ten seconds. Finally he said,

“Yeah. That’s what it means. Put him in a holding cell for the night.”

“What charge?”

“Come see me after he’s there. I’ll give you the charge.”

Takahashi turned toward the door again.

“Oh, and Takahashi?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Put Goodwin in the same cell with Wolfe.”

That got me. I turned back to Cramer.

“You put Wolfe in jail?”

“Sure. He wouldn’t cooperate. Clammed right up. Haven’t heard a peep from him all night. We’ll put him in the jail’s kitchen tomorrow. We’ll have him make Hominy Grits de Wolfe for the inmates. They’ll like that.”

“You’re not asking to get your nose pushed in. You’re asking to get your block knocked clean off. You know darn well what he’ll do to you when he gets out. And putting me in with him is cruel and unusual punishment. I haven’t done anything to deserve that.”

“Quit your griping, Goodwin. You deserve that and more as far as I’m concerned. Besides, I’m trying to think like Wolfe. I’m hoping that by putting you in with him you’ll strangle him and get crushed when his body falls on you. That will save the taxpayers ahelluva lot of dough and I’ll retire a happy man.”

I tried thinking up a comeback but Cramer was gone, buried back in his paperwork. As we left, I heard Cramer mutter under his breath,

“Nobody speaks Queens English anymore.”

Two

So as I was processed through the registration desk in the basement, I wasn't relishing the thought of a night in close quarters with Wolfe. Takahashi spent a little time trying to convince me what a great boss Cramer was despite the outburst, but I wasn't listening, and he eventually gave up.

It was a slow night at the dungeon and most of the cells were empty. I could have had my pick of the lot, and thought about trying to let a quorum of finns talk Takahashi into letting me have a different cell from Wolfe's. But I knew it was futile; those Japanese will obey orders even if they have to live thirty years in the mountains of the Philippines to do it.

After I had my fingers scanned and picture taken, I was led around a corner to a cell I had been in before. Wolfe was there, sitting on the edge of the bunk on the right. For a one-night stay in a holding cell they don't make you change into oranges, and Wolfe was still fully dressed, with his topcoat beside him on the bunk. I went in and took the other bunk. Takahashi nodded to me, made a slight bow, clicked the door closed and walked away. The stink of antiseptic wasn't too bad that night, and because there weren't the usual lot of rabble-rousers there wasn't a tinge of liquor and tobacco in the air either. But even so, the atmosphere seemed somewhat stifling.

I folded my overcoat and suit coat, sat on the bunk opposite Wolfe and pulled my shoes off. I looked at Wolfe, who had his eyes closed. We spent a little time in silence, then Wolfe opened his eyes, looked at me and spoke.

"You abandoned me, sir."

. . . *"You're damn right I abandoned you. I should have done this world a favor and shot you instead."*

. . . *"No, sir. You abandoned me. The fact that I moved out and you didn't was simply because you're so goddammed fat."*

. . . *"Yes, I did. But look. I came back so I could get more abuse at your hands."*

I had these and a half dozen other remarks ready to go, but something strange happened. I opened my mouth to spit them, but nothing came out. Not a sound. Instead, a hurt formed between my temples and my eyes squinted up. I didn't like that one bit--I was losing control when I should have been slicing Wolfe to pieces with cutting remarks, formed with precision. I leaned forward, dropped my eyes to the floor and tried like hell to get a grip.

"Do not misunderstand me. I am not upbraiding you. Your behavior was justifiable under the circumstances. Even preferable."

"Preferable? To what? Killing everyone in the room?"

“You don’t understand, of course. There are many things you do not understand; your eyes have not seen what mine have. They may never have to bear the burden of seeing the savages of man to the extent I have. But I have seen such things, and have unwittingly participated in some myself, and it will affect me forever. I try to insulate my soul with comforts, with literature and with flowers and food, but even with the layers of padding I have, I am still merely one meal away from depravity.”

Less than one meal, I thought. The hurt had subsided a little, and I knew I had my voice, but I didn’t trust it yet. Besides, Wolfe was doing just fine without me, even though he was wrong. In the detective business, you see plenty of the savages of man-- the bigger the man, the bigger the savagery.

Wolfe sighed.

“A pauciloquy must do, as there will be no understanding where there can be none. Despite the years we’ve spent together, Archie, there is much about me you do not know. I go now to face the demons of my past, and wish you luck with those you face at present.”

Of course, he wasn’t going anywhere just yet; we were stuck with each other for at least the night. I eventually turned away from Wolfe, lied down on the bunk, and tried to get some shuteye, with Wolfe still sitting there opposite me. If you ask how long it took to get to sleep, all I can say is I can’t remember.

Three

A rattling awoke me. I looked up to see Purley Stebbins, with Cramer and a uniformed guard dog next to him. I'd never seen Cramer in the basement before; he always sent for whomever he wanted. Stebbins was rattling the bars with the guard's nightstick. Through the bars of the cells across from me I could see light filtering down from one of the windows in the basement foundation. When Cramer saw my eyes starting to comprehend the world he nudged Stebbins away and demanded,

"Where is he?"

I checked my watch. 8:37 AM, I think; it still looked a little hazy. I looked to Wolfe's side but he was gone. I said to Cramer,

"Good morning to you too, sir. And yes, I slept great. Sound as a dollar. It comes from having a clear conscience. How about you?"

"Cut the comedy, Goodwin. Tell me where he is and how he got out of here."

I rubbed my eyes, and gave Cramer a puzzled look.

"Who are you talking about, sir?"

"Wolfe, damn you. As if you didn't know. I want to know what you two are cooking up and how Wolfe got out of here."

"Oh. Well, let me think. As for where Mr. Wolfe is, I don't know. I think he was with me in the cell last night. As for what we're cooking, nothing. Although I must admit I'm hungry. You suppose your cell keeper there could rustle up something? Bacon, eggs and an English muffin with marmalade, please. And as for how Wolfe got out, I don't know that either. I hope you remembered to feed him his midnight snack. Otherwise he may have slimmed down enough to squeeze through the bars and make his escape. He was only one meal away from depravity, you know. He told me so himself. You shouldn't have someone like that running wild on the streets of Manhattan."

Cramer snorted, and turned and nodded to the guard, who opened the cell. Cramer came in and sat in the exact spot Wolfe had occupied the night before. It didn't look like Wolfe's bunk had been slept in, but Wolfe may have straightened it before he bribed the guards and ran out without me. Cramer spoke, without too much hostility.

"Look, Goodwin. I came in this morning ready to cut you a break and let you go. I was starting to think that maybe the whole thing had gone too far. But the first thing that happens when I get here is a call from the jail saying a prisoner is missing. Wolfe, absent when the new shift came on and checked. Wolfe's there, in the computer all right, but not here. And your lawyer, Parker, is here trying to spring you but not Wolfe. So he knows Wolfe isn't here but he's not saying anything.

Cramer glanced at the guard, and continued,

“Now understand this, Goodwin. People don’t just disappear from the downtown Manhattan jail. Even if they could escape, they would still get caught and tangled up in all the red tape around here. It has never happened. Ever. Until this morning. We’ve been trying to find out what went down for nearly an hour now, but anyone who knows what happened last night either isn’t telling, or we can’t reach them. And there aren’t any records of Wolfe-- not in the night court, or down here, besides the one that got him in here. He’s still in this cell as far as we’re concerned.

Cramer pulled a cigar and started contemplating it.

“As screwy as that sounds, Goodwin, here’s something even harder to swallow. That you’re not in on it. So come clean and I’ll let you go home with Parker right now.”

“I’m sorry I can’t oblige, sir. Really I am. Now that I’m no longer in his employ, nothing would give me more pleasure than hunting down a relocated Wolfe. But I don’t know a thing. For maybe twenty minutes after you undeservedly left me here last night until this morning, I have been asleep. Wolfe was here when I fell asleep, now he’s not. That’s all I know. I wish I knew more; it sounds like you have quite a mystery.”

“Yeah. Things always get too deep when Wolfe’s mixed up in them. Okay. So you either are ignorant, which I don’t believe, or you aren’t talking, which I do. Next time you see Wolfe, tell him that there is a warrant out for his arrest. And when I find him, if I find out you knew about this, there will be one for you too. Now get out of here.”

“You’re letting me go? This easy?”

“Yeah. Your lawyer’s disturbing the peace upstairs, and I’m damn tired of looking at you.”

“Are you dropping the charges or did Parker somehow manage to post bail this early?”

“Neither. There never were any charges. You could have left last night if you’d put up a fuss.”

The stinker. As I got my coat I made a mental note to have Cramer for lunch myself if Wolfe didn’t turn up.

Four

Nathaniel Parker was in the waiting area and stood and shook my hand when I entered. Parker was always Wolfe's first choice when legalities were involved. Handsome, with a cultivated manner and a lean body that made his six-two frame look even taller, he had always been a ladies man.

"Good to see you again, Archie. I've heard a little of what went on last night, and I'm sorry. I've always wondered how two spirited gentlemen like you and Wolfe managed to stay together for so long, and hope that this isn't the end of it."

"Well, I don't want to dash your hopes so I won't say anything. And I guess you're off the hook as far as I'm concerned. There weren't any charges files against me."

"Ah. So that's why they were evasive. We can pursue an illegal detention action if you wish, Archie."

"No. It would be no use. Good to see you anyway, but you can go. I'll be sure and call you first when I start anew."

Parker looked at me uneasily.

"Didn't Mr. Wolfe give you another reason for my being here?"

"No. We're not communicating too well lately."

"Oh. I thought you knew of Wolfe's intentions. This will make it more difficult. And I don't know where Mr. Wolfe is or how to reach him. I don't suppose you know where he is, do you?"

"I think he's still in the cell. Hiding under the mattress."

"That's too bad. I received some instructions from Mr. Wolfe via phone call early this morning. It, ah, came at a most inconvenient time."

"Tough, huh? Just last night Inspector Cramer and I were discussing Wolfe's faulty manners."

"Yes. Of course. But I have some instructions from Wolfe that are to be carried out without delay. The fact that you are unaware of them makes the task more difficult, I think. You will need to accompany me to your residence."

"I don't have one."

"I'm sorry. I mean Mr. Wolfe's residence."

"I'm not going if Wolfe is there."

"No. It seems there is no chance of that. I have some things that must be said to you, Mr. Brenner and Mr. Horstmann, and Mr. Panzer and Mr. Durkin."

"Okay. I'll go with you. I have a few things to fetch anyway."

We hailed a taxi and headed to midtown. The traffic was slow, and Parker and I passed the time

with small talk about the changes they were making to the Chrysler building. At least, I tried to hold up my end, but my mind kept trying to work the problem of where Wolfe was and how he sprung himself, despite my telling it to lay off. When we arrived at the brownstone, I was about to ring for Fritz when he opened the door. Fritz is normally all business and completely formal when we are in the presence of company, even someone as familiar as Parker, but this time he couldn't hold it in. He looked like he was going to break down.

"Is it true about Mr. Wolfe, Archie? Is he in jail? All I hear is what is on the radio, and that is not enough. Mr. Panzer and Mr. Durkin are here, but they do not confide in me, and I cannot ask. And why is your bag here? You killed a man and you are leaving, no?"

"I'm leaving, yes. But Mr. Wolfe is not in jail, he's an escaped convict. I think you're hiding him down in the basement, no?"

"But no, Archie. I do not know where he is. It is not good; he belongs here. It is unsafe for him in the world. You know what can happen when he is out."

"Do I ever. But it can't be helped, so just for now you have to keep butling. Take our coats."

Fritz caught hold of himself, and did his duty. I ushered Parker into the office. Fred Durkin, looking concerned and very bald, was there on the yellow sofa, and Saul Panzer, short with unremarkable features, not counting his remarkable nose, was in a yellow chair on the adjoining wall. They both stood when we entered, and Fred said,

"What the hell, Archie. What happened last night. I knew we was in trouble when you pulled that stunt on Wolfe yesterday. How come you didn't?"

I didn't bother to reply, but ushered Parker into the newly repaired red leather chair in front of Wolfe's desk. I spoke,

"Who needs breakfast? I'm starving and even though I'm no longer an employee here, the policy of the house is to let no one go hungry."

They all said they had eaten, so I went alone to the kitchen where Fritz already had griddlecakes started. Fritz, who is Swiss, is well-proportioned with intelligent eyes, has a well-trimmed blond moustache with gray streaks, and a very continental demeanor. He has been in the service of Wolfe longer than I have, and his cooking is one reason Parker shouldn't wonder why I have stayed on so long.

It was obvious to me that Fritz wanted to give me the third degree about what happened last night, but it was just as obvious to him that I was in no mood to answer. So I ate the cakes with alfalfa honey, coffee and orange juice, and Fritz' sourdough toast in silence. It was unfair. Fritz

should have fed me hard tack and water. Anything else he cooks just makes it that much harder to go.

When I reentered the office, Saul and Fred had pulled up chairs next to Wolfe's desk, facing Parker in the red leather chair. Parker started,

"Good morning, gentlemen. I'm glad you were able to come."

I had taken my former seat at my former desk, and said,

"You wanted Fritz and Theodore, too, right? Parker nodded as he opened his case and took out some papers.

I called for Fritz, the button for the buzzer under Wolfe's desk still being out of order, and got Theodore on the house phone and asked him to come down. I pulled a couple of the yellow leather chairs around and put them at an angle between Wolfe's and my desk, next to Saul and Fred so Fritz and Theodore could see Parker in his chair.

Fritz had put his suit coat on, and looked the butler this time. Theodore entered. The oldest of the bachelors that live and used to live in the brownstone, he had a ring of gray hair around a shiny dome with a few strands over the top for good measure, and a sour, thin face. He knew everything there is to know about orchids, he knew he knew it, and didn't mind letting others know it too. I could tell from his face that he wanted to ask questions, but my mood hadn't changed so I just jerked my thumb to the yellow chair nearest my desk, turned my back to him and got my notebook from the desk.

When Theodore was seated, I turned. Parker started.

"Mr. Goodwin has told me he knows nothing of the instructions Wolfe has left me. Is that true for you others as well?"

Parker got blank stares and Theodore shook his head slightly. Saul said,

"All I got was your message to come."

Parker glanced at me meaningfully, and started.

"Well then, this may come as a shock, and I've not had time to prepare this thing properly. Mr. Wolfe was quite adamant that this be done without delay. I've found the best way for me to discharge these matters is to simply state them as quickly and as clearly as I can without comment. Please reserve your questions until I ask for them."

Parker pulled a yellow pad from his briefcase and turned a few pages. The page he settled on was filled with only a few notes from what I could see.

"It is the desire of Mr. Wolfe that this brownstone we are in be given to you, Archie. With the

exception of the kitchen, which, according to Mr. Wolfe, has always belonged to Fritz and is therefore not part of this transaction. Fritz, you are to have the kitchen equipment, and Theodore, you are to have everything on the roof, including the orchids. Additionally, all of Mr. Wolfe's assets are to be divided and portions are to be given to Mr. Horstmann, Mr. Brenner, Mr. Saul Panzer and Mr. Fred Durkin. Mr. Wolfe also desires portions go to charities and other funds he has contributed to in the past. He said you would know which ones, Archie. Mr. Wolfe said you, Archie, would know the location and amounts of all his assets, and he asks you to determine the size of the portions to be given to each individual and charity. What is left over, you may keep for yourself. After, of course, you pay my fee."

Parker smiled at his own clever joke, but I wasn't laughing. He continued,

"Are there any questions?"

Questions? He was asking for questions? The whole damn thing was a big question. Fritz looked like his soufflé had just collapsed, and Theodore was going to whine. I began to set my teeth to prepare for it, but Saul spoke first.

“That sounds like a will.”

“Yes, it does. But it is not. As far as I know, Mr. Wolfe is very much alive. I’ve tried several times to have Mr. Wolfe stipulate a will, but he has always resisted. He apparently detests wills.”

That was certainly true. He once called a will a tug-of-war with a dead man's guts.

Fritz piped up.

“But where is he? Does this mean he will not be back?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Brenner, I have no further information. I have received his handwritten instructions by fax machine and have passed them to you. That is all I know.”

I spoke,

“May I see the fax?”

“Certainly.” Parker fished a single page document from between the sheets of the legal pad and handed it to me. It was Wolfe’s handwriting, all right. Clean, small and precise with no rake at all. Parker had quoted it almost verbatim, except there was an additional section stating that it was imperative that the transaction take place within five business days, and another giving Parker and myself full power of attorney over all of Wolfe’s assets.

Normally faxes have the originating phone number and other data in the margins, but this one had nothing besides Wolfe’s instructions. I handed the sheet back to Parker.

“He’s still ordering us around, isn’t he? What happens if we refuse to take the money?”

Parker looked uncomfortable.

“I’m afraid that contingency wasn’t discussed. Believe me, Archie, I have as many questions as the rest of you, but it was three AM when Mr. Wolfe called, and he said he was in a hurry. He hung up on me as soon as I had the gist of what he wanted. The fax came to my home machine twenty minutes later. One thing he made very clear, though. He wants everything done immediately. So I’ve handwritten some documents that will be enough to get started on. All I need are the signatures of you, Archie, and Mr. Brenner and Mr. Horstmann. Since you will be handling the disbursements of all other assets personally, Mr. Panzer’s and Mr. Durkin’s signatures will not be necessary at this time.”

Did I like it? Sure. I liked it, not one bit. Don’t get me wrong. I appreciate currency and what it can do every bit as much as Trump, and Wolfe certainly had a good portion of it squirreled away.

And just like any loyal employee who earns a day's wage I feel that I have always earned more than I got.

But I'd seen enough rich clients and otherwise who came by their lucre by means other than smarts and hard work, and I certainly didn't want to be counted among that bunch. And if you're thinking that I was upset because it sounded like Wolfe wasn't coming back, sure I was. Not because I wanted him back, but because of the way he was trying to do it. My mind had gotten used to the idea of my being on my own, with no one to answer to. Now, I was saddled with the responsibility of maintaining the brownstone, and of trying to figure who gets what. It was worse than having Wolfe there. Wolfe had enough genius and ego to be able to collect high enough fees to keep things going. And while I certainly deserved and could get at least double the going rate for a private eye in NYC, it would bring in nowhere near what would be needed. Wolfe's assets, deposited in banks, bonds and safety deposit boxes around the burg were plenty enough to run the place, but how was I supposed to figure a fair way of what to give out and what to keep? There was no decision to make as far as I was concerned. I said to Parker,

"No."

"No? No what?"

"No, I won't sign anything. I don't want it."

"Archie, that is unfair. Unfair to you and unfair to the others. Unless you go along with this, no one gets anything and everything is in limbo."

"I can't help that. You've got power of attorney; you give the stuff to the others. I'm leaving."

"That is clearly not Mr. Wolfe's desire. I can't force you to go through with it, Archie, but if you don't sign this, it will be unpleasant for everyone. Like it or not, you have an obligation here, and you should fulfill it responsibly."

That did it. I didn't like Parker's words, or his tone.

"Sorry. You just made up my mind for me permanently. I won't sign that. Not today, not ever. Give the brownstone to the homeless for all I care. Good day to you."

Parker tried some more, and even tried starting over from scratch, but he knew as well as anyone when my mind was made up. As he got up to leave he said,

"I have five business days to execute this action, Archie. Wolfe wanted it done in one day, but I told him I had to have at least that much time. You know how to reach me if you change your mind."

"Not a chance. Don't trip on the way out."

Parker left. The others, including Fritz, stayed frozen so Parker had to let himself out. When the

sound of the front door closing came through the open office door, Saul turned to me and said,

“I think I’ll be going, Archie. I’m not needed here. You know where to get me. Fred, you coming?”

Fred said sure and got up. He had taken two steps past me when he stopped, and turned around.

“I get why you’re doin’ this, Archie, and I don’t blame you. I don’t want none of Wolfe’s money that I haven’t earned.”

For Fred that was saying a lot. With his wife and kids, and the lack of regular cases, I knew he could have used some of that boodle. I gave him a genuine smile and said,

“Thanks, Fred, see you around.”

“Yeah, and let me know when you want to find him.”

Fred went through the door before I could answer him. Then the whine from Theodore started.

“Archie, without Mr. Wolfe’s help it will be impossible to keep up with the work upstairs. We just got that shipment from Long Island and it has to be unpacked and checked for thrips.”

I unloaded. “Wolfe unpacking orchids? Baloney. You know very well that you’ll be happier without him up there arguing with you. Besides, I don’t have anything to do with it. As far as I’m concerned, the orchids are yours, so burn them if you want.”

You’d thought I’d told him to blow up Manhattan, the way he looked. He left with one parting whine,

“Mr. Wolfe was a hard worker and a great help. The orchids will not thrive without him.”

Five

Fritz and I were together, and there was silence. Eventually, Fritz rose and said, "With your permission, I shall return to my duties, sir."

That was startling. Fritz never addressed me as 'sir' unless outsiders were present.

"Fritz. It's Archie. You know that. And what do you need my permission for?"

"I'm sorry, sir. But that paper Mr. Parker had says you are now the master of this house. I treat you in the proper manner."

"I refused to take it. I'm still Archie."

"Archie." "Yes. You are Archie. May I speak to you as we once did, just for a moment?"

I said nothing. Fritz sat back down and looked at me with solemn eyes.

"Something happened yesterday, when I went for the shoe polish. I knew something had happened as soon as I got home. Of course, it could have happened at any time. You and Mr. Wolfe are men of strong will, I know that.

Fritz leaned forward.

"But this is not like Mr. Wolfe. He might fire you, yes, or you might quit, but I know you and I know Mr. Wolfe. He would never leave this house unless he were in danger. You remember the Mr. Zeck?"

Zeck was the only enemy Wolfe had ever feared, or respected, enough to go into hiding when they locked horns. I was surprised. "You know his name?"

"Of course. I know more than you think. Mr. Wolfe left when he was threatened by Mr. Zeck. Now he leaves again—he is somewhere where he does not know how to live. It is not because you made him angry, Archie, it is something else. He is in grave danger, I'm certain of it. You must find him and bring him back."

"Nope. No deal. Even if I believed you, Wolfe's affairs aren't my lookout anymore."

"But you must, Archie. Don't you see? That paper Mr. Parker brought. It gives you the house, me the kitchen and Theodore the orchids. But how do you separate those things? One cannot tear the kitchen from the brownstone. We are one or we are nothing. And we cannot be one without Mr. Wolfe. You know that, Archie. Deep down, you do. In your *gutz*, as you Americans say." It sounded more like boots than guts.

"Look, Fritz." My patience, assuming I had any in the first place, was shot. "It's no go. I'm the master of the house for now, so you make like the butler and leave me, okay?"

Fritz' eyes dropped. He got up, bowed slightly and formally, and said,

"Of course, sir. Would you care to discuss the luncheon menu?"

"No."

"Very well, sir." He bowed again turned to go.

"Wait, Fritz!"

Fritz turned back hopefully. I said,

"Sure. Let's talk about lunch. What were you thinking?"

"Perhaps the pork dumplings. That is one of your favorite dishes."

Damn him. He wasn't making this easy.

"No. I don't think so. I want a Coney Island Red."

"A Coney Island Red? What is that?"

"Where have you been, Fritz? It's a hot dog. On a bun."

"Ah, of course. The carnival on Coney Island."

"Right. And macaroni salad, chips and cola. For dessert, some lemon Jell-o topped with whipped cream. Put some shredded carrots in it."

Fritz appeared slightly overwhelmed.

"The cola I know. And macaroni. What sort of macaroni salad, though?"

"You know. Elbow macaroni, mayonnaise, and tuna fish. Maybe some dill pickles or peas. Chilled."

"Ah. Very well. And chips? Chips of what?"

"Chips of potato."

"How would you like them made?"

"Come on, Fritz. You've seen them in the stores. You don't make them, you buy them."

Fritz was genuinely uncomfortable.

"Mr. Goodwin?"

"Yes?"

"I am truly sorry. We do not have these things in our pantry. I will need to make a trip to the Coney Island and the fish market. And I have never made the Jell-o, though I know what it is."

"Forget it Fritz. Just fix whatever you have. Leftovers."

Fritz straightened.

"No no, Mr. Goodwin. I will prepare what you desire, as it is my duty."

"Okay, sure. But don't go to Coney Island. Just get hot dogs and buns at the store. And canned tuna."

"The canned tuna is good enough?"

"Right. This isn't Wolfe's palate you're catering to. Canned is fine."

"Very well, sir."

Fritz did his kowtow and left in the direction of the kitchen.

Of course, I had no intention of eating any of that lunch. I would be long gone by then. I decided that it was as good a time as any to clean out my desk so I started with the lower right-hand drawer, which held the assortment of guns and ammunition we used when necessary. I pulled the drawer and was interrupted by the phone. Normally I would have answered it, but I left it to Fritz.

He got it on the fourth ring. A moment later he appeared.

"Mr. Cohen wishes to speak with you. And I'm sorry, but I forgot to tell you other reporters have called as well. And the police have been here, asking for Mr. Wolfe."

"I'll bet. Tell Mr. Cohen I'm out."

"I knew you would not want to be disturbed, but he seems to know you are here, and he's very insistent."

"I don't care. Tell him I'm up with the orchids and therefore can't be disturbed."

Fritz did his best to smile a little and said,

"Very well, sir."

And that made me grate my teeth. I turned back to the desk, and pulled my Marley .32 from the drawer. That gun and holster were my personal property, and had been since before I knew Wolfe, but all the other guns and ammunition belonged to Wolfe-- pretty funny since he never used them and abhorred violence in any form. I decided it best to take inventory. I didn't want to take any part of that place with me inadvertently. There were enough parts that would go whether I liked them to or not.

I started with the bullets, the big ones first. The full boxes I just set on the desk, but the partially filled ones I emptied, and then lined the cartridges up in a row.

I progressed to the smallest, some nasty little .22 caliber longs with special powder that really packed a punch. I had used them with an equally nasty looking stomach gun in the Cutter case when I had to have something and it couldn't be discovered. Luckily, I never had to fire the thing.

It was a pretty good assortment of bullets. Plenty enough for the post office on Church Street. Just as I was starting on the .22's, the doorbell rang. More reporters, probably.

I yelled to Fritz that I would get it, because I didn't want him sirring me again, and I still felt like telling someone off. Looking through one-way glass in the door, I saw not a reporter, but a

schoolmarm.

No, not a schoolmarm. Some schoolmarms aren't that bad, as I had learned in the Skinner case. But she had a look of all books with her hair in a bun like that. Her haircolor was kind of a mousy blonde, if there is such a thing. I opened the door and said,

"The library's five blocks up. On Fifth."

She either didn't get it, or ignored it.

"Are you Archie Goodwin?"

The r's in what she said had an English flatness. I admitted I was Goodwin.

"I am Marian Hitchcock. You know my father, Ethelbert Geoffrey Hitchcock. He has sent me here with urgent business. May I come in?"

She was the daughter of Hitchcock, the private detective Wolfe always used for work in Europe. Hitchcock had always done a good job, so that changed the situation. I looked at her in a new light.

But the new light didn't help any. She was at least three years older than my maximum specification for a suitable young woman. Don't get me wrong. Every girl has to age sometime, and I normally don't hold it against them. But it's one thing to fight the process, and quite another to enhance it with the hair and the shoulder bag and the coat and the suit, which showed through the front of the coat and was a rumpled tweed of some sort with a skirt past the knees and pumps that looked like they belonged in a nursing ward. With that suit any details of her figure would have to be left to the imagination, and my imagination simply wasn't interested in the job.

She repeated the request.

I decided why not, and invited her in. She wanted to keep her coat. I put her in the red leather chair where she sat with her bag on her lap, and I sat in my own chair. She started in without any preliminaries.

"We haven't much time, I'm afraid. I've been sent from London to fetch you for an urgent errand. I cannot tell you what it's about, but can say it is of utmost importance. Have you a passport?"

"Whoa there, old bean. You seem to still be on the jet. What's this about?"

"I'm sorry, I can't explain much. There is transport waiting at the heliport now. Please, we must hurry."

"Sorry, madam. I'm not going just on your say-so. And does this somehow involve Nero Wolfe?"

"Of course it does. My father dispatched me at Mr. Wolfe's request."

"Then nothing doing. I'm not going with any biddy to who-knows-where, especially on Wolfe's

beck-and-call. You haven't told me anything. Wolfe keeps me in the dark sometimes, but I'm done with that."

Hitchcock sat back with an exasperated look.

"Gad. They said it would be difficult to persuade you to go. That's why they sent me to find you instead of just calling. But I was not prepared for personal insults. You've done it three times now. However in the world does Mr. Wolfe put up with you?"

So she had caught the insults.

"He doesn't have to put up with me anymore. And neither do you. Good day, and give my regards to your younger sister, the Queen mother."

I got up. She did, too. She was furious. Her face was red and she looked about to explode. She spoke slowly and deliberately.

"You are one of the three most *irritating* men I've ever met!"

"I'm sorry, I couldn't quite catch that. You British are such masters of understatement, you know. Could you make it clearer?"

That popped her cork. She stomped her foot, reached into her purse, and pulled out a tiny automatic that could fire a tiny bullet right through my not-so-tiny skull.

"Goodwin, unless you come with me at once, I shall have to force you. You haven't the foggiest notion of how important this is! Please stop playing with your guns, prepare an overnight bag, get your passport if you have one, and come with me *immediately*."

Well, that was great, just great. Wolfe had just spent 20 g's on a metal detector system to detect guns, and I forgot to look at it. There I was, with a fully loaded desk and nothing to shoot. It was too much. I shrugged my shoulders and said,

"All right. You got the drop on me. I'll go if it's that important to you. Put away your popper."

Hitchcock made a gesture with the gun, something like resignation, and bagged it. I reached for the Marley and began loading it.

"You won't need that where we're going, Goodwin."

"After what you just did to me? I'll need it, if only to protect myself from you."

I finished loading, put on the holster and cradled the gun, replaced my day-old suit coat and headed for the file cabinet where Wolfe and my passports were kept. As I got mine, I noticed Wolfe's was missing. So either he had taken it before we left the brownstone last night, or he had come back and picked it up while Fritz was sleeping. No, that would have been difficult—Wolfe, as far as I knew, had no keys to his own house. I pulled my passport and added, over my shoulder to

Hitchcock,

"C'mon, then. Time's passing and we can't dilly-dally. I've already got my bag packed in the hall. You said I was one of the three most irritating men you've met. Well, I'm sorry. You caught me on an off day. Give me a few minutes to warm up and I'm sure I can top your stupid list."

I heard an exasperated growl behind me as I turned to the kitchen. I'd certainly brought out the best in her.

And I know what you're thinking as you read this report. You're thinking 'Geez, Archie, you're in a snit.'

Well, nuts to you too. I'm not forcing you to read this.

Six

I found Fritz in the kitchen, hanging up the phone.

"Ah, Mr. Goodwin! I have found your food! Remarkably Kim's grocery had all of it, and they are delivering it now. The woman, perhaps . . .?"

He was asking about lunch for her. But it was obvious he really wanted to ask whether she knew anything about Wolfe.

"Forget it, Fritz. I'm going with her to a romantic tryst. Don't know where, don't know when, or if, I'll be back. That's the way these things go."

Fritz blushed. How refreshing to know there are still men who can blush at such things.

"Bless you, Fritz, you're a jewel. And sorry about the lunch. I didn't really want it."

"But Archie? What am I to do with it?"

"Oops, you forgot the sir."

I thought about telling Fritz to eat it himself, but hell, none of this was his fault. He would gag for sure on that meal, and he didn't deserve such punishment. So as I was turning, I said over my shoulder,

"Feed it to Theodore."

As I emerged from the kitchen, Hitchcock was waiting for me in the hall. I donned my overcoat, got the overnight bag from the rack, and opened the door for her.

She didn't dilly-dally at all, but headed straight down the stoop and left towards Tenth Avenue. As she cast a glance behind her to see if I was coming, she noticed I'd left the door wide open.

"The door?" She asked.

"Nah. We'll leave it open. Fritz will get it."

I caught up to her and we headed for the heliport on 32nd Street.

Seven

I've mentioned my preference for a woman who can walk with me without playing catch-up or overdoing it, but Marian Hitchcock was something I'd never encountered before. I'll admit she was in a hurry and that certainly sped her gait, and I had the overnight bag. But I had trouble keeping up with her. It was a new experience, and I didn't like it. As we crossed 34th, I asked,

"Where are we headed?"

"I'm not to tell you until we are *en route*."

"We are *en route* now."

"Very well, I suppose we are. We are going to Alexandria Egypt by the fastest method available."

Of course, I knew we were headed overseas somewhere, as Hitchcock had said I would need my passport, and Canada or Mexico didn't seem likely. If you had asked me to guess, I probably would have pegged London for obvious reasons. But for some reason, maybe gut feel, I wasn't surprised that Egypt was our destination.

"Is Wolfe there?"

"Yes."

"What's our mission, or is it top secret?"

"I know something of it, but it is secret."

"Hmm. Spies R Us."

Hitchcock ignored the comment. I continued,

"I guess it wouldn't help any to tell you I'm not into international intrigue or any of that nonsense. I specialize in murders of the domestic variety."

"Goodwin, I don't know what services will be required of you. From the impression I've formed of you, I would say they had better be menial. My obligation is simply to get you there."

The latter sentence was uttered in a stuffy tone spoken only by royals of the snobbish sort. I took offense.

"Well, if all that's required of me is menial stuff, I'll let you carry my bag and I'll head in the opposite direction. Wolfe can get another hireling for that."

Hitchcock made a derisive snort.

"I knew I shouldn't have told you where we were going until we were on the plane."

Of course, that clinched it. I was going with her, not in spite of her attitude, but because of it. Someone was going to have to put her in her place.

The helicopter, already running on one of the two pads, was military. That didn't surprise me

either, as international intrigue always has more than its share of khaki, but when I saw who was holding the door open for us, I almost about-faced anyway in spite of Hitchcock.

It was General Carpenter. In my other life he had been the head of Army Intelligence and I had been an insubordinate Major with the main task of "handling Wolfe," as he called it. I was in no mood to handle Wolfe for him again. Carpenter yelled above the noise,

"Goodwin, good to see you again. Get in."

My mind was working. Carpenter's presence meant at least one mystery was cleared up: how Wolfe got out of jail. General Carpenter certainly had the pull to spring someone from a city jail in the name of national security, with no questions answered. The new question was, why? And an even bigger question was Carpenter himself, head of whatever that organization was called now--what was so important to make him unbind himself from his desk to personally fetch a measly former Major?

When a helicopter is revved up and waiting for you, it's too noisy to do anything but take the ride, so I let Hitchcock climb aboard and got in after her. We lifted off as soon as we were strapped in, and headed over the river. No one even tried to communicate above the noise.

We crossed the river and headed to the middle of the Garden State. The logical guess for our destination would have been McGuire Air Force Base, but no, we landed on the tarmac of the Newark Airport, about a hundred yards from the first terminal, where a medium sized executive style jet was parked. It was not painted khaki but white. It had no markings at all beyond the identification numbers and a US flag. I got my bag and we all disembarked to the tarmac, where a man and a woman were seated at a small collapsible table, waiting for us. The General looked at me and indicated the woman, so I reported to her.

"Mr. Goodwin? I am from the State Department. I will need your passport."

"Okay, but don't ask me to state the purpose of my trip because I'm being shanghaied." I pulled my passport and handed it to her.

"I know the purpose of your trip, Mr. Goodwin. I'm here to issue your diplomatic papers, and to brief you on protocol for a United States citizen traveling under these documents."

Wow. Diplomatic immunity. Protocol. Whatever it was, I was getting in deep. Now she was going to lecture me on how to behave myself as a guest in Egypt. As the woman stapled official-looking papers into my passport, the man pulled a Polaroid camera and took my picture twice. The woman continued,

"We have diplomatic agreements with all the countries you may travel to, except with Libya. We

would prefer you don't go there. Under these agreements, you personally are not required to reveal anything whatever to anyone, including and especially, agents and employees of foreign governments, regarding the nature of your mission. These details will be handled through diplomatic channels."

"That won't be hard, as I don't know any details myself. Keep my mouth shut. Is that it?"

"Yes. If you have any difficulty the attachment to your passport has a telephone number you can call for assistance, and instructions on how to make the call from various countries. There are also local embassy numbers listed for major cities."

The pictures were done, and the man was trimming them.

"It is also illegal for anyone to detain you in jail, or for questioning, regardless of what you may have done." She reached below the table and pulled up an aluminum case. Definitely the kind spy gadgets are kept in. From it she produced three cell phones and gave one each to the General, Hitchcock and me. She then gave the General a nylon pack and said it had the accessories and chargers for the phones.

"These phones will work in most areas of the countries you may find yourself in. They can provide a secure communications channel in some cases. If the channel is not secure, you will hear a beep in the background about every ten seconds. Do any of you have computers with you?"

Hitchcock said she did. The woman told her,

"You'll have to exchange it for one of ours. We haven't time to check the files on it."

Hitchcock replied,

"I prefer to keep this one, as I know well how to use it. I can vouch that there is no sensitive information on it."

The woman started to protest, but a simple gesture from the General cut her off. She turned to me.

"Do you know how to use a notebook computer, Mr. Goodwin?"

"Yes. Most things."

"Okay. Please take this with you." She pulled a black nylon case from under the table. "It has a secure data link similar to the phones. Test it when you arrive in Egypt and give us a call if there is a problem."

"Why not give it to the General?"

"I've been instructed to give it to you or to Ms. Hitchcock."

"What program do I test it with?"

“It’s obvious. A United States flag icon. Look for the menu item called ‘test link’. There are instructions in the bag. Ms. Hitchcock, your diplomatic papers will be given to you by a representative of your government when you arrive in Egypt. General Carpenter, may I see your passport?”

She inspected the General’s passport while the man pasted one of my pictures onto a paper in my passport. He then had me sign the picture and the paper. The woman then took us all in.

“Okay. You are ready to go. Here are the standard papers and warnings regarding any trip to Egypt and nearby countries.” She smiled. “Have a pleasant flight, and good luck.”

She sounded like a goddammed stewardess. I stowed the papers in a pocket of the computer case, pocketed my passport, and followed the others to the jet.

With the dispatch shown by the State Department in getting my papers and other such, I would have supposed we would take off without delay, but we had other passengers who followed us onto the plane. They were army men in uniform, or rather army persons, as one was not a man. Six men and a woman, all carrying large duffels. It took a while for them to board and get their gear stowed. There was also a fair amount of equipment being loaded into the cargo hold.

I didn’t like that, of course. It may have all been innocent—spare parts for Iranian jets or something, but it looked a lot like I was about to be involved in some nasty military operation.

Frankly, though, I was tired of a morning full of not liking things. I was just plain tired anyway, having only about five hours of my eight and a half quota the night before, and the interior details and seats in the jet were by no means standard military issue. Mine was the most comfortable plane seat I had ever sat in, and I was only vaguely aware we were taxiing before I drifted off to sleep.

Eight

My stomach woke me. It wanted pork dumplings, but was so empty it would have settled for Coney Island Reds. I stirred and looked around. General Carpenter was across the aisle from me, watching me. The leavings of lunch were on a tray in the seat next to him.

“Ah, Goodwin. You’re awake. Are you hungry? I’ll have someone get something for you, and we’ll talk after you’ve eaten. You’re probably wondering what this is all about.”

The general caught the attention of one of the enlisted men behind us, words were exchanged, and a soldier got up and went to the galley in the front of the cabin. Needing to stretch my legs, I got up and went to help him. Our stewardess had apparently been left at the table on the tarmac in Newark.

I had a pleasant and meaningless conversation with the enlisted man, who was from Arizona and whose name patch said Johnson, and took my lunch to my seat and started.

I said my stomach would have settled for a Coney Island Red but that still left open the question as to whether it would tolerate Army food. It didn’t have to make the choice, as the lunch was good for airplane food, featuring grilled chicken breast with an apricot glaze. The meat was actually tender-- an amazing technological achievement for aviation. The lunch was more evidence that I was not on an Army plane, but some executive jet for Generals and their minions. My tax dollars at play, I suppose.

After I had eaten lunch I attended to personal details such as combing my hair, brushing my teeth with one of the complimentary toothbrushes placed in the bathroom, and even shaving. I really could have used a change of clothes as well, but that would have to wait. I returned to the cabin and sat next to the general.

The General looked behind him and motioned Hitchcock to join us. She got up and took the seat just across the aisle from me. After the General had made sure none of the other passengers were within earshot, he started.

“Goodwin, you know that in the past Wolfe has helped our government a great deal. At times with no remuneration. My office and the government have always been grateful to both you and Mr. Wolfe for that help. But Mr. Wolfe is a private citizen, and his demeanor is such that he is sometimes, well, unpredictable. So since the end of the crisis that brought your help originally, I have not considered Wolfe for any further assistance. Indeed, his name has come up as a possible resource to solve many problems, and I have always flatly refused to consider those proposals. We do not take advantage of private citizens. The constitution forbids it.”

Well. I was certainly relieved. I was jetting to Egypt, practically at gunpoint, presumably to help a man I would rather poke with something, and the government wasn't taking advantage of private citizens.

The General continued,

“But an unprecedented situation has developed. One completely out of our control. We are negotiating the purchase of a certain item. An auction, really, and the selling party insisted that the bidding be done by no one other than Wolfe.”

“Why Wolfe? And what's being sold?”

“We don't know why they asked for Wolfe. Frankly, Goodwin, it makes me nervous. Our intelligence people have full dossiers on the sellers, but we can find no connection between Wolfe and them. I have no doubts whatsoever that Wolfe is a loyal American—that's not it—it's just that when we told Wolfe who the sellers were, he did not act surprised. He accepted it; with what I would say was resignation. All our attempts to get information from him have failed. Wolfe has hardly communicated at all. As for what the item is, it's not necessary for you to know.”

“Then you sprung Wolfe from jail last night. And told everyone not to tell in the name of Uncle Sam.”

Carpenter made a gesture with his hand. A triviality. He continued,

“Goodwin, we need your help. Badly. It is of the utmost importance that our country gets the item that is for sale. We are bidding against another government. We don't need the item as much as we must assure the other country doesn't get it. We got Wolfe to Egypt by the fastest plane we have, and three hours ago he put in the first bid. It was for one dollar. Since then he hasn't budged. I tell you, Goodwin, if he doesn't do something it will be a disaster!”

Carpenter ran his fingers through his hair.

“Dammit, Goodwin, you know him better than anyone alive. Why would he do that? Why would he only bid one dollar? And what's the connection? Why won't the sellers listen to anyone else?”

“Scratch that,” I said. “I thought I knew him, but maybe I don't as much as you think. As for why he bid one dollar, it could be for any of a number of reasons. His plane seat may have been too small, or maybe they left the salt out of his pheasant under glass. It's probably because he exhausted himself on the trip over there. It takes a lot of energy to hold a plane together by sheer willpower. The point is, it could be anything. As for why the sellers want him, I give up. Maybe if I knew their names I could tell you.

I continued,

“But before you answer that, answer me this. My arithmetic, which I still remember from Mrs. Wintel’s seventh grade class where I got an A, tells me you were making arrangements for me to get on this plane even before Wolfe started giving you trouble. Why?”

Carpenter emitted a disgusting word.

“You know very well why. We can’t deal with Wolfe without you. I’m coming because others think I might do some good, but I won’t be able to, not with Wolfe. He’s just too damn eccentric. You’re the only one who can handle him. Like it or not, you two come as a pair. We would have had you on the same plane as Wolfe, but we didn’t know where you were.”

“Nuts. I was in the jail cell with Wolfe.”

Carpenter’s eyes opened wide.

“You were?”

“Sure. We come as a pair, remember?”

“Well, I don’t know why my agents didn’t recognize you, or why Wolfe didn’t tell them you were there. They had to be discrete, of course, but they checked the police records to see if you had been arrested, and checked with Wolfe’s cook, Brenner, posing as reporters. No one knew where you were.”

“So you had Hitchcock lasso me,” I said, pointing a thumb at her.

“Well, by this morning our agents had seen you going into Wolfe’s residence, and Marian was already on her way to help, so we decided to wait until Marian could get there. In light of things we had heard, we thought you might be a little uncooperative. We thought Miss Hitchcock stood the best chance of getting you to come.”

“She did that all right. With great finesse, I might add.”

“Goodwin, whatever your personal problems are, you are going to have to set them aside temporarily for a greater cause. You’ve done it before. This is every bit as important.”

“I doubt it.”

“Believe me, Goodwin. This is vital.”

“Okay I trust your judgement, which is saying a lot, especially about a General. But you haven’t told me who the sellers are. And why is Marian Hitchcock involved?”

“The seller is a man named Gospo Stritar. And his wife, Anna Bathory. Do you know them?”

I tried to control my face. I knew him all right. My mind went back to when Wolfe’s best friend, Marko Vucik, had been murdered, and Wolfe and I had gone to Yugoslavia and surrounds to find his killer. We had traipsed mountains, slept in haystacks, and generally had a miserable time. Stritar

was a Yugoslav government official. Wolfe tricked Stritar into sending Peter Zov, Vucic's murderer, back to the states where Zov was then prosecuted and jailed with a life sentence, but not before he had put a bullet in Wolfe's leg. As part of the deception, Wolfe had to tell Stritar where eight thousand American dollars had been cached in a canyon of the Black Mountain.

The puzzling thing was that Stritar really didn't swing much weight. He was nothing more than a minor bureaucrat in a small office with dirty windows. How had he got hold of whatever it was the U. S. wanted so badly? Maybe he had used the eight thousand, which could have done a lot in Yugoslavia on those days, to advantage.

Regarding Peter Zov, one of my functions as Wolfe-lackey had been to keep track of felons we had put behind bars so we could brace ourselves if any were released and came gunning for us. But with Zov it had been impossible. About six years after his incarceration he had been deported to Yugoslavia as a part of some diplomatic deal, and I instantly lost any and all information on his whereabouts. For all I knew, he was now plotting revenge against Wolfe, which would make two of us.

So there was definitely a connection between Stritar and Wolfe, but if Wolfe didn't want Carpenter to know it, Carpenter wouldn't find out from me.

"Doesn't ring a bell," I said, which was true. Stritar did not, and never would, ring any bells in my book.

"Well, maybe you could get it out of Wolfe. We really need to know why Stritar insisted Wolfe do the transaction."

"We'll see. What about Hitchcock?"

"He is involved, but is busy with other things right now."

"No. I mean Marian Hitchcock here. Why is she involved?"

"That's simple enough. Mr. Wolfe asked for the Hitchcocks' help. It is appropriate, as Great Britain has agreed to pay a portion of the sales price."

"Anything else? Like where we are going? I know it's Alexandria, but what and where?"

"That's all for now. We are going to a secure facility in Alexandria, where the sale is to be negotiated. The facility being provided through the courtesy of the Egyptian government, and we don't want to do anything that would strain our relations with them. We want you to get Wolfe to cooperate. Do you think you can do it?"

"I don't know. Things are a little different these days. As I said, we'll have to see." I could have explained that Wolfe and I weren't a pair any more, but it seemed at little futile at that point.

Besides, something had been gnawing the back of my mind. Something I had unconsciously noted, a small item, in my conversation with the soldier whose patch had said Johnson, and whose uniform said U.S. Army. During the conversation with Carpenter it had come forward and demanded attention. I excused myself and moved to the back of the cabin, where the Army persons were.

Johnson was there, and nodded at me. I took another look at his uniform. Then I looked at the uniforms of the others, who were seated together in the last three rows.

Sure enough, the item my mind had caught was verified. Any soldier likes to keep his uniform nice, but these men were wearing brand new issue. Various details of the creases in the material, its stiffness and the slight smell of fabric sizing showed that every man was wearing a uniform fresh from the box, not more than six hours old.

It was true with the men, but not with the woman, whose patch said Harrington, and who had other details worth noting. She was in a brown uniform of the same type, and though it was starched and kept, it was definitely worn.

Surely new uniforms by themselves were not enough to merit suspicion. Maybe they got new ones just for the trip. But if so, why not Harrington as well? And the men, while they were definitely military, didn't quite seem to fit the Army mold—something with their jaws, and their demeanor. It didn't jive with my boot camp experience and the men I had met there. I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I asked Johnson,

“So are you soldiers all with the same outfit?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Forget the ‘sir’. Today is my day to let enlisted men call me by my given name, Archie. What are you headed to Egypt for?”

“We are going to train soldiers in the Egyptian army. It's a good will gesture.”

That was a fine answer. It surely made me comfortable, not. For one thing, it was too pat. It sounded like it had been rehearsed. A better answer would have been ‘none of your damn business.’ For another, soldiers on goodwill training missions do not ride in executive jets. It only took a couple more brief exchanges with Johnson to peg him, and the other men. As I turned to go back to my seat I said to him,

“Well, good luck Johnson, and Semper Fi.”

Sure enough, several of the men jerked their heads around and looked at me. They were Marines in Army uniforms. Probably a special force of some sort. Before Johnson had a chance to reply I walked back up the aisle and sat in my original seat, next to Hitchcock, who hadn't moved back to

where she was. I looked out the window at the ocean. There were no clouds and the ocean stretched as far as I could see. What had Wolfe gotten us into? And how much had he known before Orr and Garre were killed? Why were Marines dressed as Army men? Did that make them spies in the eyes of a foreign government? And what made Harrington different, besides the obvious?

Too many questions, and not enough answers. I looked at the ocean again. The sun was setting behind the plane and there were no ships in sight.

The flight was long, but I had the sense that we were travelling faster than a commercial flight. Hitchcock eventually returned to her original seat, which allowed both of us to raise the middle armrests and stretch out for some sleep. Not long after she moved, Harrington came forward and sat next to me. Close up like that, she was fully worthy of attention, even in a baggy uniform. Her hairstyle showed just the right amount of conformity with a bit of upswept rebellion. But it was the sparkle in her eyes that caught me off guard—that, and the wedding ring I hadn't seen earlier.

“Mr. Goodwin, right? I'm Julie Harrington.”

“Hi. Call me Archie. Enjoying your stint with the Army men?”

She chuckled. It was a pleasant sound, from deep in her throat.

“Oh, I'm not really with them. You figured them out plenty fast, didn't you? I really have no idea why they are here. I was just told to play like I was with them. I don't suppose it matters now, since you know and the General knows, and Miss Hitchcock here has probably overheard us.”

She indicated Hitchcock's seat with a slight nod of her head.

“Yeah. You're right. I think your mind works faster than a few others here.”

“I should hope so. I'm here because I'm supposed to be smart about certain things.”

“Really? What things, or is it top secret like everything else?”

“I can't say because I've been told not to, but I hope you find out soon. I really am in the Army, not like those guys. Maybe we will be working together. I'd like that better than working with Marines, let me tell you.”

She wasn't giving me a come-on, she was just being pleasant and appropriately loyal to her branch of the service, and I appreciated it. I asked, “Can I get you anything from the galley? Some coffee or something with truth serum in it?”

She laughed her pleasant laugh. “No thanks. I need to get back to my outfit.” She snickered a little when she said ‘outfit’. “Hope to cross paths with you again, Archie.” Harrington got up with a friendly smile and returned to her seat.

We touched down at the commercial airport in Cairo at six twenty-three in the morning according to my wristwatch, which I had set to local time. I'd give you some nice information that would come in handy if you ever have to negotiate that airport, but I didn't get it myself. We were met by an open shuttle bus and carted to a building away from the terminal where the General was told we would be passed through a special customs for diplomats. The Army/Marine men went on another bus in the direction of the terminal, but Harrington was told to stay with us.

There we were stymied. I suppose some diplomatic snafus are inevitable, but it seemed a shame that the State Department had taken the trouble of setting up a table on the tarmac just to get us off quickly, only to have us inexplicably delayed on the Egyptian end. We waited in a small room for exactly three hours. Carpenter was agitated, and only got worse as time went on. At periodic intervals he would leave the room, only to come back more exasperated. The rest of us stayed put. One reason was because there wasn't anything else to do. The main reason, though was that there were guards, dressed head-to-toe in black and carrying submachine guns, standing just outside our door. They tended to dampen any tendency to wander, although they let Carpenter pass freely.

At about nine, the General roused up some grub for us, though it consisted only of flat, round bread and oranges. About the only positive aspect of it all was that I got a chance to become acquainted with Harrington, who had been in the Army for nearly eight years, and had just been married last June. She was from Indiana, which made me, an Ohio boy, nearly a neighbor of hers. Hitchcock, who I concede may have also had a life of some sort, kept to herself, her nose buried in a book, except for once when she was called out of the room to get her papers from an unseen British embassy official. She finished one book, and immediately started another, pulled from the same bag that held the gun. Her interest in literature would probably impress Wolfe if she could convince him that she wasn't a female; and that didn't seem like too tough a job.

Finally, a man in a black suit and tie came in. I would say he was in his late forties or early fifties, with a small but graceful build and a pencil mustache. I would have guessed he was Egyptian or Arabic except his skin seemed a little too light. The most striking thing about him was his face, though. Even though it had a dignified appearance, it looked as if something was pinching him. When he faced us and bowed, and apologized for the wait, even his smile looked more like a grimace of pain. Like something in his underwear was bothering him.

"I am truly sorry to keep you waiting. I was not informed of your arrival in timely fashion. Please accept my apologies. It is a great honor to have you, General Carpenter, and you, Mr. Goodwin, Ms. Hitchcock and Ms. Harrington in our country. Please accept our hospitality."

He appeared to want an acknowledgement, so we smiled and nodded, and the General said something about the wait. He apologized again and continued,

"My name is Ahmed Tayel and I will be your host during your stay. If there is anything you desire or need, please do not hesitate to ask me. It is an honor, truly an honor to have you, and the great Nero Wolfe, here with us. I mean this both as a representative of my government, and personally, as I had the honor of Mr. Wolfe's acquaintance some years ago and have never forgotten the great

service he did for our country.”

I knew Wolfe had spent time in Egypt in his younger days. He owned a house in Cairo. But I was unaware he had performed some service for the Egyptian government.

Tayel smile/wincing and said,

“We must go through the formality of checking your passports, then a helicopter will transport you to your destination. Also, I’m afraid the facility you are going to has a policy: no firearms, knives or other weapons. I know that some of you carry these weapons as a normal part of your occupation, but now if you are carrying any, or have them in your luggage, you must surrender them to me.”

Tayel barked an order to the door in Egyptian, and an assistant appeared and collected and inspected our passports. I wasn’t too keen on the idea of giving up my Marley, and briefly toyed with the notion of not declaring it, but Hitchcock settled the matter by taking the gun from her bag and declaring that I had one as well. Bless her heart. On collecting the Marley, Tayel told me he would return it when my stay was over.

After the formalities, Tayel gestured to the door and we went back outside, where a helicopter, bigger than the one in New York, was waiting.

There was an awkward situation before we took off. Some of the equipment I thought had belonged to the Tom Clancy bunch was actually Harrington’s: one was a good-sized metal box on wheels that looked like a tool case. From the look of the padlock on the front, it must have had something worthwhile in it. The people with Tayel weren’t about to let it on the helicopter before searching it. Either Harrington’s Army uniform did not give her the same diplomatic status, or the tool case would have raised alarms regardless of who had it. General Carpenter and Tayel had a whispered dialog, away from the helicopter and my ears. Eventually, Harrington joined them and added to the discussion.

It got settled with a compromise, as near as I could tell. Harrington unlocked the case, and Tayel’s men were allowed to choose a drawer from the box at random to look in. From what I could see, it looked like the drawer they chose, the third one down, had tools. Like an auto mechanic—socket wrenches and screwdrivers and similar items. They took a couple out and inspected them, then allowed Harrington to close and lock it, and it and we were put aboard.

The sun was well up on our right as we headed for Alexandria. Even though I’m not up on Egyptian geography, anyone could tell we were flying down the Nile delta, with the desert and pyramids on our left. The contrast between the green delta on the right and the desert on the left

was remarkable. So I'm remarking it.

Ten

I don't want to sound like a complete hick. When you live as long as I have with a man like Wolfe, and have access to items like the three-foot globe and the Oxford Atlas and sparkling dinner conversations, you pick up certain things. I knew, for example, that Alexandria was on the Mediterranean at the Western end of the Nile delta, that it had been founded by Alexander the Great as a naval port and center of learning, and that there had once been a great lighthouse at the harbor entrance, one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. I also knew that occasionally leaders of state would go there to negotiate things like temporary peace settlements, and wondered if we were headed to the same place.

The trip didn't take long. Details of the city soon came into view. Right on the Mediterranean coast, it had plenty of water in the form of a large lake on the landside, lined with factories on one end that seemed to be causing the water to turn red. On the near side of the lake were marshes, then desert. We headed to the left of the city. There was an airport there, but instead of heading for it we crossed a harbor full of ships to a peninsula that curved around the harbor. At the tip of the peninsula where land ended and concrete quays started there was a complex of buildings, some modern and some old and ornate. There was plenty there, such as the type of ships moored at the quays, the vehicles parked here and there, and the fence surrounding the building compound, to show that it was a military base of some sort.

We landed in an area marked for helicopters and were met by a man in formal dress uniform escorted by a couple of military guards and a couple of men dressed in white tunics and black pants. He seemed pleasant enough but didn't talk to us directly, instead yelling above the noise in some form of Egyptian or Arabian to Tayel. After the helicopter blades became civil, Tayel turned to us and said,

"This is Saad Tayel, my brother. He is head of security here, and we both welcome you to the Ras el-Tin palace. We are honored that you are here and hope you enjoy your stay. While you are here you are free to enjoy the palace and its grounds and gardens, and may move about at will, but my brother requests that, for your own safety, you do not attempt to go beyond the walls that surround the palace. Ms. Hitchcock, your father has requested you join him and he is not here, so the helicopter will take you to him. The rest of you, if you will follow me, will have an opportunity to get settled in your rooms and begin conducting your business. If you are hungry there is an informal luncheon being prepared on the terrace outside the palace. I will show you where it is. Tonight, we request your presence at a special banquet to be held in honor of you, our guests. Please

be in the Great Hall of the palace at 8:00 P. M. If you need anything at all most of our attendants speak English, and you may dial 0 from any phone for assistance.”

I had been examining the two brothers for a filial resemblance, and decided that I might have detected one if our host had unpinched his face, but otherwise it was no go. Saad was taller and fuller, and his skin was darker. He was also clean-shaven and had the pleasant look of someone at peace with the world, or maybe with his wife.

Hitchcock reboarded the aircraft and took off. The rest of us were led to what must have been the back of the palace, where the terrace was, and where lunch was going to be. We continued across the lawn between flowerbeds to some small huts grouped in a circle with their main doors facing inward. There were an even dozen of them. A sidewalk led from the cluster to the terrace steps. Carpenter had been talking to the Tayel brothers, and finally sauntered over to me.

"When you finish unpacking, Goodwin, meet me on the terrace. We'll find Wolfe, get an update from him, and check in with the people back home."

I gave him a snappy 'yes sir' which made him scowl, and he went to talk to Harrington. One of the attendants, a handsome young man who introduced himself as Muhammad, showed me to the hut with what looked like a nine on the door.

The room was fairly nice, with Western-style amenities. It was after midnight back home and my body wanted to start winding down, but it knew better, and after taking care of such items as showering, shaving, and changing to the suit I had packed, I took the clothes I had been wearing, collared Muhammad outside the hut, and asked him if they could be cleaned. He nodded yes and took them for me, and I headed to the terrace.

Lunch had not been started yet, and neither the General nor Wolfe was there. I began to doubt the existence of Wolfe, since it would seem reasonable that he would be where the food was going to be, and it was past dinnertime as far as he was concerned. We were told we had the run of the place, so I decided to take a quick look inside.

It was a palace all right. The entry from the terrace was lined with portraits, stone statues, and all the trappings you might expect. The hallway had what looked like offices with Arabian lettered placards next to the doors lining the left side and went all the way to the front of the building. It ended at one side of a reception area behind the large front entry. A long hall went the entire length of the front of the palace in both directions. The side facing the front was all windows with a view of the sea, and there were stone statues and Egyptian artifacts lining the opposite side. One of our buddies, a black-garbed guard, was posted further down the hall to the right. I walked across the

reception area and down the hallway toward him. If he knew I was there he didn't let on.

As I approached him, I asked in a friendly voice,

"Is this where the treasure room is?"

The guard didn't say a word, but that didn't matter. His message was loud and clear. He stepped in my path, poked his machine gun a good inch into my belly and gestured with his head to go back the way I had come. I decided to humor the man, since he didn't have any of his own. I had learned something: we certainly didn't have the run of the entire palace. There were places that would be off-limits.

I doubled back to main entry. The back of the reception area had two matching sets of large double doors. I surmised that one of them must be to the Great Hall, chose the right set of doors because one was slightly ajar, and entered.

What I saw was a tableau. It must have been the Great Hall because it would be hard to imagine something outdoing it. There were marble columns, an elaborately carved ceiling, tapestries and paintings on the walls and hooked rugs on the marble floor. In the left corner nearest the door, carved wooden screens shielded an area of the room. Next to it on the left wall, another set of double doors were open to the second room, which appeared to be a library of some sort, judging by the bookshelves and chairs. At the far end of the Great Hall was a large semicircular alcove that seemed to be floor-to-ceiling white marble. A pink marble pedestal ran around the entire alcove, and on the pedestal were white stone busts. In a semicircle pattern like that, they gave the impression that they were all staring at a single point in the room.

But none of these things were the tableau. They only contributed to the effect. The real tableau was sitting on cushions at the spot where all the busts were staring.

It was Nero Wolfe. Sitting with his eyes closed, cross-legged in a white Arabian getup complete with the head covering, surrounded by dishes of food.

Wolfe of Arabia. Although if you ask me he looked more like the tent. And at his side, fanning him with a corrugated fan on a pole was Cleopatra.

No. Not Cleopatra. Cleopatra had the snake on her head and the eye makeup. This woman was dressed in a beautifully embroidered silk chador and head covering, and was younger than Cleopatra had been when she was a movie star.

It was Scheherazade. That's who it was, all right. I remembered the book of Arabian Nights we had in our home in Ohio when I was growing up, and the frontispiece illustration showing Scheherazade telling her stories to a fat old sultan who looked bored. That always had struck me as

odd because Scheherazade's stories were supposed to have been so interesting they saved her life.

But there she was, to a T. She looked at me and smiled. Her outfit only showed her face and hands and a little of her black hair, leaving the rest to my imagination, but this time my imagination had heartily dived in and was tackling the chore with gusto.

The tableau needed time to appreciate properly, so I leaned against a marble column and took it in.

Presently, Wolfe opened his eyes and saw that I had arrived to save the day.

"Confound it, what the devil are *you* doing here?" He shouted.

Eleven

"I'm on the lam," I answered. "Someone tried to give me a house and I beat it here to escape the responsibility."

"Pfu."

"I was under the impression," I added caustically, "that you had requested my assistance. I was brought here against my will to give it."

"Bah. I requested nothing. Those confounded generals and their meddling. If patience were the only path to peace, the world would be lost."

"Right. Well, right now I'm lost. If you didn't ask for me, what good am I?"

Wolfe said nothing. I added,

"So I'm no good. See you later. Like never."

"Pfu. Sit down. You are here. You know very well what your talents and assets are, and my enumerating them would only make you bray louder. Confound it, sit! We have to talk. Your presence here changes everything."

Wolfe turned to Scheherazade and spoke to her in a tongue unknown to me, but known to Wolfe, who speaks nine languages fluently and is passable in six more. She got up, gave Wolfe a slight bow of the head, put the fan in a stand near the far wall, circled around the plates of food on the floor and headed through the front doors. As she passed me she smiled and gave me the same bow. She had nice white teeth, and I wondered how I would let her know it.

I circled and took the cushion just vacated. It was still warm. I said,

"By the way, did you know you are on the lam too? Cramer has a warrant out for your arrest. He's fit to be tied."

"No doubt. But let's ignore petty matters. Are you hungry? The spatchcock is too old now, but most of the food is still edible. The dates are the largest I've seen."

"Thanks, but lunch will soon be waiting for me on the terrace. I don't suppose you eat or dress like us common folk anymore."

"Pfu. The time change has confused my digestion. I ate because I was hungry, and the chef was kind enough to accommodate me. I dress this way by necessity, not having had the luxury of packing a bag before I came. It seems there are no suits my size in this region. Who came with you?"

"General Carpenter, an army girl named Julie Harrington, and Marian Hitchcock. Hitchcock went to join her father, wherever he is. There was a bunch a Marines, six to be exact, playing army on the

plane. They left us at the Cairo airport and I don't know where they are now."

Wolfe scowled.

"Just as I feared. Condottieri with their courageous bands on nefarious missions." Wolfe pointed behind him to the first bust on the left. "Alexander himself would not be able to cut through the tangle they will likely make."

"Well, at least you're clear on that. I'm not clear on anything. It would be nice to know something about what's going on. And while you're at it, you might add why you've willed the brownstone to me. I think you've dropped off your rocker onto that cushion."

Wolfe sighed.

"I suppose so. As I said, you are here, and we must compensate. You've been given the brownstone because I will have no further use for it. I shall not be leaving Egypt."

"Why not?"

"The reasons are recondite, so I won't burden you with them. I simply shall not be returning, and shall have no further use for the house or any assets. I entreat you to take care of the house, and enjoy it."

"Nuts. I don't want it. I didn't take it."

"Pfui. Of course you want it, and you will take it. You lived there too."

"I'll be the first to admit it was a first-rate place, and I loved my room and the office and the food and that third hook from the left on the coat rack—the one I always used. But I can't take it the way you offered it. You shouldn't even have to ask why; you know me well enough by now."

"Indeed I do, but you have been vexatious of late. Something seems to have exanimated a part of you."

"No thanks to you. And I'm stuck here for now. General Carpenter says that whether I like it or not, you and I come as a pair. He is about to find out how very wrong he is, but before I can say mother may I on leaving I have to help you with something. What?"

"I am bidding for the purchase of an item. On behalf of the governments of the United States and Great Britain."

"I knew that, and I know Gospo Stritar's in it somehow. But if you tell me it's not for my ears and eyes, then I'll take them elsewhere."

"I'm perfectly willing to tell you all I know of this matter, but Mr. Johnson needn't know."

Wolfe's reference to Mr. Johnson, who doesn't really exist, was plain enough. It was our way of communicating that the room may be bugged. I would have to wait until we were in a safer place.

“Okay. I’ll ask you later. Maybe in an hour, when you’ve finished your lunch, or dinner, or whatever it is and managed to pry yourself from that cushion. Meanwhile, General Carpenter is probably waiting for me on the terrace. Do you wish me to summon your slave girl?”

“Bah. Her name is Bahar Ferdowsi. She is Persian, and slave to no one.”

I spelled her name that way because that was the closest I could come with my keyboard. The ‘h’ rolled from the back of Wolfe’s throat in a way I would have to practice if I was ever to get on a first-name basis with her.

Twelve

I exited the Great Hall containing the Great Man, turned left twice, and headed down the hallway to the terrace. About halfway down, Bahar, alias Scheherazade, emerged from a small alcove to my left.

“Hello. Can you speak English?” I spoke slowly and distinctly.

In response, she smiled. She reached to a fastener on her chador, undid it, then grabbed her robes and headgear and pulled them all off in one motion. Underneath she was wearing a plain white T-shirt and blue jeans. Her hair was jet black, and she did a little fluffing, which wasn’t really needed as it was already fluffed to jumbo size. A little overdone, but you can’t have everything, especially since the jeans and shirt revealed that my imagination had done just fine with her figure.

She spoke, answering my question.

“I should hope so. I’m serving an internship at Southampton University in England. You are Archie Goodwin, aren’t you? I’m happy to meet you and am so glad you could come. It must be a marvelous experience to work for Mr. Wolfe.”

By golly. She spoke English all right. Or I should say American, because her accent was more neutral than mine. I replied,

“It’s an experience all right. What brings you here?”

“I’m your hostess. My name is Bahar Ferdowsi. I’m actually from Iran. Have you met Mr. Tayel?”

”Yes, both of them.”

“Oh. Well, I mean Ahmed Tayel. When he learned he would be hosting Nero Wolfe, he asked me to come and be the hostess. He is my stepfather, so I took a vacation from my studies and came here. I’m trying to please him and be the traditional hostess, but I’m afraid I’m not succeeding very well. These clothes are very hot. It’s been too long since I’ve worn them.”

“Well, if it helps any, you look lovely in them, and out of them. Would you like to fan me sometime?”

“Really, Mr. Goodwin, I . . .”

“Call me Archie.”

“Okay. Archie. I . . . well, never mind. My fanning Mr. Wolfe did look a little funny, didn’t it?”

“Not at all. It was charming.”

“It has been so long since I had seen Mr. Wolfe, I thought it might be nice to sit with him a while and talk.”

“You have met Mr. Wolfe?”

“Yes, when I was very young. I must have been about four years old. When my stepfather married my mother, he took me here to stay for a few weeks. Mr. Wolfe was here at the same time. I don’t remember much, but I do remember calling him Uncle Nero, though he didn’t like it very much. He was much thinner then, and younger too, of course. He didn’t talk very much, and didn’t like to have me around, but he fascinated me for some reason, and I bothered him more than I should have. I asked him a lot of questions.”

“No kidding? You called him Uncle Nero?”

“Well, yes, but in Farsi.”

“Farsi is the language you speak?”

“Yes. I’m from Iran. We speak Farsi. And Arabian too.”

“And Mr. Wolfe speaks Farsi too.”

“Yes. He speaks some, and some Arabian.”

“I guess it goes with the outfit.”

As we spoke, she had been glancing over her shoulder occasionally.

“Are you expecting someone?”

“I’m keeping an eye out for my stepfather. I don’t mean to sound rude but if he found us together alone here, I’m afraid it might be uncomfortable for both of you. He is steeped in the traditional ways and thinks it is not right for young people like us to be alone together for too long. It’s silly, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t know, not understanding your culture fully.”

“Of course it’s silly. And incredibly old-fashioned. I should be able to be with whomever I please.”

“Bully for you. Look, I don’t even know yet what I’m doing here, or how much time things will take, but I’d love a tour of the palace, and you could assert your independence by being alone with me again. I’m expert at avoiding girl’s fathers. Maybe later?”

“I think I’d like that. I know the palace fairly well. Maybe this afternoon before the dinner?”

“Sure, if I can. Just one more thing. May I call you Sherry?”

She looked at me with surprise.

“Do I look like a Sherry to you? It doesn’t even sound like Bahar.”

“It’s short for Scheherazade.”

“Oh, I see. You think I look like her. Of course I don’t, as she is just a legend.”

“If she is a legend, how do you know you don’t look like her?”

She laughed, and covered her mouth when she did it.

“Well, if you put it that way, I guess I do look like her as far as you’re concerned. But I have no stories.”

“That remains to be seen. What are you studying at the university?”

“Mideastern history.”

“There you go. Plenty of stories there. You can tell me some.”

“I could try.” She glanced over her shoulder again. “I really must go.”

She gave me a smile and headed back towards Wolfe. I didn’t get permission to call her Sherry, so I would have to ask her again later. As she left I noticed she was putting her chador back on: ready to be the slave girl again.

I had been keeping the General too long, and he was waiting for me at a table on the terrace. The palace attendants had started preparing the buffet, but no food was visible yet.

“Ah, Goodwin. What kept you?”

“I’ve seen Mr. Wolfe. We talked a little.”

“Good. Did you get an update on the situation?”

“No. Not a bit. He was worried that the room we were in was bugged.”

“I suppose that’s possible. It’s possible that everything around here is bugged. But we need to know some things from him as quickly as we can. There is a conference with the people back home in an hour, and I’d like to be prepared for it.”

“So do you want to talk to Wolfe now?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I’ll try to fetch him. It would be better, I think, if you waited here.”

The General nodded, and I went back into the palace. One reason I wanted him to wait was because if we set it up right, the terrace was probably a pretty good place to talk without fear of eavesdropping. A second reason was that I wanted to be alone so I could check that alcove Bahar had emerged from. It was on the same side of the hallway as the Great Hall, so there couldn’t have been much in it. Why had she been there?

The mystery deepened when I saw it. It was only about four feet wide and four feet deep, with nothing but a U-shaped brass vase on a stand at the end. I wasn’t sure, but I think the wall of the Great Hall became narrower at roughly the same point, so the alcove would have been about it. Yet Sherry had definitely been in the alcove when I saw her. I looked in the vase but it was empty. I

inspected the walls. They seemed to be a fabric something like dyed canvas, framed by hardwood.

Then I saw something. All the wood had been polished nicely, but at the right corner of the alcove the wood frame had fingerprints on it. You had to hold your head in such a position that the light played off the wood just right to see them. From the size and pattern it looked as if someone named Bahar had put her fingernails behind the far edge of the wood to pry. I tried my fingernails, but they were too short, so I pulled my penknife, and managed to slip it in enough to pry.

With a little effort, a concealed door came open. It was as wide as the canvas panel and as tall as the wall, and was fitted to the wall so perfectly that it looked part of it. Inside, there was a space just big enough for an old wooden stool. On the wall facing the Great Hall was a panel. There was no light or anything else that I could see. I sat on the stool and monkeyed with the panel. It had a brass hook that, when unhooked, made the panel hinge downward to reveal a rectangular peephole. It reminded me of the waterfall picture we used for eavesdropping back at the brownstone.

So Sherry had been spying on us. I grabbed the handle mounted on the inside of the door and closed it. Looking through the hole, it seemed to be covered with some sort of gauzy material, but I could see well enough. Wolfe was gone, and a servant was picking up the dishes. I could easily hear the clinking of the dishes, so Sherry must have had no trouble hearing everything we said.

Having solved that mystery and having created a couple more, such as why Wolfe's slave girl was eavesdropping on us, I put the peephole door back in place, left the peephole closet, made sure the door disappeared, and headed for the Great Hall. I hadn't seen Wolfe from the hole, but it didn't cover the whole room.

The attendant had finished with the dishes, and the room seemed empty. I went to the left to look behind the carved screens. What I saw was a small sink on a carved pedestal and a rack-like piece of furniture with four rolled-up throw rugs stowed on the shelves. Judging by the size of the rolls and how far the ends stuck out from the shelves, they were all probably of uniform width and length. And color too, judging by the edges, which were tinged with green.

Having established there was no one there, at least overtly, I went to where I thought the peephole must be. Sure enough, the room narrowed about four feet at that point, about six feet in front of the statuesque semicircle. On the wall was hanging an old tapestry, woven with a pattern of turbaned swordsmen on horseback with attacking other men. Some sort of a battle. The tapestry material was a light weave and was what I had peeped through. I lifted it from the wall and saw nothing, until I looked a little closer. There it was. The peephole door had been fitted with marble that matched the wall perfectly, and it was invisible except for the small seam that showed the door's

outline. Very well done, I thought. And probably old, too. The brass fittings I had seen could have been original with the palace. It was impossible for me to tell since I didn't know the history of the building, or the style of the fittings.

"Hello, Mr. Goodwin. You are admiring the artwork here. There are many fine pieces."

It was Ahmed Tayel, with his stepdaughter in her chador again. I let the tapestry fall back to the wall and controlled my face. Tayel's face was trying to smile but it looked more like his camel had just tried to spit on it. I smiled and answered,

"Yes. This tapestry struck my fancy. Is this a famous battle?"

Though I wouldn't have it possible, his face pinched even more.

"No. That is a massacre. We needn't talk about that. There are many other fine, old pieces here."

I decided to let it go, and asked,

"Oh? How old is the palace?"

"The palace was built in the early eighteen hundreds, but there isn't much of the original left, I'm afraid. Just this room and the room next door. The rest was rebuilt and added to early in this century. But I'm not being the proper host. Have you met my stepdaughter Bahar? She has kindly consented to be your hostess during your stay."

"Yes, we have met." I smiled at her and she bowed slightly without saying anything. Did she suspect I was too curious about the hanging? I didn't know, but had to play it safe by showing interest in other pieces as well. The General would have to wait some more. I said,

"I'm interested in the busts as well. Could you tell me about them?"

"Yes, of course," Tayel said with his smile. I couldn't help getting the feeling that it was the last thing on earth he wanted to do. "The busts are all people who influenced Egypt, and particularly Alexandria in some way. But I should have Bahar tell you about them. She is our historian."

She stepped forward formally and indicated the first bust on the left.

"Alexander the Great who, with the help of Cleomenes designed and built the city in 332 B.C."

She indicated the next bust,

"Ptolemy I, the viceroy of Alexander, who began the Ptolemaic dynasty. He established Alexandria as the world's seaport, and brought the first Greek influences to the city."

She went on, giving facts about each bust in turn. Some of the figures I knew, others were new to me. But I'm not going to tell you about all the people, even though I could write what she said verbatim. It's not that it was uninteresting; it's just that most of it isn't pertinent, and I had my mind

on other things, such as detecting any indication that she suspected I was onto the peephole.

I found no such indications.

During the entire explanation, Tayel had stood next to Alexander, watching us both like a hawk, or really more like a vulture. It was a little unnerving--something like the backup traffic cop who stands behind your car watching for you to draw a weapon or pull a hanky so he can shoot you.

Even though I'm skipping a lot there were a couple of things worth mentioning. For example, the busts seemed to be divided between leaders of Alexandria on the left and ancient Egyptians on the right. Women were well-represented, too. Of the thirteen busts on the semicircular pedestal, five were women. There was Cleopatra seven, of course, but there were others as well. Bahar finally finished up with the bust on the right, a woman named Khentkawes, whose tomb was next to the Sphinx in Giza, and who, besides being a queen herself, was the mother of two kings, though no one knows for sure which two they were.

I thanked Bahar and told her it was impressive, which it was. I was deciding whether to ask about more objects when we were interrupted by a loud noise that came from above. It was a voice, really, calling in a singsong. It had the tinny sound of a recording coming from a loudspeaker near or on the roof of the palace.

"That is the noon call for prayers, Mr. Goodwin," Tayel explained when it had stopped. "Those of us who are Islamic try to pray at least five times daily. There is a small mosque on the palace grounds, but some prefer to use the area set up in that corner for praying. If you will please excuse us?"

Tayel indicated the screened-off area that had the sink and the rugs. It was my cue to leave, and I took it, bidding both of them goodbye. Tayel and Bahar both stayed behind.

I didn't get far, though. As I left, two men in Arabian attire met me. One was thin, with a pious look and a small salt-and-pepper beard. He had a yarn covering on the back of his head. The other was smiling, a larger man with a jet-black beard and a turban. His belly would be a pot in a few years, but that wasn't the interesting part. The interesting part was attached to his wide brown leather belt. The belt had a few gems encrusted in it, but also attached to the belt was a dagger in a jewel-studded curved scabbard about eight inches long.

It was unfair. If he got a dagger I wanted my Marley back.

Thirteen

“And who might you be?” The smiling one said.

“I forget. Who are you?”

“Oh. Oh-ho. You are the famous Archie Goodwin, are you not? The funny assistant to the great Nero Wolfe. I am pleased to meet you. My name is Reza Takhti and this man here is my good friend Shokrolahi Abbas. Those are hard names for you Americans, aren't they? Well, you can just call me Reza, and I doubt you will be saying much to my friend. He doesn't speak English, you see.”

It was going to be hard to stop him. He was gesturing and nodding his head. He grabbed my sleeve with his right hand; a little too familiar if you ask me. He pulled me close and whispered, still with a smile,

“I am Mr. Wolfe's enemy.”

I pulled back.

“That's fine with me,” I replied. “Any enemy of Mr. Wolfe's isn't one of mine. I'm pleased to meet you, too, but I've got to be going.”

“Oh, but you must wait, Mr. Goodwin. Have you ever seen the Islamic people pray to God?”

“Well, parts at least. I know what happens.”

“Please come, and watch my friend pray. He won't mind. It is most interesting, and necessary to know for you to be effective in understanding your enemies. I don't pray myself. My good friend Shokrolahi here tells me that he always adds a prayer for me to his own, and I wouldn't want God to think I was selfish enough to desire more than one prayer.”

This guy was an item. He had his arm wrapped around mine and was almost dragging me back to the Great Hall. I could either create more of a scene than we already had, or go with him. I decided against scenery.

The prayers were interesting at that. Tayel had taken off his suitcoat and rolled up his sleeves. He was at the sink and was doing some sort of washing, starting at his elbows and going down to his fingers. Bahar apparently did not pray either, as she was standing outside the partitions. When she saw us she warned us with a finger to her mouth.

Takhti's friend waited patiently for Tayel to finish at the sink, then, as Tayel prepared a rug to kneel on, started washing himself. But his washing was different. He started at his fingertips and washed toward his elbows. And he was far more graceful in his movements than Tayel was. Tayel had arranged his rug, but was waiting for Abbas to finish his washing chore. When Abbas was done, he took the lead, with Tayel simply mimicking him. I knew they were supposed to face Mecca, but I

was surprised. Apparently, Mecca was behind the Palace, more South than East. I was going to have to check the next globe I saw, as I would have thought it was straight East. Tayel's movements during the prayer were interesting, consisting of much hand and arm movement and a lot of bowing and murmuring, but it was obvious that Abbas was really the one to see. His bows and wrist movements were a work of art. If God awarded points for grace and presentation this guy had it made.

I was uncomfortable, as it seemed that an infidel like me shouldn't be watching. The problem was Takhti, who was still smiling and watching me for my reaction. He probably would have broken the mood of the moment had I turned away. I didn't want that, but when the prayers started looking repetitive, I inconspicuously backed away and started examining the room again. One thing I hadn't mentioned in my description of the room was a glass case on the same wall as the peephole, near the door. It had a curved sword on a red pillow in it. The sword looked like the best bet, so I slowly backed to it, turned around, and started examining it.

Takhti had noticed what I had done and moved up next to me. I braced for his voice.

When it came I was relieved. He had decided to whisper.

"That is the sword of Muhammad the prophet, peace to him and his family. It is not actually his sword, of course, but probably a copy of a copy. Still, it is very old and rare, and only used in Islamic ceremonies. Some think Muhammad had a two-pointed sword, but I think that is just a myth. His sword probably really did look something like this."

That sword only had one blade and it wasn't shiny but showed signs of past neglect and corrosion, but it looked like recently it had been cleaned and sharpened all right. I didn't say anything more, and neither did he. He didn't encourage me to go back to the prayers, so after another moment I left the Hall.

Takhti followed, and when we were out of earshot of the others he said,

"That was interesting, wasn't it?"

I admitted it was.

"My friend Shokrolahi is a *Sayed*, which means he is a descendant of Muhammad's family. He is an important member of our government."

"Which is?"

"You mean, which government? Why, Iran of course! Weren't you briefed by your people before you arrived?"

"Brief is the right word. I don't know anything."

“You Americans are strange. How can you conduct proper business when you know nothing about it?”

“Well, in defense of Americans, I think I’m about to learn. I have a meeting with Mr. Wolfe right now, so if you will excuse me . . .”

He got the message. He grabbed my hand, pulled me toward him, slapped me on the back, and said,

“Well, it was wonderful to talk to you. What a marvelous thing to work for the great Nero Wolfe. He is a legend among some in our region.”

A legend? Wolfe? I asked,

“Why?”

“You don’t know? After living and working with him? Well, I don’t know the details; it was long ago and I was just out of school. I don’t think many do know the details, so you must ask him yourself. But what an adversary! I could not ask for a more worthy opponent.”

“So this is a fight to you.”

“More of a game. Like a game of chess, and Mr. Wolfe has made the first move.”

“Not much of a move, was it?”

“On the contrary, Mr. Goodwin. It was brilliant! A pass! A surprise move: no move at all, and my people do not know how to respond to it. But I tell you too much. It is not good for you to know we are groping. Let’s change the subject. Have you met the fair Bahar, your hostess?”

“Yes, I’ve met her.” I guess he really didn’t get the message. He would probably keep me as long as I tolerated it.

“Is she not beautiful?”

“I suppose. Under those robes.”

“Ah, but it is more than the body and hair that make beauty, it is the spirit as well. And I believe you’ve seen her without her chador, have you not?”

I said nothing. If people were going to sneak around peeping on others . . .

“Don’t be uncomfortable, Mr. Goodwin. Bahar saw me just after she talked to you and told me of your conversation, at least as much as she could before Mr. Tayel interrupted us. She confides in me, as I am something like a Godfather to her. More than that, I like to think. She said she likes you, so I like you too.”

While Takhti was speaking, General Carpenter came up to us, not from the terrace hallway, but from the wing to the right of the Great Hall, the one I hadn’t explored yet. I introduced the General to Takhti. They were cordial and exchanged a few pleasantries, but it was obvious they wouldn’t be

talking like Takhti and I had, and that Takhti and my conversation was over. Takhti excused himself, and said that he hoped to talk to me again.

When Takhti was out of earshot the General asked,

“Have you seen Wolfe? We don’t have much time. I’ve knocked on the door of his room, and looked other places, but I can’t find him.”

“I haven’t seen him. I got interrupted and haven’t looked much.”

“Where could he be? It is imperative we find him.”

I knew he wasn’t in the Great Hall and told the General so. We went to the second set of doors beyond the hall, opened them and looked in.

My detecting was running perfectly: it was a library. Near the door was a carved wooden stand of the same style as the sword case but with a large book on it, written in what looked like Arabic. Probably the Qu’ran—the words of Muhammad the prophet. Wolfe had two copies on the shelves in the office, one in English and one in Arabic, next to his Bibles and Josephus and other religious writings. The rest of the library had bookshelves lining three of the walls and the fourth, the one adjoining the Great Hall, had more paintings, except where the doors to the Hall were. Comfortable-looking chairs and tables and lamps were scattered here and there.

But Wolfe wasn’t there, either. As we left the library, Tayel and Bahar were leaving the Great Hall. Apparently Abbas was staying longer to ask an extra prayer for Takhti. We asked them if they had seen Wolfe and they said no.

“Where can he be?” Carpenter was exasperated.

I had a hunch, and asked,

“Have you checked the kitchen?”

Fourteen

The kitchen was at the end of the front hallway, the side I hadn't seen. The General hadn't gone far enough down the hallway the first time, and had missed the kitchen. Wolfe was there, next to the man dressed as head chef, bending over onions being sautéed in a pan.

"Mr. Wolfe," General Carpenter started, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but we need to have a conference as quickly as possible."

Wolfe apparently didn't hear over the sizzle in the frying pan, or he didn't want to hear. I tapped Wolfe on the shoulder. He turned, and the General repeated his statement. This time Wolfe didn't see. It was obvious from his eyes. Eventually, though, the eyes cleared, Wolfe saw us and acknowledged our presence. He greeted the General and added,

"I won't ask if you had a pleasant flight; that you arrived at all is remarkable."

"We need to talk," I said, "the onions will have to wait."

Wolfe introduced us to the chef, whose name was Antonio Scarsi.

"We are having orecchiette with rapini for dinner tonight," Wolfe said, "and a garum over flatbread. Mr. Scarsi has substituted an Egyptian herb for the basil. It should be interesting."

I suggested we go back out on the terrace, and the General agreed. We followed a waiter outside, where the buffet was ready. The two Tayels were there with Bahar, but Abbas and Reza weren't anywhere. I was still waiting to lay eyes on Gospo Stritar as well. I found a table on the patio that looked like it was safe enough, and headed for it. The chairs were white wrought iron, and were probably sturdy enough, but the seat wouldn't do for Wolfe. Luckily, there was a bench nearby with a more ample seat. I pulled that up for Wolfe, and he sat with barely a murmur. Wolfe started,

"You are probably hungry. Eat first."

"No," the General replied, "we have to hurry."

"Pfui. Your bellies would hold your thoughts hostage. Get something. I'll wait here. We can talk while you eat."

Wolfe's rules about discussing business at the table--in fact all of Wolfe's rules--had been left in New York, of course.

Carpenter and I went and got some food. The buffet was fine. A few dishes I didn't recognize or patronize, but it was basically the same buffet you would find at any palace or casino in the world.

When we returned, Carpenter started questions before he had even sat down.

"What has happened? Have you put up a reasonable bid?"

Wolfe made a face. Just because he was breaking rules didn't mean he had to like it.

“Eat something, General. You’ll feel better. Nothing has happened since I offered the first bid. It still stands at one dollar. As far as I know, the Iranians have not yet submitted a bid.

“But Wolfe, that makes no sense. We don’t understand what you are doing here. I thought I had impressed on your mind how important it is that we win this bid.”

“You have . . .” Wolfe started, but I broke in.

“Hold on, both of you,” I turned to the General. “General, you got me here and believe me, it is a delight. But you can’t expect me to cooperate unless I know what I’m cooperating with. What are you bidding for?”

The set of Carpenter’s face told me I was about to be stonewalled again, but Wolfe told me.

“We are bidding for a nuclear bomb. A small one. Stolen from the Russians. We are bidding against the Iranians for it.”

Of course, that possibility had crossed my mind, since Carpenter had tried to keep it so hush-hush. But I still didn’t believe it. Would you? Why would Wolfe, of all people, be the one bidding, and how in the world had Stritar got hold of such a thing? And besides, there’s no such thing as a small nuclear bomb. The General croaked,

“Wolfe, Goodwin hasn’t been cleared yet! Goodwin, you must tell no one about this. Especially the Egyptians! Swear that you’ll keep this quiet!”

Wolfe interrupted Carpenter by clapping his hand on the glass table-top.

“Bah. You’ll get no oath of fealty from Mr. Goodwin, but his discretion in matters such as these surpasses my own.”

“It’s all right, General,” I added, “I don’t believe it anyway, so why would I repeat it?”

Carpenter calmed a little and pointed a finger at me.

“Believe it, Goodwin. A lot depends on you. You’ve got to get Wolfe to put in a bid that makes sense.”

Wolfe said,

“Pfui. We have time enough to bid properly. By delaying we force their hand. Do they have a deadline? Why isn’t a third or fourth party invited? Why must this be done in person? Perhaps with our delay we will learn something, or force the Iranians to make the first move. It is even possible we may force Mr. Stritar and his wife to use a closed bid, which would favor us.”

“I don’t know.” Carpenter was doubtful. “But I do know the people back home aren’t going to like it. Have you learned why Stritar insists you do this? We don’t see any connection. Why would he want you?”

“He and his wife are arriving this evening. You can ask him then. We are still communicating by message until then.”

“Well, it’s making me nervous, not knowing what we are dealing with.”

“Have patience, sir. Finish your lunch. By the way, I have done one thing since we last communicated. I have asked Mr. Stritar and his wife for more information concerning how the exchange will take place, assuming our bid is accepted. I have not received a reply. I told them that in any case we would need to know certain details at least twenty-four hours before the exchange. Did you bring someone who knows how to deal with those hideous contraptions?”

“Yes. Her name is Julie Harrington. She’ll be joining us for the video conference.”

“Video conference? You told me nothing of this.”

“It is a video conference to update the people back home.”

“I won’t participate. You now know all I do now. Conduct it yourself.”

“You have to be there, Wolfe. They’re nervous enough as it is. When they learn nothing has happened some of them are liable to come here personally.”

“You know very well military people are not to be involved. I doubt your presence here will be tolerated.”

“I know, but believe me, it was all I could do to keep a couple of them back. General Carter especially.”

“That blatherskite? Confound it, if he shows up all is lost.” Wolfe sighed. “It probably is anyway.”

“All the more reason we need you there.”

Wolfe leaned back and scowled. Carpenter resumed his lunch. I caught Wolfe’s eye and touched my mouth, meaning I needed to talk to him in private as soon as possible, then sat back and tried to figure out what I was doing there.

Fifteen

Harrington came a few minutes later. None of us had spoken, but the General had finished his lunch. Carpenter invited her to join us, but she said she had grabbed something earlier. She told me it was nice to see me again, and that it looked like we would be working together after all. I mustered a smile. Then she and Carpenter left to set up the video conference. Carpenter said he would let us know when they were ready.

When they left, Wolfe turned to me,

“What is it?”

“Various things. For one, your niece was spying on us.

“My niece?”

“Bahar Ferdowsi.” I muffed the h, but it was clear enough. “She calls you Uncle Nero.”

“Miss Ferdowsi eavesdropped?”

“Yes. That Great Hall, which must have once been a throne room . . .”

“It was.”

“Okay. It has a peephole behind the tapestry of the men with swords. There by the heads. When I left the room, I saw Bahar coming from an alcove on the other side of that wall. Later, I investigated the alcove and found a hidden room, or closet, really. She had been in there listening to us, and watching us.”

“Indeed. You say she calls me Uncle Nero. She did, but in a time now distant. Her curiosity was boundless. If she wasn’t pestering me with questions, she was poking her nose here and there in that palace. Doubtless she found that peephole then. It is possible that she is trying to garner information for her stepfather, or for Mr. Takhti, but I doubt it. She doesn’t take Mr. Takhti seriously, and she does not like her stepfather.”

“Yeah. So she’s doing it for Stritar.”

“Pfui. She doesn’t even know them. No. That would not be her. No. . . with her boundless curiosity she flits about at random--never working to weave the patterns of expertise—instead content merely to be drunk with the nectar of knowledge.”

“Sure. Okay, she’s on a binge. Next topic: what makes you think you’re qualified for this bomb nonsense? I have sense enough to know it’s way out of my league. Why don’t you?”

“I do have sense, but no alternative. These things aren’t for humans; they are for automatons who have successfully severed their minds from their intestines. I haven’t the stomach for this, but I’m trapped.”

”Why?”

“The eight thousand dollars, of course! Archie, it was our money, those American dollars, which enabled the circumstances we find ourselves under. In a way, we paid for this debacle.”

“Hey, don’t try to put the blame on me. It wasn’t my money, it was yours. Besides, even eight thousand dollars in a third-world country wouldn’t buy this much headache.”

“No. But it set in motion the chain of events that have culminated here. We are culpable. . . no, I am culpable.”

“That’s better. Just like it was your stomach that got us into our last mess.”

“Pfui. We both have our sialogogues. Mine is the sauce. Yours, the saucy.”

That was uncalled for, whatever it meant. But I swallowed it and tried to get back on track.

“How do you know it was your money that did this? We don’t know what Stritar did with it.”

“I know enough. You’ve seen the letters.”

That was true. Wolfe would occasionally get a letter from Danilo Vukcic, who is the nephew of Marko Vukcic. Marko was Wolfe’s best friend until he was murdered. Danilo helped us find Marko’s killer near the Monte Negro in Yugoslavia, and had written, maybe on average once a year, since then. My standing instruction with Wolfe’s personal mail is to open it for him, but not read it, so I didn’t know what had been in those letters. Besides, they had been written in Serbo-Croatian. Danilo must have let Wolfe know what Stritar had done with the money Wolfe had cached on that mountain.

Monte Negro. The Black Mountain. Wolfe’s name, Nero, had come from that mountain, now it appears our troubles had come from it too. I asked,

“So what were the circumstances that led to this?”

“No. You don’t need to know that.”

“Top secret again?”

“Pfui. Governments and their intrigues. They withhold information in the name of security, and by that very act reveal it. Our Egyptian hosts, the Tayels, already suspect what we are dealing with. The Israelis do too. That is where Mr. Hitchcock and his daughter are right now, trying to assuage them.”

“Huh. Why the Hitchcocks? Did you ask for them the same way you asked for me?”

“I asked for them. In his past, Mr. Hitchcock was employed by his government on matters such as these. He has come out of retirement, if you will.”

I had no idea Hitchcock had been an automaton. I backed up and asked again,

“Well, if the circumstances are not top secret, why aren’t you telling me?”

“Confound it! Are you ancephalous? I don’t tell it because it is too painful. It is something better forgotten. Pfui. I won’t discuss it further.

Wolfe pointed at my food. “Eat. You know very well that you are dissentaneous when you haven’t eaten.”

I took a bite.

“Okay. You’re culpable. But I don’t see how I fit into this.”

“You don’t. You should be home, digesting dinner.”

“Yeah, I got that. But I’m here, remember? I helped you hide that money, so I suppose I’ll help you undo the consequences. Just as a favor. Or maybe last wish. What do you want me to do?

“Nothing. We are waiting for someone to budge.”

“You don’t want me to do some budging? I’m expert at budging immovable objects, you know.”

“This is no time for levity, Archie.”

I blew up.

“Don’t you think I know that? Here I am, halfway across the world, playing spy or lackey or who-knows-what. I’m surrounded by Egyptians and Arabs . . .

“Persians.”

“Don’t interrupt. I’m surrounded by people whose culture is strange, to say the least. Any minute now, I’ll make a friendly American gesture in front of one of them, and they will misinterpret it as the signal to start World War III. How am I supposed to behave?”

Wolfe leaned back on the bench. The back wasn’t high enough, so he scowled.

“There is some truth in what you say. A war was once started in this region because an ambassador hadn’t taken a bath. But you overreact. These people have seen Western television. They make allowances for American rudeness. Culturally we are, as a group, regarded as amusing ignoramuses.”

“That’s me all right. Seriously, I’m really not sure how I can help here. Or you.”

“An opportunity to assist may present itself. In the past you have shown dexterity of movement balanced with a clumsy temerity that has worked to our advantage. It may prove useful yet.”

“So what do I do in the meantime?”

“Recuperate from that dreadful airplane ride. Eat. Sleep. Be ready. I’m tired, and I’ve slept. You are probably exhausted.”

“I’m getting there. Avoiding you is exhausting work. And futile. But one more thing. Or maybe

two. Something both Takhti and Tayel mentioned. Are you some sort of Egyptian hero? What did you do?"

Wolfe made a face.

"Bah. They're both donkeys. The servant who whisks the King's mistress from under the Queen's nose earns the King's eternal gratitude, but it is never given voice. What I did is best kept buried in the catacombs of this city."

I ate some more. Wolfe watched patiently. When he saw signs that the food was looking less appetizing to me, he said,

"Was there anything else?"

"Well, there was one thing, but I don't quite know how to put it. You might get ideas."

"Such as?"

"Such as the idea that we're chums again."

"Pfui. That word is grotesque. It would never aptly describe our association."

"Okay. But we've been out here nearly an hour now, and you haven't had a single beer. If I fetch one for you I don't want you to think it's because you're back in my good graces, or that I'm just here to be menial. I just think you need it to keep your innards lubricated."

Wolfe's face and eyes changed. It was subtle; I doubt anyone else would have noticed. But I did. There was resolve, but there was also pathos, more than I thought him capable of, buried in there.

"No, Archie."

"No beer?"

"No."

I tried to find out why, but he was silent. Eventually it dawned on me. Once, years ago, Wolfe had resolved not to eat any meat until a certain case was solved. It had gone on for nearly two weeks.

This time he had sworn off beer. This made that other case look like peanuts.

Sixteen

The video conference, which was held out in the open on the palace lawn, was just more of the same conversation Wolfe had had with Carpenter, only worse. The setup was nifty enough, with Harrington running the tiny camera, a cute little display on a portable easel, and an antenna stolen from a 50's sci-fi flick.

The biggest problem was the one Carpenter had mentioned, a certain General Carter, who had obviously got his promotion because the outside of his dome was the crux of our laser defense system. It had to be that because there wasn't any equipment functioning underneath that shine.

Carter was in a roomful of about twelve people. That meant twelve opinions, which at the command level were freely expressed in the form of interruptions. Wolfe answered their questions nicely enough, but of course refused to budge on anything. Carter hit the roof when he heard I was in on the secret, and tried to get another oath of fealty from me. He was the worst of the bunch, and unfortunately things got worse instead of better. It degenerated to Wolfe barking at the cameraman at the other end to point the thing at the person Wolfe was addressing, rather than at the person talking, and with Carter stating he was going to go to Egypt to straighten out the mess Wolfe had created. Carpenter was in the middle-- it was the first time I had seen him indecisive. He just didn't know which way to go.

The helicopter landed while we were in the conference, and we were joined by the Hitchcocks and a man who worked for the British Government named Ty James. He was a little shorter than I, about my age and was dark and handsome. He had the air of someone with an incredible amount of *savoir-faire*, but I decided to withhold judgment until I could find some English words to describe him.

The interruption was welcome, and gave us a chance to communicate instead of argue. Unfortunately, the news from Israel, where Hitchcock had been, was not good. They suspected what was true—that there was a bomb for sale. They also had information that it was somewhere in Egypt, which was more than anyone involved in the conference knew. They were afraid the bomb had their name on it, and they implied that they were willing to wipe out a sizeable section of Egypt if only they knew which section and what size. For some reason that attitude had people worried.

And a portion of the conference was just for me. The man at the Newark airport—next to the stewardess, got on camera to ask me why I hadn't tried the computer data link yet. I told him I had been busy, and would do it as soon as the conference was over. Then he reminded us all that our phones needed a battery switch, and that General Carpenter had the spare batteries and chargers.

Those items only postponed the unpleasantness a little. When they had been disposed of, Carter got back on and he and Wolfe resumed their argument. It ended on a sour note, with Wolfe simply refusing to respond to any questions Carter asked. When it was over, Harrington started packing up the equipment.

Hitchcock the elder told me it was good to see me again and that he wished it were under more pleasant circumstances. I said the same. He was very cordial, so his daughter must have kept the fact that I'd been a hangdog to herself.

Ty James and I were introduced formally. I smiled frankly and openly, and so did he—with his fingers crossed, I think. He had an extra item to add, one that he didn't want the Washington people to know.

"I think you're right to stall, Wolfe," he said, "we have an unconfirmed report that some Russian agents are out and about, trying to get their bomb back. As far as I know, they don't know we are here, but Mr. Stritar and his wife are probably pressed for time."

Wolfe acknowledged with a grunt, rose from the bench we had moved from the terrace, and said, "We are still waiting, then. I'm going to get some sleep. I suggest you all do the same. If we do not hear from Mr. Stritar before the dinner tonight, we shall meet there."

Ty James and I returned the bench to the terrace.

Seventeen

In my room after getting the phone stuff from the General, I was using it. The phone, that is. I was on with some technician plowing through various menus and error messages, trying to get the State Department's computer to link up. It was no good. After the fourth or fifth try I told the guy I don't power down computers, I turn them off. I turned off the computer, then I powered down the technician. I was frustrated.

Since I was frustrated it was only natural for Marian Hitchcock to show up at my door, which she did after I had shed my tie and shoes.

"I received a call that you are having trouble with your computer."

"Nothing I can't handle, given a large enough canyon."

"May I see it? I have been known to have a knack for this sort of thing."

Her pleasantness was forced, but at least it was there. I invited her in and pointed to the machine. She turned it on, waited for it to respond, then played with it a little.

"It's not seeing the communications card at all," she said.

She did something on the screen, pulled out the card with the little rubber antenna on it, and inspected it. Then she took the table lamp and played it into the slot the card had come from.

"Oh no. Here it is. Your pins are all bent. Did you attempt to force the card in?"

"No. I haven't done anything with it."

"Well, this computer is no good now. Not without a lot of work. Let me take the card and the computer. I'll have to transfer the software to my machine and see if I can get the card working on it. Should we win the bid we will need this link to transfer funds."

I told her more power to her and the computer, and bid her off. As she cantered with the bag to her room I thought good—she has a skill she can fall back on in her old age.

Eighteen

I can't take naps. I have no trouble drifting off at night or on an airplane, but my body can't accept the fact that it's sleepytime when the rest of the neighborhood is not in bed. Never mind that it was midnight wherever home was and that I was dead tired; it would have been futile to try to sleep. So I took another shower and used up my last change of underwear; then tried the TV, which had no cartoons at all, then inspected the drawers in my room. One of them had what must have been the Islamic equivalent of the Gideon Bible. It was written in Arabic, and was probably another Qu`ran. I opened it and tried to get some religion.

It worked, too, to a point. I was definitely conjuring up visions and images from the shapes of the Arabian scratching on those pages. When one of the images became the fat man himself, riding what should have been a camel but was really a llama because one of the verses ended too early, I decided it was time for some fresh air.

I dressed and went out the patio door at the back of my room. I chose to take a walk around the perimeter of the wall surrounding the grounds, and headed to the nearest one, about thirty yards to the East. The wall itself was about eight feet tall, made of masonry blocks of some sort, and had nasty-looking razor wire on the top. But the grounds were nice, with trees and flowers and birds. I even saw a peacock in full bloom. The weather was nice, too: a slightly cloudy sky with a moderate temperature and slight breeze. There were also interesting things to see, such as a small eight-sided building with a domed tile roof, which I assumed was the mosque that Tayel had mentioned. The Southern wall at the back of the grounds must have had a road behind it as I heard occasional sounds of vehicles. At the corner between the South and West wall, there was a stone-lined stairway—fairly wide—going down to what looked like an underground stone chamber. Some of the stones in the structure were missing, or had collapsed. I picked my way down the stairs down to see what was there, but whatever it was was behind an iron door that wouldn't budge when I pushed it.

“That's probably a necropolis. I've read there are several on the grounds here.”

It was Marian Hitchcock again, behind me, up at the head of the stairs.

“Did you get the computer going?”

“Yes. It worked in my machine just fine. I was coming to tell you when I saw you walking, and followed you here.”

That was a little irritating; if she was following me I should have noticed it, and I hadn't. Of course, she was a detective too, so maybe she knew how to keep from being spotted. I answered,

“Good. So what's a necropolis?”

“A burial chamber. With many tombs.”

“Like catacombs.”

“I suppose so, I don’t know the difference, except that I think catacombs are of Italian origin, and necropolises are Greek. Alexandria apparently has both. And many underground cisterns as well.”

I picked my way back up the stairs.

“You seem to know Alexandria,” I said. “Did you bone up on the plane?”

“A little. But I do the research for my father, and maps fascinate me. I’ve known the major roads and features of this city for years, though I’ve never been here.”

She was being civil enough, even nice, but there was still a strain. I guessed it was time to clear the air. I started,

“About this morning . . .”

“Oh. You mean yesterday morning.”

“I suppose so. It’s all one long day to me so far.”

“Yes, well, I’m sorry I popped in on you that way. My father told me what you had been through the night before. I was unaware of the circumstances.”

“Your father knew what happened? Did Mr. Wolfe tell him?”

“I don’t think so. I think he learned from Ty.”

“Ty James? How would he know?” She was on a first-name basis with the guy.

“Oh, Ty has many sources of information scattered about. Whatever Ty had found out must have been fairly detailed. Did you know there is an arrest warrant issued for Mr. Wolfe?”

“Yes. How about one for me?”

“Not that I’ve been told. But I truly am sorry; it must be emotionally difficult for you to have killed a man, even though it was an accident. May I walk with you a bit?”

This wasn’t turning out the way I expected. I had expected to just tell her there were no hard feelings and let’s forget it but here she was, offering a shoulder for me to cry on. It was exasperating because she reminded me of when I was a kid growing up with my big sister. We’d fight like turbaned men with swords then, when I’d least expect it, she would show me compassion. Whatever expertise on women I have doesn’t count when it comes to sisters, and no one should have more than one. My big sister was still living in Ohio with her husband and two kids, so Hitchcock made one sister too many.

I didn’t want to let Hitchcock down cold, but she was expecting me to share my innermost feelings. I was trying to think of an out when I spotted Bahar Ferdowsi coming toward us from the

behind the stone stairway. She had her Western wear on, and I made a gesture that I hoped meant the same thing in Iranian as it did in American.

Apparently it did, as she joined us. I asked Hitchcock if she had been introduced, and was informed she hadn't, so I did the formalities. We talked about her studies, and why she was here, and her stepfather. It was then that I noticed a neat little trick she had. When she was talking to me, she had a pure American accent, but when she spoke with Hitchcock, it was British. It was so automatic I'm not even sure she was aware she was doing it. I finally turned to Hitchcock and said,

“Well, I'd like to take that walk with you, but Bahar here promised me a tour of the palace and, I presume, the grounds.”

“Splendid! I'd love to come along.”

Hitchcock wasn't making this easy.

“Well, I guess there are some complications. As Bahar told you, she is on holiday from her university studies which, you have just learned, involve history. She has to write a report on modern man, and I'm going to be that man. So she will be interviewing me, and I'm afraid it will be a little boring.”

It was phony, and I knew it even as I said it. She knew it too. Her eyes flashed, and she said,

“Very well. And I thought I had possibly misjudged you.”

Hitchcock turned and walked away. I would have felt worse, but I was already thinking about something else.

Bahar had come from the behind those stairs, from the corner of the palace walls. Had she walked there while I was exploring I would have seen her, whether she was a trained detective or not. That meant she was there already, and there was simply no reason for her to be there.

When was that girl going to do something to convince me she really was Scheherazade and not Mata Hari?

Nineteen

Bahar and I strolled the rest of the wall perimeter. I tried to find out more about her and her studies and the palace and grounds, but she kept countering with questions regarding the detective business and New York, and even my personal life.

I was beginning to see what Wolfe had meant about her. I eventually said,

“No fair. You’ve asked ten questions to my one. It’s my turn.”

“You don’t like my questions?”

“You did it again. It’s my turn to ask questions.”

“Oh. Okay. I will try to answer more questions. Ask one.”

“Why does Takhti say he’s like your Godfather?”

She smiled. “Ask another.”

“How did Tayel, an Egyptian, come to marry your mother, an Iranian?”

She kept smiling. Finally she said,

“I can answer both questions, but it’s a long story.”

“Good. Right now you need to tell a long story to redeem yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nope. No questions, remember? Go ahead.”

She started.

“We live in Isfahan. Today it is just my mother and I. Isfahan is a beautiful city, with a river running through it. My real father was named Shagnam, and was killed in the Iranian revolution. Do you know of our revolution?”

“Americans taken hostage.”

“Yes. That was in 1979. I was five, no, six then. I was young, but I remember it. My mother was very frightened. She thought she and I would be killed too.”

“Why?”

“Because my father was friend to the Shah. When the Shah was deposed, my father promised to stay behind and work to have the Shah placed in power again. When the revolution came, he was one of the first to be killed for treason. And sometimes, in our country, when a man commits a crime, especially a bad one, his family is punished too. It is not the law; it is just what people do. My mother tells me the new leaders were crazy for blood at the time, but I don’t remember that part. I just remember she was very frightened, so I was too.”

“And the new leaders were the religious leaders, like Abbas?”

“Yes, but I don’t know if he was involved at the time. Mr. Tayel was our house guest then. He was a diplomat from Egypt.”

“So he began courting your mother.”

“No. Not at all. He did not court her. He just offered to marry her. He said that as his wife, she would be protected by his name and his country. He offered to take me to Egypt until the danger passed. My mother married him, and Mr. Tayel took me here. I stayed three months.”

“Why didn’t your mother leave?”

“You don’t understand our people. When my father promised to stay at all costs, it meant my mother did, too.”

Bahar continued,

“The marriage to Mr. Tayel worked. My mother said she was saved by that marriage, and that Mr. Tayel performed a great service and should be honored.”

“So you are honoring him now?”

“Yes, my mother says that since the marriage, Mr. Tayel has asked for nothing in return, and we therefore owe him a great debt. But that is not completely true. He has asked my mother to have me come stay with him two other times. Once when I was eight, and again when I was eleven. I came and helped keep other children company when their parents were staying here. So you see, I have played the hostess here before.”

“That’s interesting. So your mother and Tayel are not in love at all.”

Bahar gave a snort. A bit unbecoming.

“My mother certainly isn’t in love with him. If she didn’t feel indebted to him I think she would despise him. Maybe she does anyway, I can’t tell. You’ll have to ask Mr. Tayel about his feelings. It’s possible he does love her. My mother is very beautiful. The newspaper in Tehran once called her the most beautiful woman in Iran.”

“No surprise there.”

“Thank you. My stepfather does come visit us when he can, but I don’t like to think about him much. He is hard to understand. When he asks for me to come he behaves as if he loves me like a father, but once I’m here, he ignores me completely. I was always left to entertain myself.”

“And how does Mr. Takhti fit into this?”

She chuckled.

“He doesn’t fit in at all. That’s the problem. He was my father’s best friend, and, I think, has always been in love with my mother. He certainly makes no secret of that. He wanted to marry her

when he was young, but my father beat him to it. He wanted to again when my father was killed, but Mr. Tayel beat him to it. He is very frustrated. But he dotes on my mother, and he says he wants to be my father, so he has made me something like his Goddaughter. That's his title, not mine."

"So you don't like him?"

"Oh no, I love him! He's funny. He even takes care of our garbage, though we have servants to do that. He says it shows how devoted he is to my mother. But he is too silly, I think. My mother . . . I don't know. Maybe she loves him . . . I just don't know. But he sure hates my stepfather. Reza doesn't understand why my stepfather hasn't divorced my mother."

"Divorced? I thought your people didn't divorce."

"Oh no. Our country does have divorce. When I ask my mother why he doesn't divorce her, she simply says he did not promise to."

"Well that's a situation, all right."

"Yes." She looked up at the sky. "Mr. Takhti is a famous man, you know."

She looked for a reaction. I raised my eyebrows. She continued,

"He is. His father was Takhti the great wrestler. He was world-renowned for his strength."

Great. More wrestlers.

"Takhti was a great hero in Iran. Not just because of his skill, but because he had a noble spirit. That is important to our people. He drowned in a river, and the people believed it wasn't an accident but that the Shah's men killed him."

"Was it an accident?"

"No one knows for sure. He was my father's friend, but he had spoken out against the excesses of the Shah's government. Whether it was an accident or not, his death started turning the people against the Shah. In a way, he caused the revolution."

"So his son has won favor with the new government."

"Yes. Had my mother married him, she would have been protected even more. But he was not there soon enough. Now he negotiates for my people. He is a great talker."

"Yeah. I've had a sample."

She chuckled again. I asked,

"So how have you come to know English so well? You speak it better than I do."

"Oh. Thank you again. Well, after the revolution and things had settled down, Mother said her obligation to stay was moot and we moved to California. I lived there until I was ten. Then Mother missed Iran too much, and we moved back. You should see Isfahan and our house. They are both

very beautiful.”

Bahar sighed, and said,

“Now I’ve spoken too much. I get to ask more questions. Are you married?”

“No.”

“Is Miss Hitchcock your girlfriend?”

That took gall. I replied,

“I’m afraid I’d have to say no to both the girl and the friend.”

And that answer got her asking more questions, like what I had meant. I refused to answer and she pouted a little. She said,

“I’m sorry I asked, it just seemed that Miss Hitchcock was a little jealous when I joined you. That’s all. So you don’t like her at all?”

“Look, Bahar. You’re supposed to be telling me about this place, so play like you’re a tour guide and that the only way you get paid is through tips. Earn your tip.”

She smiled and settled down and did a nice job of it. I learned that the stairs we had been by did indeed go down to a necropolis, and that it was one of the better-preserved ones, discovered when the palace was being rebuilt in 1913. She pointed out another that seemed to be nothing more than a pile of stones. She confirmed that the small building I had seen was the mosque, and said we should check out the lighthouse as well. The lighthouse was the tower I had seen from the helicopter and was on the shoreline at the North end of the wall. The wall ended there because there was no North wall, but a nice beach with a pretty view of the sea. The windows on the front of the palace looked to the North.

I asked Bahar if the lighthouse was a miniature version of the ancient one. She replied,

“Oh, no. The ancient one was incredibly large and had eight sides. I will show you where it stood.”

She took me to the side of the lighthouse and tried the knob on the door. It was locked, and the place looked deserted. It was probably all automatic, so no one was stationed there. But a locked door didn’t daunt Bahar in the slightest. She asked if I had a pocketknife and I gave her my penknife. She took it and jimmied the catch deftly. The door came open; it was obvious she had done this before.

We mounted the metal spiral stairs inside and emerged through a trapdoor onto the light’s landing. The breeze from the sea had picked up.

“This is the way to see Alexandria if you can’t leave the palace, Archie. Look. Over there is Fort

Qaitbay. That is where the lighthouse was. The lighthouse collapsed in an earthquake. Do you see that boat? Divers are looking for stones that had once been part of the lighthouse. And this boat here?”

She pointed to a small craft about one hundred yards from the beach.

“It’s there to make sure we don’t escape. You’re trapped here, you know. My stepfather doesn’t want you getting into any mischief.”

I thought she was a strange one to be talking about mischief. She continued her tour, pointing out this and that: where the ancient library had been, the place in the water where Cleopatra’s palace had been, some gardens and another palace in the distance called Muntaza. It was all quite interesting. Then she started a history lesson, complete with battles and tactics, intrigues and betrayals, all the time pointing out where everything had happened. She took it chronologically from ancient times, and spoke fast and with passion. She talked of Alexander, Cleopatra, of the Greeks, the Turks, and French and the British. She talked of Muhamet Ali, who built the palace and who slaughtered all the Marmaluke princes after a banquet held in their honor. She said that was what the tapestry I had seen portrayed: the slaughter of the Marmalukes. When I asked why Tayel didn’t want to talk about it, she said she didn’t know, but she retold the event with relish. She talked of the rebuilding of the palace and the discovery of the necropolises, and the wars of this century and Rommel and Montgomery and the six-day war and of Nasser, and Sadat and his wife. She talked of the poet Cavafy and quoted one about the dedication of a gymnasium in the time of Cleopatra’s children. It ended with the stanza,

*But the day was warm and poetic
The sky was a light azure
A triumph achievement of art,
The opulence of the courtiers was extraordinary,
Caesarion was full of grace and beauty
(son of Cleopatra, blood of Lagidae);
and the Alexandrians rushed to the ceremony,
and got enthusiastic, and cheered
in greek, and egyptian, and some in hebrew,
enchanted by the beautiful spectacle—
although they full well knew what all these were worth,
what hollow words these kingships were.*

She gave story after story after story. If this was being drunk on the nectar of knowledge, it certainly did her good. She was amazing, there in that setting, on the lighthouse with her hair blown by the wind and the green sea's waves crashing below. She finished with a flourish,

“And even today, great intrigues happen. You are part of one Archie. Bidding for something not talked about yet known by all.”

I didn't know how to take that, so I pretended to ignore it. She took a breath and let it out, then moved closer and said,

“How did I do, Archie? Did I earn my tip?”

The setting was perfect. The day was warm and poetic and the sky was a light azure. She was perfect. Exotic beauty with passion in her eyes. She pressed against me and lifted her lips.

But something made me hesitate. It was the culture, of course. By kissing her I didn't know what I was committing to. It made me hesitate, but it didn't save me. I started to give in.

Something else saved me. I was saved by the bell. Or rather, the loudspeaker. It was mounted just below the lighthouse landing, and the recording of the call to prayers was incredibly loud. We both clapped our hands over our ears and laughed, then ran down the stairs and out onto the sand in front of the palace.

“Come on,” she said as soon as we could hear each other. “I have something to show you.”

She led me through the large front doors, past the reception area, and down the hallway leading to the terrace. She turned into the peephole alcove, put her fingernails into the wooden crack just as her prints had shown, and pulled the door open.

“I think I'm the only one who knows about this, and now, you know about it too. Look, there's this hole, and it lets you spy on anyone in the Hall. I found it the first time I was here. See? Down here,”

She pointed to the lower wall, below the hole. There were markings.

“That's my name. It must have been built for Muhamet Ali. Do you think the person who built it was killed to keep the secret? I like to think so. Look.”

I looked through the hole she had opened. No one was there but the ancients.

I straightened. Bahar closed the panel then used the handle to pull the door closed. Then put her arms around me.

“Now kiss me,” she said.

But in my mind I had been thanking the Pharaohs that I hadn't gotten into something I couldn't get out of, and even though the temptation was still there, and how, I resisted it.

“Oh. Sorry, Bahar. I’m a little claustrophobic.” I pushed the door open. “Believe me, I’d love to, but let me take a raincheck. Show me the rest of the palace.”

There was embarrassment and hurt in her eyes. She was the second one I’d hurt that day. But I was relieved. Her stories were marvelous and she was innocent of spying. I would have started calling her Scheherezade but I was starting to get the hang of the *h*.

Twenty

Bahar was disappointed we hadn't kissed, but she took it like a trooper. We left and shut the door, and she took me to the front.

"Would you like to see more of the Hall?"

"Won't your stepfather be in there praying?"

She was surprised.

"Yes, I guess so. He will be. It's strange. He never prayed on my other visits, just this time. Let's go to the library. I discovered something there, too."

The library doors were closed, but not locked. On opening the right hand door, we had a surprise. Ahmed Tayel, Bahar's stepfather, was there just inside the door, reading the Qu`ran that was on the stand. He wasn't praying at all. He looked at us and said a single word to Bahar in a gruff voice.

Bahar's reaction was complete panic. She backed until she hit one of the chairs and crossed her arms over her chest as if she were hiding her nakedness. She was frightened and embarrassed. Tayel's words continued and were accompanied by gestures and pointing to her body, and they were perfectly understandable. Tayel was berating her, calling her a slut. She was giving a little effort to defending herself, but it obviously wasn't working as she shrank into the chair and began to cringe.

I put a hand on Tayel's shoulder and jerked him around.

"Look here. You can't talk to her like that. She hasn't done anything."

Tayel turned his wrath on me.

"You do not know us and our ways, Mr. Goodwin. Stay out of this. And do not be alone with my daughter again. Leave us now."

"She's not your daughter. You didn't even care about her until now."

"She is my responsibility, and I must protect her."

"From people like me?"

"Yes. I will allow you to stay in honor of Mr. Wolfe only. Even that may be temporary. But you are forbidden to see Bahar alone. You will be watched. If you try to see my daughter again I will have you killed."

Well. He didn't mince words. But I wasn't finished.

"Look you. I don't matter. Kill me if you can. But you can't talk that way to her. Look at her! Five minutes ago she was happy and full of life. Now it's like you popped her. No good can come of this, regardless of your stupid ways."

Tayel took a swing at me. I guess that's what it could be called. It was a clumsy roundhouse and I had no trouble catching his wrist. I didn't do much back, just bopped him on the nose with his own fist, but it was enough to make him collapse in a chair next to Bahar and nurse his nose. He looked at me and spoke through his hands,

"I will have you killed *now*."

The door to the Great Hall opened, and I had an ally, or an enemy. Reza Takhti was there. He took a look at the setup and went to Bahar, who was now rolled into a ball and weeping. He asked her questions, but couldn't get coherent answers from her. Eventually he gave up and said,

"Mr. Goodwin, please take her to her room. I will have a little talk with Mr. Tayel, here."

With effort, I helped her up and supported her as we left the room. All the way to the terrace I could hear Takhti and Tayel going at it.

At the huts Bahar was still gasping for breath and a little weak in the knees, but she managed to let me know she was in hut number eleven, the second to the left. She gave me her key and I opened the door for her and began to help her in. But she pushed me out.

"You need someone to be with you. I won't leave you alone."

She wept. And whispered,

"You cannot come in here, or be with me."

Tayel had really got to her.

"I don't care. You need someone."

"No!" She wailed. Then her voice trailed off. "No . . ."

She needed help. And if she didn't want me, I knew where to get it: a shoulder to cry on.

I told her to stay put and not to ignore a knock on the door, and let her close it. Then I headed in the general direction that Marian Hitchcock had headed when she took my computer. It had looked like hut six.

I was right, and I had to give her credit when she opened the door. Instead of biting my head off, she took one look at my face and asked,

"What's wrong?"

"Bahar. Her stepfather just abused her."

"What did he do?"

"I don't know the details because it was in their language. He didn't hit her, but he might as well have. She's in a bad way. She's in her hut and they don't let a man in a lady's room here. Can you help her?"

She didn't say anything and didn't dilly-dally. She went back to her dresser, took the pins out of her hair and ran a brush through it. A woman has to do something with her hair even if it's an emergency of course, but she was quick about it. I took her to Bahar's hut and knocked, and she answered after a few seconds. She had put on her chador, which was a bad sign: she had given in to Tayel.

"Marian is going to help you, Bahar. Just be with you a little while. Is that all right?"

Bahar nodded, and let her in. Marian didn't hesitate then either, but took Bahar in her arms and let Bahar gush, which she did.

I left them and headed to the palace. I suppose I had a score to settle, and was mad enough to do it, but frankly I didn't know quite what to do or how to go about it. Everything was so different; the rules weren't the same as New York. Plus, I didn't want to do anything to bollix up the bidding. Takhti met me in the hallway right by the alcove.

"Thank you, Mr. Goodwin, is she in her room?"

"Yes. Miss Hitchcock is there with her."

"Good. She needs someone with her. I will go see her when the time is right."

"Yeah. Me too. Where's Tayel?"

"Ah, Archie. May I call you Archie?"

"You did."

"Yes I did. It is not good for you to seek him out just now. You are angry and he is powerful. You must bide your time. Do not strike until the circumstances favor you."

"What makes you think I want to strike?"

"Your eyes. And your voice. But do not worry about Mr. Tayel. I have taken care of the situation."

"And how did you do that?"

Takhti regarded me a moment. Then with a single swift movement he drew his dagger and sliced off my head.

At least he would have, had the dagger possessed a blade. All it had was a blunt metal stub long enough to hold it in the scabbard. As it was, he grazed my neck and made me back up a step. Even though there was no blade, I resented his action anyway. He showed it to me.

"Look at it, Archie. A beautiful instrument of death, ruined. It was my great-grandfather's, passed from father to son for generations. But nowadays, civilized men mustn't carry such tools. My great grandfather would think me a weakling to allow this to be done to his dagger. But I enjoy

wearing it, so I have had it rendered useless. Bah.”

He continued,

“It is that way with our country, too. Look at you Americans with your thousands of instruments of death, and we haven’t a single one. That is why we will win this bidding. We must.”

“So you can blow up someone’s city.”

“On the contrary, Archie. One would be a fool to actually use such a weapon. Can you imagine the repercussions? No. We simply have no saber to rattle. How can we be taken seriously until we have a true saber instead of an impotent dagger?” Takhti looked at the stub.

Then he leaned closer and whispered,

“But with Mr. Tayel there are other ways, are there not? Ways to get what you want; ways to get others to do what you want. It is more difficult today, but that just makes the challenge more interesting. Do not worry about Tayel.”

I wish I were as confident in him as he was. But he was right. Anything I did right then would be just plain stupid, and I was having my own challenges in that area.

Takhti put the dagger back into its scabbard. A door in the hallway opened and Tayel came out. Not Ahmed but his brother Saad. His face no longer showed peace. He spoke to Takhti a few moments then headed to the front of the palace. Takhti turned to me.

“He said he was increasing the guard. For our security. We are not to be alarmed, it is merely a precaution.”

“I’ll bet. And this had nothing to do with his brother?”

“It had everything to do with his brother, of course. You will have to watch yourself, my friend. You are probably all right for now, but you mustn’t be seen in a, ah, difficult situation. You were with Bahar this afternoon?”

“Yes. She showed me the city from the lighthouse.”

“I know. I saw you up there. You spent quite a while with her.”

“Yes, almost two hours. You’re getting a little personal here.”

“I’m sorry. I have the same desire to protect Bahar as Tayel does. The difference is that I trust her, and I trust you.”

He leaned in again, and with a smile whispered,

“At least I *think* I trust you, Archie. Bahar was gone for three hours today. No one could find her. I think she was just hiding, so she didn’t have to be with Tayel. I know you weren’t with her because I saw you walking, but it would comfort me if you say you didn’t know where she was.”

“Well, I didn’t, not that it’s your business.”

“Good!” He said loudly and slapped me on the back. I was going to have to go into hiding myself.

I told him goodbye, that I was going to see Wolfe. He told me to give Wolfe his regards, and we parted at the terrace.

As I walked to the huts I thought about Takhti. He was friendly and outgoing, but he left no doubt that not only Tayel was on trial, but me too. If I stepped over the line with Bahar I would be in trouble with him. More so than with Tayel, whose threats were merely the passion of the moment.

At least I think they were. If I crossed Takhti, the punishment I got would be well planned and deliberate. And definitely with a personal touch.

Good grief. How do people ever get married in this part of the world? All this trouble and nothing even happened.

I should have kissed her. Good and long and hard.

Twenty-one

Back at the huts I listened to the words of Muhammad. The servant, not the prophet. He had delivered my cleaning and told me where Wolfe was staying: hut six. He said Wolfe was there, as his suit had just been delivered as well.

Wolfe invited me in. He had started changing for dinner, and was in his pants and yellow shirt, no tie or shoes. He sat on the bed and I took one of the room's two chairs. I told him,

"Well, it happened. I made a friendly gesture and have started World War III."

"Pfui. Talk sense. What have you done now?"

"Nothing by our standards, everything by theirs. Bahar took me on a tour of the palace grounds. Sans chador. Oh, and by the way, she is innocent of spying on us. She showed me the peephole so she isn't hiding anything. She's just curious, like you said."

"Hmpf. Continue. What happened?"

"Ahmed Tayel happened. Bahar tried to take me on a tour of the palace as well. We avoided the Great Hall because we thought he was in there praying, but it turned out he was in the library reading the Qu`ran there. It is the Qu`ran, there on the stand?"

"Yes."

"Well, when he saw Bahar with me he exploded. He crumpled her completely with a single word. I've never seen anything like it. He followed up with plenty more, but it was that one word that got her."

"Can you repeat the word?"

"No. It sounded like *Cshackz*."

"Indeed. Not quite right, but close enough. Of course she is a woman and needed no impetus, but no wonder she collapsed."

"What does it mean?"

"It has no translation in English."

"Come on. Everything has a translation."

"Not at all. A scholar pressed for a translation might choose the word *harlot*, or something more vulgar, but that would merely convey the superficial meaning. The word would be hollow."

Wolfe put his palms on his legs and leaned forward.

"To completely understand the impact of what Tayel said, Archie, you would need the blood of a hundred generations of the followers of the prophet Muhammad flowing in your veins. You would need to feel their angst and their passions, to pray their prayers and eat their food. That single word

stripped Miss Ferdowsi of any remnant of esteem or reputation she had.”

“Yeah. It sure did. I could strangle the guy.”

Wolfe continued,

“Mr. Tayel is a fool. What stopped his tirade?”

“Takhti came in from the Great Hall and stopped him. I think Takhti was there waiting for Abbas to finish praying.”

“Did Mr. Takhti hear what Mr. Tayel said?”

“No. By that time Tayel had hit himself with a little help from me, and was nursing his nose.”

“Such a word is not spoken, even in anger, Archie. Had Mr. Takhti heard that ejaculation, Tayel would probably be injured, or worse. As I said, Mr. Tayel is a fool. These desert sands have hardened and polished a noble people, but occasionally they produce a man with a fine patina, yet whose gut is filled with gritty bile. Have you seen his face? He has scorpions consuming him from the inside out.”

“Yeah. I’ve seen it. So what do I do?”

Wolfe looked at me in mock surprise.

“Do? You are asking me? “

“Sure. I don’t know how to handle these people. You’re the expert.”

“But Archie. You are no longer in my employ. Some strike with a word, others with a poker. Since you are not my agent, I needn’t rescue you from your feral adventures.”

That was unfair. I didn’t ask to come. And I wasn’t too proud to ask for his help. He was letting me down.

“So you won’t help me here?”

“How can I? Your aptitude for poking at hornet’s nests is unnaturally keen. But we may be able to use what you did to advantage. Come.”

Wolfe got up and got his shoes, and with effort put them on. Then his tie. I waited. He headed to the door. I followed. He headed toward the palace. I followed. He spoke,

“I don’t trust that room. We barely have time before dinner. It is known by some that you and I have had a falling out.”

“I suppose. No more than half the world.”

“I would like to inform the other half. The Great Hall would be best, I think. I’ve heard from Mr. Stritar and his wife. Their arrival is imminent. They have given the terms of exchange should we win the bid. The bomb is somewhere here in Egypt, on a truck. If we win the bid, we will be taken

to it in secret with no military personnel allowed, excepting Mrs. Harrington, who will be there to verify the authenticity of the bomb. Once we have verified the device's veracity, a partial payment will be made via the computer you have been given."

"No. The computer I was given is broken. Marian Hitchcock's computer will do it, and she will have to be there."

"No. I don't want to involve more people than necessary. You, or Mrs. Harrington will have to do it."

"Too late. You know how computers are. You have to have used them for a while before you know them. It's Hitchcock or no one."

"Confound it. Very well. At any rate, full payment will be made when the bomb is fully under our control. For us that means we pay when Mrs. Harrington has rendered it useless. For the Iranians it would mean something else."

I couldn't imagine what. Wolfe continued,

"But it occurs to me that such a device is never totally useless. The fuel inside it is still a valuable commodity even if the device itself does not function. If you can convince Mr. Stritar that, acting on your own, you can deliver that fuel back to them after full payment has been made, it may convince them to entertain our bid."

"What do you mean, entertain our bid? They wouldn't otherwise?"

"Of course not. We are here merely to force the Iranian bid higher. And for other reasons, but certainly not to purchase that item. They have no intention of accepting anything we offer. We are holding no cards at all, but if you can convince them that you have been assigned to drive the truck after the exchange has been made and can therefore deliver the bomb back into their hands, we may at least be able to play in their game. It is a weak stratagem, but it is all we have."

"So how do you propose we convince them I'm Benedict Goodwin?"

"We shall have an argument. Within earshot of anyone near the Great Hall, and any listening devices that may be present. Words will be exchanged. Words strong enough to percolate to Mr. Stritar and his wife. For you, in your present state of mind, that will be child's play. Later, after dinner, you will visit Mr. Stritar and his wife and offer to return the bomb for suitable remuneration."

"An argument. Right now?"

"Yes."

"Can't you think of anything better?"

"Pfui. We have no options. And your recent performances at home and with Miss Ferdowsi have

created a tension that is ideal for our purposes.”

Great. I come to Egypt to help Wolfe out of a bind and the only thing I’m good for is an argument, and a fake one at that.

Twenty-two

Wolfe and I argued. At least, that was the plan. We went to the Great Hall and found servants there, erecting a long table and generally preparing for the dinner. Wolfe and I went to the busts and started examining them. Eventually Wolfe said,

“Get me a chair, Archie. I need to sit.”

I replied a little louder than normal,

“Get it yourself. You have two legs.”

“Confound it, no. Not yet. I really need to sit.”

“Oh.”

I went to the library, picked the largest specimen I could find, and lugged it in to Wolfe, placing it where the cushions had been that morning, but facing Alexander. I leaned against the pink marble semicircular shelf the busts were on, and cocked an eyebrow at Wolfe. He didn't like to look up at anyone, and got annoyed when I raised a single eyebrow because he can't do it, so that set the tone quite nicely. Wolfe started,

“Your work in the Rottfeld case was most unsatisfactory, Mr. Goodwin. And your tomcatery with Miss Ferdowski has put us in an awkward situation with our hosts. It was inappropriate. You should stay in your room if you don't understand the customs here.”

That was hitting below the belt, and he knew it. I was perfectly willing to give him a good argument if it was over a triviality such as a chair or my job, but he was crossing the line. He didn't deserve an argument over things of substance, especially if they weren't true. So I decided not to play his game. I answered in a contrite voice,

“You're right, sir. From now on I'll stay in my room. I appreciate your pointing out my shortcomings like this; it will make me a better person. More rounded, like you.”

Wolfe's eyes were instantly suspicious. But he kept on, with his voice a little louder.

“Very well, and lately you have been petulant. That will stop immediately.”

I replied brightly,

“Yes sir. I'll stop it even as I speak. And may I say what an honor it is to learn from the best?”

Some geniuses get it sooner, some later. This one was on to me. He growled,

“So. Instead of parrying my thrusts you run. You skedaddle, like a hare to her hole.”

“Yes sir. Thank you sir. Though I prefer to think of it as dodging and feigning. It's like a prizefighter, you see. He gets most tired when he's fanning air. You have to admit there has been plenty of breeze here since you started.”

And so it went. I won't say all the rounds went to me--after all Wolfe is every bit the genius he claims to be, and he knew my weak spots, and how to get my goat better than anyone. A couple of times I found an edge had crept into my cheery voice without asking, and I had to check it. But for every weak spot Wolfe knew, I knew one of his, and I had an advantage. He hadn't had a beer at all in the past thirty hours or more, and it was beer that triggered his *organus sanguinus*. He was testy to start, and he got worse the cheerier I got.

Wolfe doesn't lose control often, but when he does it's worth paying extra for the front row seats. He eventually sputtered,

"Confound you! You scurrilous sornor! Why, a thersitical dizzard has more. . ."

"That's another thing I must thank you for, sir. Since living with you not only have I had free room and board as you mentioned, but my vocabulary has reached new horizons. I understood that. Every single word, and I must say it was impressive. I've learned a few words on my own, too. I looked them up in a book. Myrmidon. That's me. Aeolistic skeepch. That's you."

That did it. I saw something that was almost worth the trip to Egypt. Wolfe grabbed the arms of the chair and actually got to his feet in anger! I'm not saying he was trying to punch me, no. But his body was definitely responding to something deep down and primitive his mind had commanded. It was a joy to see, and I was filled with a sense of accomplishment.

"Get out!" Wolfe shouted. "Get out of here!"

I got out. And if you're thinking I botched it, that I really did put the world in jeopardy by not arguing with him, nuts to you again. If that room had any ears they were filled plenty, and with the right message. Besides, who made you an expert in international affairs?

Twenty Three

I went to Bahar's hut and knocked gently. I was half hoping she was sleeping peacefully, and didn't want to disturb her. There was no answer, so I moved to Marian Hitchcock's door. She was there and invited me in, and to sit.

"She had a fright, but she settled down a little after you left. I did what I could, but she didn't want to talk about it. She told me to tell you that her stepfather is a decent and honorable man and that you mustn't think ill of him or do him any harm. That's all I could get from her. Exactly what happened?"

I felt like telling her to mind her own business, but she had just done me a favor, and done it without hesitation. I decided she deserved the truth, and all of it, so I gave it to her. Not verbatim, and not with all of Bahar's stories or the near-kiss, but it was all there, including the peephole Bahar had discovered, and my conviction that she hadn't been spying. I ended by giving a few of Wolfe's comments and by puzzling over Tayel's outburst.

"Well," Marian said, "I'm no expert on these people, and Bahar didn't want to talk about it, but I would guess that the combination of seeing Bahar alone with you and out of her chador is what set him off."

"Well sure. I figured that out. I just can't figure what to do about it."

"You avoid her of course. And her stepfather. These negotiations are too delicate to do anything else. Our success can't hinge on your personal affairs."

She might as well have called them *petty* personal affairs. Her tone sure said it.

"Well thank you. That will sure do Bahar a lot of good. I tell you, the way her stepfather treated her I'm afraid she won't survive the next one."

"But you can't do anything about it, Goodwin. You would just make it worse. We have more important matters to attend to."

I thanked her for helping Bahar and got up. She was right, we did have more important matters, and I knew it. At least, my head knew it.

"Important matters like hell," I muttered to myself as I crossed her threshold. Wolfe was just entering his hut. I crossed to mine to get ready for what was bound to be a festive occasion. As I entered my room I heard someone yelling through that damn loudspeaker that I'd better start praying.

Twenty Four

I thought dinner would be as fun as a welcome-home party at the morgue, but it actually had its good points. The food was top notch. Not up to Fritz' standard, maybe, but I did have to wonder if that was only because I was so fond of my normal fodder. There was no alcohol at the table in deference to the Islamic guests, but we all had our fill of other drinks. The person who made it bearable was actually Takhti, who did a marvelous job making the others, including Wolfe and myself, forget their cares and enjoy an hour, cordial if not pleasant, at the table.

The seating arrangements were a problem, of course. Tayel had obviously arranged them, as he was at the head of the table. I was dead last, at the other end on the side to Tayel's left. Across from me was Marian Hitchcock and her father. Wolfe was at Tayel's right, and Bahar, in her chador of course, was next to Tayel on my side. Yes, Bahar was there and doing her best to act the hostess as if nothing had happened. No, it was more than that. As I watched her through the evening it seemed that she had convinced *herself* that nothing had happened. The whole incident appeared to have been forgotten by all, as Takhti even invited Tayel to participate in some conversations. Takhti introduced topics for discussion and he took care to make sure all were involved at one point or another, so the banter was bilingual. Or rather trilingual, as I had an ear good enough to tell that at least two foreign languages or at least two diverse dialects of the same language were being spoken.

Abbas was next to Wolfe, then Takhti. That side finished up with Ty James, between Mr. Hitchcock and Takhti.

Next to Bahar, on my side, was a dignitary from the Egyptian government who Tayel introduced. His name was also Muhammad, and I won't even attempt his last name. I don't think he spoke English, as he only participated when a foreign tongue was being spoken. General Carpenter and Julie Harrington, both in nice uniforms, were next.

Two more chairs to my immediate right were empty. I thought about scooting up closer to the front, but decided not to push it-- I was happy where I was. It was just as well, as halfway through dinner a servant appeared and ushered Gospo Stritar and his wife into the room.

They had arrived. Gospo had hair that was grayer and a little thinner than when I had last seen him, but still had a bitter face that only smiled as a formality. I think the only time he would really grin was when someone else wasn't. He looked a little peaked from traveling, maybe.

His wife, who didn't go by Stritar, but by Anna Bathory, would have qualified as a dish twenty years ago. In fact, if I were Wolfe's age I might even give her the benefit of a doubt now. Her dark

brown hair still showed no gray. She wore it in curls to her shoulders, which usually looks dotty on someone her age, but it looked good on her. She had aristocratic cheekbones and a nice neck that wasn't nearly as wrinkled as it should have been. Her smile was more natural than her husband's, and she apologized in English for the both of them. They had just arrived, and hoped we would pardon the interruption.

Tayel welcomed them, and they joined us, with Anna Bathory next to me. I suppose I should have been glad not to have had to sit next to Stritar, but as far as I knew she was just as much the extortioner as he was, so it put a bit of a strain on things. We did exchange introductions, and she said she had heard of me through Gospo and some friends. Stritar did not communicate with me at all, through his wife or otherwise. In fact, he said very little all evening, even though Takhti tried a couple of times to open him up, using Stritar's wife as the zipper.

Wolfe was fine. He always did well with table conversation, and our non-argument didn't seem to faze him a bit. In fact, I was beginning to wonder if it had even mattered to him when once, during a discussion in English with Takhti on wool carding and dyeing for Persian rugs, Wolfe had glanced at me. The glance said it—he was pushing it for my sake, trying to make me think he wasn't still upset when he really was.

Something else happened to reveal Wolfe's state of mind. Toward the end of dinner he asked one of the servants for another helping of nearly everything. That was okay—he had a big stomach and Gospo and Anna were still eating. But when it came he started savoring it. That is, sampling small portions with his eyes closed. He did that when he wanted to discern all the ingredients in a dish that was new to him, but rarely with everything on the plate, and he was doing it with the vegetables too. When he asked the servant to invite chef Scorsi in, the hair prickled at the back of my neck. We were in danger. I had seen signs of a relapse earlier when Wolfe hadn't recognized General Carpenter right away in the kitchen.

This was bad. If Wolfe went into full relapse he would spend the rest of his time in Egypt in that kitchen, and even an A-bomb would not be able to knock him loose. I started watching him to see how bad it really was.

The chef came, and Wolfe started talking to him in Italian about the food. Tayel was obviously irritated, but had no choice so he tolerated it. As soon as the Gospo Stritar and his wife were finished, though, Tayel interrupted all the conversations by standing and clapping a couple of times for attention. Wolfe would have continued with Scorsi regardless, but Scorsi excused himself and went back to the kitchen. Eventually, Wolfe acknowledged that others were present and gave Tayel

his attention: it appeared a speech was coming.

Tayel cleared his throat and started, in English.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have told you before this what an honor it is to have you here, and I tell you again now. It is an honor. I welcome you in behalf of the great land of Egypt!”

There was suitable applause. Tayel continued,

“My associate Muhammad also welcomes you. Not all of you speak English, so I hope you will find a neighbor who will translate what I have to say for you.”

Takhti nodded and turned to Abbas. Anna Bathory whispered to her husband, and Muhammad turned to Bahar. Tayel continued, with suitable pauses for the translators.

“We stand here in a Great Hall, built originally by Muhamet Ali and restored more recently. Egypt is filled with wonders such as this, as you know. One could say that our antiquities, our tombs, our pyramids, our very history makes up the flesh of our people. . . the flesh through which the lifeblood of the Nile flows daily.”

There were suitable nods and expressions of appreciation. I thought it was a little corny myself, but tried not to let on. Tayel gestured to the busts behind him.

“You see in this room carvings of great men and great women. People of power who, just as their likenesses have been carved here, in turn carved civilizations from these desert sands. They made Alexandria the center of the world once, and they made Egypt what it is today!”

Tayel gestured to the bust of Alexander the Great, said a little, then went on, enumerating each one in turn. I had heard the stories before, from a better storyteller so I wasn’t particularly interested. I did notice that he was doing little other than parroting what Bahar had said earlier. He finally raised his index finger.

“But,” he said, “though these people are great, we are too selective, are we not? Surely our past was not shaped just by the people whose images are here. There were many others. Some we do not even know. Others we wish we didn’t know.”

That seemed to call for a chuckle, but either no one caught it, or no one was up to it. Tayel smoothed his suit coat, and again gestured toward the busts.

“And see. We have those who built and shaped Alexandria. And we have the ancients, who made the first civilizations. But where are the moderns? Where are those who shaped our great country more recently? Where are those who shape it even today? Do not they contribute just as the ancients? Nassar, Anwar Sadat and his wife. Our great President Mubarak. Are they not just as great as those whose images are here? I say they are!”

There was some polite applause, and the man named Muhammad smiled enthusiastically when he got the translation. Tayel continued,

“We are therefore doing something I have wanted to do for a long time. We are expanding the display in this room to also include those who have shaped our own Egypt, the modern Egypt of today. Not just our presidents, but others too. And I’m pleased to inform you that we have the honor of unveiling the first figure this evening. It is only a temporary bust, but it is a start. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you our first modern-day figure to go on display in this room!”

Tayel clapped, and two servants wheeled in a stainless steel cart. On the cart was the figure, covered with a red velvet cloth. The servants wheeled it alongside Tayel and stood by. Tayel waited for the right moment, then with a dramatic gesture pulled the cloth from the bust.

Staring back at us were the cold white eyes of Nero Wolfe.

Twenty four

There was some clapping and surprised murmurs, and Tayel put up a hand.

“As you see, it is my own friend Nero Wolfe. You may wonder, why we have chosen Mr. Wolfe?”

Tayel smiled and let silence hang for a moment. Then he said,

“I’m afraid I cannot tell you, for it is still a well-guarded secret. This is fitting. Many of those whose figures you see led lives shrouded in mystery to us. Egypt is full of mysteries, and our Mr. Wolfe is but one more. Let me assure you, however, that we honor Mr. Wolfe justly. His contribution, though secret, was every bit as important as the others I’ve mentioned!”

Tayel bowed towards Wolfe and applauded him. We all followed. The servants then proceeded to roll the figure to the display. There was no place set aside for the bust, so they had to move other busts, three of them, over enough on the marble pedestal to place Wolfe. There he was, on the right next to Khentkawes. It was the closest he had been to a woman in a long time, and it looked darn funny. The spacing was wrong and too close, and the temporary bust of Wolfe did not quite match the others: the white was too pure. Once the bust was placed, Tayel started again.

“We shall replace this temporary figure with a permanent one as soon as Mr. Wolfe can sit for our sculptor. And we shall, of course, have to build another shelf for the new figures.”

Tayel went into the screened off area and came out with a poster. On it was an artist’s drawing of the display, with a second semicircular pedestal added. It was in front of the original, and lower so that the double row of busts could all be seen, choir-fashion.

I had been watching Wolfe for his reaction to all this. On the surface he seemed imperturbable as ever. But his lips had thinned, and I could see small movements in the arm of his suit coat—he was making small circles with his finger. Probably on his knee, under the table. Wolfe was seething.

Tayel put down the poster and said,

“Though we have a mystery here, there is much we can say about Mr. Wolfe.”

Tayel then launched into a résumé of Wolfe’s life, at least the more recent part of it. And it was fairly complete. Tayel even mentioned me, twice. All the time Wolfe’s lips were getting tighter and tighter until they were almost gone altogether. Tayel finally concluded,

“But we must hear from the guest of honor himself. Mr. Wolfe . . . Nero, my friend, would you please say a few words?”

Tayel sat, and all eyes turned to Wolfe.

I knew what Wolfe would do, and he did it. He placed his hands on the table, got up, and

without a word calmly and gracefully walked out of the room.

Twenty Five

There were various reactions. Takhti laughed out loud, which didn't help Tayel's demeanor any. Marian Hitchcock gave me a look that said 'go get him, for heaven's sake', and I, figuring it wouldn't hurt any to let Stritar and his wife know how things stood asked Marian,

"What do you want?"

"Don't you think you should try to do something?"

"What? In case you haven't figured it out yet, I don't work for him anymore. I'm not his lackey, and besides, no one could get him back now. Forget it."

I hoped I hadn't overdone it. Marian's eyes told me I had, so I think it was about right.

Tayel's face had turned white, and was more pinched than ever, if that was even possible. He was fingering his fork, and his movements were jerky. I glanced around at the others. They all were reacting about what you'd expect, with various mixtures of surprise, amusement, and embarrassment. The only ones who didn't seem to show a reaction were Abbas and Gospo Stritar.

But Anna Bathory's face clearly showed something was going on inside her. I couldn't put my finger on it, as she seemed to be making an effort to hide it, but fury would have been a good guess.

Eventually, Tayel got up and quickly left the room to go find a camel to spit on.

At least, I hoped it would be a camel. I didn't want it to be Bahar, and would try to make sure it wasn't. When Tayel left, Bahar stood up to address us. She put up her hand and had everyone's attention immediately.

"I am sorry," she said, "I apologize to all of you. Please, forgive Mr. Wolfe and my stepfather for their actions. They have both had a trying day."

I thought she was being generous. She continued,

"And I'm afraid some of this is my fault. You see, I upset my stepfather this afternoon. I have apologized to him, and I apologize to all of you as well. You may stay if you wish, as there is some dessert coming, but you are free to go if you are uncomfortable. I hope all of you have a good night's sleep."

She smiled, treating us with those teeth, and began leaving. Takhti, Ty James and I all got up; I'll admit it looked a little comical, but I didn't care. I wanted to make sure she wasn't going to cross paths with Tayel in the state he was in.

Takhti won. That is, he escorted Bahar to her hut, but not before she assured all of us she would be all right. It seemed to me once again that she was avoiding me, and it was beginning to get under my skin. Why would someone like Tayel have that kind of control over her?

Marian Hitchcock joined James and me, and asked me,

“Goodwin, wasn’t there anything at all you could have done when Mr. Wolfe left the room? I thought you knew how to handle him.”

“No. Circuses have handlers for their elephants, and while I’ll admit this is similar in many respects, it’s a little more difficult with Wolfe. What Mr. Wolfe did at dinner is the least of our worries. If he went to the kitchen instead of his hut when he left here, we might as well pack up now and go home.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s a genius with an ego the size of New York. That ego won’t let him admit to himself that there are some problems that he can’t solve. So when he is confronted with an impossible situation, he ignores it. If you look for him and find him in the kitchen discussing food with the chef, it means he sees no way out of the mess we are in. And it would take more than what we have to get him to come to his senses.”

General Carpenter had joined us. James interjected,

“Well, you should be able to do something, Goodwin. That’s what you’re here for, isn’t it?”

Marian’s tone had been civil, and I had answered her civilly, but James was derisive. I told him,

“Try yourself. I have sense enough to know when I can’t do anything, and this is one of those times. Maybe tomorrow something will develop.”

Fat chance of that. I knew tomorrow would be worse, if anything.

Carpenter gave it a shot, too. He was more tactful than James, so I put him down easy.

No one had stayed for dessert. A few had clustered around the bust, but had eventually scattered. Most, including Stritar and his wife, had left the room by now. I left the group still discussing things and went to examine Wolfe’s image.

Abbas was still there. When I came closer he drew his open palm over his face, pointed to the bust, and said in stilted English,

“Mr. Wolfe. Great man.”

He had a smile, or a sneer. He was difficult to read.

“Yes,” I admitted. We looked in silence for a moment. It wasn’t a bad likeness, especially since Wolfe had obviously not sat for it, so it had to have been done quickly, from photographs. But no matter how good the sculptor, the eyes of those things are never right. If the pupils are carved the eyes look fake, and if they aren’t the eyes look blank.

Takhti came back from his errand and joined us. He indicated the bust and said,

“Mr. Wolfe was not at all pleased, was he? And Mr. Tayel! Forgive me, I should not think ill of others, but what a delight to see him so mad! I do not wish to detract from Mr. Wolfe’s great achievements, but I do believe Mr. Tayel only places Wolfe here so that he himself may one day have his own image among the great ones. If Wolfe is honored, why not he as well? That is what *I* think. Forgive me.”

I asked after Bahar and learned she was safely in her hut. That would do for the night, and tomorrow was another day. I hoped she would get a good night’s sleep.

Twenty six

I was dead tired, but hadn't received any new instructions from Wolfe and therefore had one more errand to perform. Granted, he hadn't had a chance to give me any new instructions, but if he had wanted to, or if he was even interested, he would have let me know. I needed to go see Gospo Stritar and persuade him that I was a turncoat and therefore of the same feather as he was.

I didn't relish it, but it would be better to get it over with. I decided, though, to make a side trip to the kitchen first—not to see whether Wolfe was there—but to see if they had anything I could use as an offering.

Wolfe was there, talking with Scorsi at the small table near the stove. I ignored Wolfe and got the help of one of the kitchen hands, who supplied me with a nice bottle of Chianti. There had been no wine at dinner, and I hoped the wine would break the ice a little. I asked the servant which hut Gospo Stritar and his wife were in. It was next Marian Hitchcock's, on the right side.

It was dark outside, but the patio was lit. One of the black-dressed guards was at the foot of the patio steps, part of the extra security. I paid him no attention, and headed for the Stritars' hut.

Of course, being on a nefarious mission heightens the senses, and I had no trouble catching the red glow of a cigarette from between huts one and two, on my right. It hit the ground and disappeared when I closed the distance. Someone was there, watching me. It could have just been chance—someone out for some air, but I didn't want whomever it was to know where I was headed. I decided find out for sure, so I went to my own hut and entered.

My room had a short hallway that passed a closet on one side and the bathroom on the other. I turned on the bathroom light and closed the door, with me on the outside of the bathroom. A frosted glass window in the bathroom would hopefully show the observer I was occupied.

The front door had a small window next to it, covered with a curtain. I parted the curtain and looked for the shadow. I could see it moving. The movements seemed furtive to my eyes, which were admittedly a little biased. The figure crossed to my side of the courtyard and slunk between my hut and the next. The shadow seemed to be a man, and it was definitely interested in me. It took position beside my hut so an exit from either the front or the back door could be heard.

I went into the dark room and sat down on the bed to consider. There was no doubt I had to shake my tail but it was tricky, there in that small space. Especially with the guard there keeping an eye on things. And I didn't know whether my furtive friend knew I suspected anything. If he did, that would change the picture.

Furthermore, the shadow had to be sidetracked for the entire time I talked with Gospo Stritar: it

would do no good to shake him or her on the way in only to be observed on the way out.

I could pretend to visit someone innocuous and stay with them a while, sneaking out and back into their back door, but that had its drawbacks. I would have to get in, explain the situation and get out before my tail had time to cover both entrances. With Wolfe it would have been a cinch but he wasn't in his hut. Marian Hitchcock or her father? Maybe. But the guard complicated it. Standing to the west of the patio as he was, he could see the back doors of the huts on that side.

As I thought about it, something started happening inside me. It welled up and became big enough that it couldn't be ignored. I was mad. Damn mad. I was tired of all the stealth and the secrets and having to watch my step everywhere I went. I was tired of uncooperative geniuses and Generals and godfathers telling me who I could and couldn't see. And I was tired of whoever it was outside, poking his nose into my affairs, or worse, waiting to kill me on Tayel's orders.

I decided what to do. I left my hut still carrying the bottle, moved up to Bahar's, and knocked. I didn't even watch for, or care about the shadow: I knew where it would be.

Bahar answered, saw it was me, and began to remonstrate. But she didn't get far. I pushed my way in and closed the door, grabbed her around the waist with the arm that had the wine bottle, and put my other hand over her mouth.

"Listen carefully, my sweet. I'm not here to attack you, just to use your back door. I know it isn't right for me to be here, and that you don't want to see me, but right now I just don't care. I'll let you go now. Whether you scream or not is up to you; my fate is in your vocal chords."

I let her go and headed for the back door, fast. So fast that I didn't even notice that under the robe she had thrown on she was wearing nice pink pajamas. I didn't have time to catch her reaction, but as I exited the back, I heard her whisper,

"But I *do* want to see you, Archie."

I made plenty of noise opening the back door and left it open. Then as fast as I could, I beat it around the far side of the hut, the side the shadow wouldn't be on. Crossing in front of Bahar's hut I rounded the other corner and started sneaking. Sure enough, there was the shadow, trying to see what was going on behind the hut.

I knew who it was even before I hit him with the bottle. His trim shape gave him away. I gave his skull a stiff uppercut with the bottle and the British agent Ty James went down with a grunt.

Bahar had heard the noise and was there with me. She whispered,

"*Archie! What is going on?*"

"Just a second. I've been hitting people too hard lately. I want to make sure he's okay."

I checked his pulse and under his eyelid. He would be out for an hour or more and would have a dilly of a headache for a day or two, but he would be fine. I told Bahar,

“Sorry you had to see my dark side, but this was necessary. Believe me. Thanks for not yelling, and thanks in advance for not asking me why.”

She didn’t ask me why. She asked,

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to take him to his hut and let him sleep it off. He’ll be okay in the morning. In the meantime, I have an important and nefarious mission so don’t tell anyone anything. I’ll see you tomorrow, I hope.”

I fished James’ hut key out of his pocket, didn’t notice Bahar’s pajamas again, slung James over my shoulder, and started off the way I had come. Bahar whispered after me,

“Didn’t I tell you? Alexandria is full of mysteries and adventures even today!”

There was an understatement.

Twenty Seven

I paused at the courtyard to see if anyone was around. It seemed clear enough, and as long as the guard was still at his post he wouldn't be able to see me. I crossed to James' hut, number two, and got him in. There was no way to tell if I had done it unnoticed, but at least no one screamed.

I put James on his bed and checked him again. He was okay. I had told Bahar he would be out maybe an hour, but you really can't guess it that close. I wanted to check him again after I had talked to Stritar, so I kept his key, turned out his lights for the second time that night, and locked the door behind me. I would have to hurry my visit to Stritar.

Stritar and his wife were in their hut, and invited me in. It appeared they had finished unpacking and were just waiting with bated breath for someone to come visit them. I offered the wine, and Anna Bathory accepted it graciously, but set it aside.

"It is good to meet you Mr. Goodwin. Gospo has told me about you of course, and I have found out a little by myself. I will try to translate for my husband. What is it you want?"

That was tough, coming onto my proposal cold like that. I was searching for words when Gospo said something, and Bathory said something back to him. A couple more exchanges were made, then she turned to me.

"I apologize for not translating everything. I think it is rude to speak in the presence of someone who can't understand your language, but sometimes it is unavoidable. Did you come to discuss Mr. Wolfe's bid?"

"Um, maybe we should go outside, or run water or something. Microphones, you know."

"We've checked. This hut has no microphones. You may speak freely."

I wish I could have been as sure as she was. I told her,

"Okay, but I don't know anything about the bid."

She translated, and Gospo replied. She said,

"My husband and I would like to know why Mr. Wolfe has not given us a reasonable bid for the item we are selling. Mr. Takhti tells us he will not bid until Mr. Wolfe does, and we cannot proceed."

"I don't know why he hasn't bid. You will have to ask him. You see, he doesn't pay my salary anymore, and even when he did, he didn't tell me everything."

Anna Bathory translated it, waited for an answer, and said,

"Yes, it is evident that you and Mr. Wolfe are having difficulties. Mr. Wolfe's actions are very hard for us to understand, Mr. Goodwin. Is there anything you can do?"

It was time to turn my coat. I decided to give it all to them at once.

"I doubt it. Mr. Wolfe has a mind of his own. King size. But I have a proposition for you."

"Oh? What is it?"

"Well, my understanding is that if we win the bid the bomb will be given to us on a truck, and that we will need to dismantle it on that truck. Is that right?"

"Yes, I think that is how we are setting it up. If you win the bid."

"Right. And that's the right thing to do, too. You don't want a live A-bomb around, and neither do we. You just want your money."

"Well, you oversimplify it Mr. Goodwin, and it is not an A-bomb but a hydrogen bomb, but let's agree for now."

"Good. Well, I was thinking. Even if that bomb is dismantled the pieces are probably worth some pretty big money. I think I will be the person assigned to drive the truck, and if so, I might be able to work it so that I could get those bomb parts back to you. You could sell the same bomb twice. It would cost you, of course; I don't come cheap. But it would work out better all around. You'd be richer, I'd be richer, the bomb would still be useless so my country wouldn't complain, and the Iranians wouldn't have it burning a hole in their pockets, or whatever it is they wear."

She had listened intently. She said,

"And you would get back at Mr. Wolfe?"

I hesitated. The corner of her mouth was turning up a little. I finally said,

"Well, sure, but that's not the main reason."

She threw her head back and laughed. Maybe you noticed that she wasn't translating for Gospo anymore. I noticed. She was being rude to him. And to me. She calmed and said,

"I'm sorry, Mr. Goodwin. It's just that you are so funny. Do you think I cannot tell when Nero Wolfe has put you up to a trick? And it wasn't even a very good one."

The *trick* had a slight *e* sound to it . . . *treeck*, but her accent was really quite good. And it was *I*, not *we* now. She was completely running the show as if Gospo wasn't even there. She continued,

"Really, Mr. Goodwin, you shouldn't let Mr. Wolfe put you up to such things. It is beneath you. How long have you been with him?"

"Forever. And I didn't say this was a trick. It is a bona fide offer."

"Fui. Stop with that. You should know better than to play that man's tricks."

That stopped me cold. Her use of the word *fui*—even though she had pronounced it differently from Wolfe--and the way she said *that man* got to me. My mind was racing. Her frustration with

Wolfe's bid was only part of the story. I remembered the fury, or maybe it was hate, in her eyes when Wolfe had been honored at dinner. It was obvious now that she knew him from the past. Intimately, as Wolfe would say. I had never heard of her from Wolfe, but there was a part of Wolfe's past that was taboo to even bring up, and I had the distinct feeling I had just stepped into it.

It was obvious the trick was off, but I had to do something. I said,

"Okay. No bomb parts, but listen to me for just a minute."

She listened.

"Mr. Wolfe tells me that we Americans are here just to jack up the Iranian bid. That you would never accept our bid no matter how high it got."

"That's not true, Mr. Goodwin. I am a businessman . . . businessperson. I will accept the highest bid. It matters not who wins."

"But look at it. If you accept our bid you make the world a safer place. One less bomb to go off. If you accept the Iranian bid, who knows what will happen? You should seriously consider, and not let your personal feelings for Mr. Wolfe get in the way."

I turned my palms up in a gesture that likely meant go jump in a lake in Serbo-Croat.

She angered.

"I did not say I had personal feelings for Nero Wolfe. He is nothing to me!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you had known each other in the past."

"We fought in the revolution together. That is all. I have no personal feelings for Mr. Wolfe. He is nothing."

She had said it twice, so of course it meant just the opposite. She continued,

"And listen to you! You are young, handsome and virile, and living a safe and comfortable life in the richest country in the world! It was your bombs that made you safe as you grew, don't you realize that? You have been protected from enemies by your bombs, and yet you would deny other children of the world the same!"

She was nuts. Money was obviously not the only thing that motivated her. She continued more softly,

"You know, Mr. Goodwin. These devices have been too long without use. Don't you think it is time for things to change? Time for a small pruning . . . so that the whole tree may live. No one knows what our newer devices would do in a populated area; it has simply been too long. Think of your precious New York. How would the new buildings survive, or would they? And what about your Central Park? Did you know it once had four million plants and trees? It doesn't have as many

now, but how would they fare? Would the device even reach that far? And the World Trade Center, or the UN building. Would they even be damaged? How would the hospitals cope? No one knows. There are people who guess, who calculate, who measure, but no one really knows . . . No. No one knows at all . . .”

Her voice had gradually trailed off until it was barely a whisper. And her hand had subconsciously dropped to the hem of the tunic she was wearing. Her fingers were playing along the edge of the material--feeling it, caressing it.

I had seen that happen before. I once dated a girl who had a two-year old daughter. The little girl would curl up at night with her teddy and suck her thumb, and her other hand would finger the bottom button of her pajamas. That button was the little girl’s security blanket.

And here was Anna Bathory, talking about blowing people up and at the same time doing the same thing, fingering the hem of her garment. Her security blanket was contemplating the death of millions. That little action was one of the scariest things I’d ever seen.

It changed my perspective completely. This had nothing to do with Gospo Stritar; he was still just a minor diplomat. It was Anna who was the threat, and it was no joke. She could probably charm the rattle off a snake when she wanted to. That’s probably how she got the bomb in the first place. But she was filled with more poison than any cobra.

Poison. I took a look at Gospo again. The symptoms were there; the grayish temples, the clammy skin. Was he peaked from the journey, or was it something else?

I decided it was my imagination. But I wasn’t imagining her. She was real. Wolfe had known who and what he would be dealing with the whole time, and now I knew too. No wonder Wolfe was going into a relapse. How do you deal with someone who actually *wants* to see mayhem, clear down in her fundament? I didn’t know, and I knew the only person who even had a shot at it was Wolfe. I decided then and there to do what I could to help him, regardless of what it took.

I got up and told her,

“I have to go. I don’t think there is anything I can say to change your mind. It is already set.”

“I will accept the highest bid, no matter who it comes from. You may tell Mr. Wolfe that he has won this battle, but not the war. Tell him the bids will be closed, due by ten AM tomorrow.”

So she was continuing the charade. As I got ready to leave she said,

“You know, Mr. Goodwin, you are really a reasonable and attractive man. However in the world have you put up with Nero Wolfe for so long?”

Great. Validation from a despot. Just what I needed. I said to Gospo: “Goodbye Mr. Stritar.”

“I’m sorry my husband didn’t speak much. He is not feeling well tonight.”
I’ll bet.

Twenty Eight

I had a nasty surprise waiting for me when I went back to check on Ty James. I opened the door with his key, and went to flip the light switch, but didn't make it. James, who was conscious and hiding behind the door of the bathroom, hit me over the head with a bottle of his own.

It dazed me a little but I didn't go out completely.

"What for?" I asked when the sting had subsided enough.

"Just a little taste of your own medicine, Goodwin. Why did you hit me?"

"Because you were spying on me. Any good reason for doing that?"

"It seemed prudent. You haven't exactly been cooperative here. And it appears I was justified. I just saw you coming from Mr. Stritars' hut. Why were you there?"

"I offered to sell the bomb parts back to them if we won the bid."

"You *what*?"

"You heard it straight. I was acting under Mr. Wolfe's orders, and didn't want you interfering. That's why you got hit. Mr. Wolfe thought they might consider our bid if they could get the parts back. But the plan backfired. They saw right through it."

"Blast. I tell you, Goodwin, this is the worst mess I've seen in a long time."

"I know. And I'm humbled too, at least right now. I want to help as much as I can. Can you teach me?"

"Teach you what?"

"Look. I'm a detective, and a good one. But I'm not a spy. That's what this seems to call for. I'm looking for some pointers."

"I'm no spy."

"You're not?"

"No."

"I'll bet they taught you to say that in lesson three of the spy manual. Okay, you're not a spy. But give me some pointers anyway. What am I supposed to do here?"

"Goodwin, you're balmy. I don't have any pointers. You just have to play it by ear, and not flinch when the going gets sticky."

"What do you mean by that?"

"A lot is at stake here, Goodwin. You know what I mean."

"Sticky means to kill someone?"

"You're an abrupt gump, aren't you? Of course that's what I mean. Only if it's necessary, of

course.”

“And you get to decide when it’s necessary. Well, I have to admit that was a lesson all right.”

“You draw the line a little short, Goodwin. Even with what is at stake”

“Look. I’ll help all I can. But right now I don’t know where the line is. Help me here. I just talked with Anna Bathory, and it’s obvious we’re going to lose unless we do something drastic.”

“Anna Bathory? Not her husband?”

“Don’t they tell you everything in your briefings? Gospo isn’t running this show, she is. And it’s ten to one that she isn’t even interested in our bid. Mr. Wolfe says we’re just here to drive the bid higher, and I believe him. She doesn’t want that bomb destroyed, she wants it used.”

James blasted again, and said,

“This is serious, Goodwin. If we lose that bid I have orders.”

He didn’t have to explain. Someone-- Stritar and his wife I suppose-- would get killed. I said,

“Well, I don’t know how to avoid it. And neither does Mr. Wolfe, right now. But he’s been known to pull some miracles at times, so I’ve decided to throw in with him. One hundred percent.”

“Well, that’s patriotic of you, Goodwin.”

“Don’t get sarcastic. It would help if I knew more about the people we are dealing with.”

James sat on the bed and considered.

“I don’t know . . .”

“Hey. I’ve been candid, haven’t I? It can’t make things any worse.”

“All right. But what we know about Gospo Stritar and his wife would fit in a thimble. The records of the Serbs are nonexistent. Your statement that Mrs. Stritar is behind this may explain some things, though. All we know is that Gospo was once an officer in Tito’s regime. Not an important one. He came into some money, no one knows how, and married Anna. She is some sort of royalty in Hungary; that’s why she retains her family name. After they married, Gospo became active with the Russians. It appears to be through those contacts that they got the bomb. That’s it. We don’t know any more.”

“Well here’s something to file. She fought in the revolution.”

“What revolution?”

“I don’t know. She just said that she fought in the revolution.” I didn’t mention that she said Wolfe had as well. I asked,

“What about Takhti? And Abbas?”

“Takhti we know a lot about. He is kind of a hero in his country. His father was even more so.”

“Yeah, I heard the story.”

“Well, there are parts you probably haven’t heard. You remember Oliver North?”

“Sure. Arms for hostages.”

“Well, Takhti was involved. He fancies himself a real wheeler-dealer like you Americans, and I guess he is. But he isn’t too bad, because he is more or less politically neutral. It’s Abbas that frightens me.”

“He seems pretty passive.”

“Yes. That’s why he’s dangerous. Those Islamic religious leaders are unpredictable; they are motivated by things we don’t understand in the West. We think he may have been involved in that Khomeni mess, but haven’t verified it. He stands watching.”

“Sounds pretty vague. He could be a saint for all you know.”

“It is bloody vague. Yes, he could be a saint.”

“Is that it?”

“That’s all I can tell you.”

“Oh. Until I get to lesson four, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, thanks for exuding such confidence.”

I left. Luckily, no bottle followed me. There was a light on in Wolfe’s hut and I had to unload, so I gave it a try.

He was not happy to see me, but at least he acknowledged my presence, which was more than I expected. He sat on the bed. I sat in a chair.

“The Stritars didn’t bite. Or I should say the Bathory. Anna is now running the show solo, with Gospo on the sidelines. I’d wondered how Gospo could swing this deal, but with her as a wife, I don’t wonder anymore. She saw right through me to you. She knew right away that was a scheme you had hatched. You did get a concession, though. The bid is now closed. It’s due at ten tomorrow morning.”

“I suppose that was all we could expect. Goodnight, Archie.”

“Hold on. I want to report.”

“Report what? You made no progress.”

“I know. But that woman scared the heebie-jeebies out of me. I’m in this up to my neck and you should be too.”

“Bah. It’s futile.”

“For once, I agree with you. But I need to report.”

Wolfe could tell when I was serious about something. He sighed, and said,

“Very well. Not verbatim. A summary.”

I reported. Not just my conference with Bathory and Stritar, but I also told him about the tour Bahar had given, and the stories she told. I told him about my talks with Takhti, too, and about Marian Hitchcock’s helping Bahar. I covered it all. Quickly, but it was all there, minus a few of the personal details with Bahar. Wolfe didn’t need to hear it all, of course, but it helped me feel better to be reporting to him. I could feel some confidence returning as Wolfe listened; maybe we could pull this off after all.

I finished with the conference with Anna Bathory, and that I did verbatim because it was important, and short, then I added the few things that James said. After it was over I asked if there were instructions and he said no, that nothing could be done. Wolfe said that even though the bid was now closed, any bid at all was superfluous.

I said,

“Anna gives you her regards, not. So you fought side-by-side?”

“Pfui. She speaks figuratively. That region, where the Christian world meets Moslem, has been an open sore of purululence since the beginning. It attracts all kinds of vermin. Some are idealistic and naively try to right wrongs in the name of justice. I was such a person once. Some prey on the trust of the idealistic for their personal gain. Still others are there simply because they feed on the misery of man.”

Wolfe was implying that Anna Bathory fit in the second and third groups. I was tempted to ask about Anna Bathory. How had she known Wolfe? But I knew better than to ask. He would tell me if the time came, and not until.

Wolfe wished me a good night. I did likewise and left, not feeling much better after all. He was going through the motions, but his soul wasn’t in it.

I went to my hut and got ready for bed. It had been a long day—longer than any day had a right to be. I was dog tired but still set the room’s clock radio, which had a dial that was labeled with Arabic numerals, to seven AM. I had an errand to perform in the morning and wanted to make sure I caught a certain event before it was too late.

Twenty Nine

It took me a while to realize the radio was going, and that it wasn't a call to prayers. Maybe it was both, I couldn't tell. So even though my body said otherwise the clock said seven and I rolled out of bed, put on yesterday's pants and shirt and my shoes, then arranged a chair and the curtains so I could watch out the sliding back door of the hut. I parked in the chair and started surveillance of the East wall. I set my mind to watch for movement, and prepared it to wait as long as it took.

It took longer than I thought it would, a whole hour. But at 8:13 I noticed a movement to my left. There she was. Bahar, in a tan blouse and brown slacks, headed for the back wall. I was glad to see she was carrying a handbag over her shoulder; it meant she was planning to go into town at the very least.

I watched her walk beyond the huts, then kept watching. I knew she would be followed, but I was surprised. Here came Takhti. I leaned behind my curtains so he wouldn't see me, and waited for him to pass. When I checked his rear I saw one of the guards following Takhti. That was who I was waiting for.

I let the guard pass, made sure his rear was clear, then opened the door and joined the parade. I didn't know what Takhti was planning, but I knew my timing would have to be just right. Our procession went south, past the mosque, and turned at the wall. I could only see the guard from my position, so I went until, in my estimate, Bahar had reached the southwest corner of the grounds. Then I started moving fast and making noise while I did it. The guard turned and saw me.

"Excuse me," I yelled. "I think I'm a little lost. Can you tell me how to get to Penn station from here?"

The guard, who was the same one who poked me the day before, looked bewildered. Either he didn't speak a word, or he didn't get it anyway. He thought he was going to poke me with his gun again, but decided not to. Now that he had been discovered, he just decided to forget it, gave a shrug with an upward turned palm, and started back to the palace.

I found Takhti leaning against the stones of the necropolis.

"Ah, friend Goodwin. Thanks for taking care of the guard. You saved me the trouble."

"So you had the same idea as I did. Did she get out all right?"

"Yes. Through that door."

Takhti pointed to a bush. I circled it and found a small iron door in the wall. It had dawned on me the day before that there had to have been a door there somewhere. That was why Bahar had been there behind the necropolis-- she had gone AWOL for a while. Now she would be gone again.

I hoped that she had sense enough to just keep going, back to England. I joined Takhti, and leaned on a stone next to him. He spoke.

“It appears we think alike, Archie. At least when it comes to my goddaughter. She told you of her intention to leave this morning?”

“No. I guessed that. After last night, I wasn’t sure what Tayel would do. But I figured she would avoid him today, and I knew she had a way out of here. How did you know?”

“I am not as smart as you, Archie. I have been watching her hut all night.”

“All night?”

“Yes. I saw your remarkable performance with Mr. James. That was funny to watch. But believe me, had you stayed in Bahar’s hut a moment longer it would not have been so funny eh?”

Takhti elbowed me in the ribs. It was irritating. I said,

“So you haven’t slept at all.”

“Some things are more important than sleep, as you know. Now that I know Bahar is safe, I will rest.”

“But she’s out there alone. Is that safe?”

“Of course it is, Archie. Haha. This isn’t the Wild Wild West, you know. She is far safer out there than she is in here, believe me. Walk back with me.”

I did. We didn’t talk much, but I did ask him if he had heard from Stritar, and he confirmed that he had heard the bidding was closed. He parted with,

“It’s really too bad we are bidding against each other, Archie. I’m starting to like you.”

I entered my hut and went back to bed.

Thirty

I was awakened by pounding on my door. It was the General. I invited him in and let him behold my green-striped pajamas. They had been a present from my sister last Christmas, and were darned comfortable.

“Goodwin, we are supposed to have a bid ready to go in five minutes, and Wolfe is completely out of control. He’s in that kitchen, eating chickens!”

“Chicken?”

“No, chickens! I’ve never seen anything like it. You’d have to see it. I can’t get him to even acknowledge me. He just keeps eating and talking to that chef. You have to do something!”

So it had happened. Wolfe was in a full-blown relapse. I said,

“I doubt I can do much, but I’ll try. And you have to make allowances for Mr. Wolfe. Believe me, if I were in his shoes I’d probably be eating something bigger than chickens. Give me a few minutes to wake up.”

“We don’t have a few minutes. The bid is due now.”

“Well, you’re not going to get anything from Wolfe. Put the bid in yourself.”

“But Wolfe has to tell us how much to bid.”

“Phooey. I’m quoting Wolfe now. It’s a closed bid, and even I know what you bid when you gotta have it and you don’t know what the other guy is going to bid.”

“How much is that?”

“Everything you’ve got. Now get out of here and let me dress.”

The General left, not happy.

I showered and shaved and donned a fresh shirt and jacket and headed for the terrace. But on the way something at the corner of the palace caught my eye and I headed for it instead. It was where the kitchen was. There was Muhammad the servant, in a dirty apron sitting on a chair outside the kitchen entrance. Next to him was a wire cage that had five plump chickens in it. He was plucking another and looking thoroughly miserable.

“I am not a butcher,” he told me as I went in the door.

There was a giant yellow sheet draped over the small table opposite the stove. No, it wasn’t a sheet, it was Wolfe, in a bright yellow Arabian getup. He had obviously ordered it custom-made, and I don’t care what he had said, he liked to wear those things. He was tasting chicken. Several empty dishes showed he had been at it a while. Scorsi was at the stove and had a pan on every burner; each pan having a different sauce or seasoning in it. He had been shredding garlic into one of

the pans, but was now cutting a freshly-plucked specimen and cooking the pieces.

I pulled the other chair at the small table and sat next to Wolfe.

“Good morning. Breakfast?”

“Good morning, Archie. Did you sleep well?”

“Not enough. And the timing is wrong.”

“Ten minutes.”

“Huh?”

“Ten minutes. The change in the taste of fresh chicken is discernable if it waits ten minutes before cooking. Perhaps even less time. I’m trying to decide.”

“Oh. Have you given any thought to General Carpenter? Or to our bid?”

“Who?”

You may think this was a setup; that no one could possibly have said that. But I saw his eyes and his expression. Whatever part of him it was that knew General Carpenter and the fix we were in was off on sabbatical. Wolfe was in a full relapse. The fact that he recognized and responded to me meant that whatever world he was in, he had let me in too, and that was encouraging. It meant I might be able to bring him out of it, perhaps with the help of a herd of lemmings.

I started bristling, but then I checked it, and considered the matter. If I brought him out of it now, what would it accomplish? He was too late to influence the closed bid; the General would have to take care of that. I suppose he might be able to pull something out of his hat, but it was by no means certain. In fact, it was far from certain since it was his empty hat that put him in this state. The die was already cast and it was loaded against us.

Waiting began to look more and more attractive to me. For all I knew, the part of Wolfe’s brain that handles crises was off charging its batteries in the back room, and fresh chicken fat made good battery juice.

Besides, the night before, when I had realized who and what Wolfe was up against, I had decided to stick with him and see it through, and I’d seen plenty of times when Wolfe had pulled it back from the brink when I thought we were sunk. What Wolfe needed—what I needed, was a little old-fashioned faith and loyalty—at least this time around.

So I didn’t pull Wolfe out of it; I didn’t even try to. Instead, I told him never mind, and asked him how he could tell about the chicken. He began sharing morsels of chicken with me, along with comments. And Wolfe and I had chicken for breakfast. Nothing but.

Thirty One

Breakfast was interrupted. For me, at least. After about fifteen minutes a guard came into the kitchen. One I hadn't seen before. He looked around, then left. Five minutes later he returned and in broken English let me know I was to go with him. I bid Wolfe goodbye and asked him to take care of my portion of the chickens, which he agreed to do.

The guard and I went down the hallway past the Great Hall and the library, and past the sentry, the same one who had stuck his gun in my belly the day before, and who I had seen at the wall. He let us pass.

At the far end of that hall were more offices. I was ushered into a room that was well-furnished with leather sofas and oak tables and a bookcase. There was a nice rug on the floor, with a burgundy and royal blue weave. Wolfe would have liked it. On the side wall was a door, and I could hear muted voices coming from behind it. The guard said wait, and left me.

I waited. And waited some more. There were some magazines on a table, and I tried them, but they were all Egyptian, and the pictures and advertisements, many of which I recognized from their American counterparts, were not much to look at. I got up and paced, then decided it had been long enough and opened the side door to see who wanted me. The Tayel brothers were in there, with the guard who had talked to me. Ahmed Tayel looked put out at my appearance.

"I will be with you in a moment, Mr. Goodwin. Please have patience. It will not take long."

So I went and sat again. I'm sure it was his game. In Executive America the longer a person is kept waiting the lower he is in the corporate food chain. That's how he or she knows where she or he stands. I figured it worked the same way in Egypt.

I decided to flip a coin: heads I leave, tails I stay and wait some more. It was tails.

Tayel the sinister finally called me in, and I took a seat in front of the desk he was sitting behind. The office matched the waiting room. Tayel's brother had left, but the guard was still there, behind me. Tayel looked at me without affection and said,

"Mr. Goodwin, my stepdaughter is missing. You were seen with her last night and this morning. I want to know what has happened to her."

So someone else had seen me last night. Or Takhti had told him, or Takhti had told someone else and the story had got to him. Or I was completely wrong and he hadn't seen anything but was making it up. As for this morning, there hadn't been anything to see.

"I'm sorry. You see, I don't speak your language so I couldn't possibly answer."

"Please don't try humor with me, Mr. Goodwin."

I replied, "I know when I'm funny, and that wasn't it. I meant every word. I really don't speak

your language. I couldn't say anything that you'd get right even if you understood the words perfectly. As for Bahar, I don't know where she is or what has happened to her, as you put it." That was true. I didn't know where she was. I just knew where she wasn't.

Tayel smiled a pinched smile,

"But you must know where she is, Mr. Goodwin. We know that this morning she took a walk on the palace grounds and you were there too."

"Then you must also know she didn't see me or speak with me."

"We don't know that, Mr. Goodwin. The guard assigned to protect her got confused when you talked to him. He came back to the palace. He was supposed to stay with her."

"To protect her from the likes of me."

"Yes. Now please don't force me to get . . . unpleasant. Tell me where she is, or what you have done with her."

Cripes. The guy was spewing thinly-veiled threats and everything. I was in a galdurned World War II movie. So I gritted my teeth and said,

"Okay. You win. She was going to rat on me, see? So I got her from behind. You know, a shiv under the third rib; that way they can't bark. I stuffed the stiff down that necropolis there. You got me cold, by gum. Dead nuts."

I had to hand it to him. At first he thought he understood. Then he didn't and was going to ask. But it didn't take him too long to figure out he was being led by the lip. He barked to the guard,

"Shzzzi"

Or something like it. The guard was fast and the butt of his gun caught the left side of my face as I turned to look at him. It was hard, and knocked me right off my chair. The guard stood there, over me, ready to do it again if I tried anything funny. I wasn't in the mood for funny, though. I was in the mood for blood. Tayel's. But that damned guard had his feet planted and the gun poised and his weight set for another blow. And he had thirty pounds on me. It wasn't the time for vengeance, so I stayed down.

"I want to know, Mr. Goodwin. Do not joke with me. Where is she?"

It was time for a crack at the other side of my face. This hurt a lot more than the movie ever did. My head had bees buzzing in it, pulling the nectar of knowledge from the edges of my brain. All I wanted to do was think up an answer that would keep the next blow from landing, but I couldn't think it.

Luckily for me the door to the hall opened and Tayel's brother came in. The guard snapped to

attention, and when the Saad saw what was going on a family spat ensued. The guard was dismissed and left, and I made it back to my chair.

Saad won. At least I think he did. Ahmed left his office and Saad motioned to me to stay a moment. Then he went to the door and called a name. In came the sentry, the other one who had poked the gun in my belly. Saad Tayel sat in his brother's seat and said something to the guard. The guard turned and spoke to me in nearly perfect English,

“We apologize for your treatment, Mr. Goodwin. The Colonel has instructed me to tell you that such treatment is not legal in our country, and that Mr. Ahmed Tayel will receive the same discipline that any citizen caught breaking this law would receive. He advises that, under the circumstances, you and your party leave immediately. We can no longer guarantee your safety.”

Good advice. I thought I should take it before I did something stupid. I said,

“Thank you. And tell the Colonel that I appreciated his coming in when he did. We will be leaving soon, I think.”

The guard translated, and got a reply.

“Please leave as soon as you can. The helicopter will be at your disposal. Colonel Tayel will send a doctor to your room to check your condition in a few minutes.”

I got up to go. As I turned for the door, Tayel spoke my name and I turned back. The guard translated,

“Mr. Goodwin, you don't happen to know where Miss Ferdowsi is, do you?”

The blow to my face had rejuvenated the headache Ty James had given me. I sighed and slowly shook my head no. At least, it was no in English.

Thirty Two

Back at my hut, I got on the phone and asked for an ice pack and some painkiller. The voice at the other end of the phone had trouble getting it because I couldn't open my mouth too much and my speech was a little funny.

The ice arrived with the doctor, a matronly-looking woman in uniform who checked a few things and said there was no permanent damage and that I'd get a big bruise. Then she gave me some real pain pills and watched me swallow them, and told me to lie down with the ice pack. I asked her how long it would be before the pain would go away. She said fifteen minutes with the pills in me and three days without. Then she left the bottle of pills and left the hut.

I may have dozed a little just when the pills kicked in, I don't know. But not much time had passed when there was a knock at the door. I wasn't going to answer, but I knew that I would have to go see if I could get Wolfe out of the kitchen and onto the helicopter so I decided to start moving my body parts to make sure they still knew who was in charge.

It was the General at the door, and he was in a panic.

"I gave them the bid, Goodwin, and it was damn high, too. But that woman took one look at it and said the Iranians had won the bid. I tried to up the ante, and to talk sense to her but she was dead set. Dammit, we need Wolfe now! You've got to get him going!"

I pushed the General out the door and as I closed it I told him I would do what I could with Wolfe. He hadn't even noticed my face.

I turned back to the room and contemplated how to go about it. There probably was a way, but I didn't relish it and it was sure fire that if I did it there would be no going back. I decided to do it right, went to the bathroom, showered, shaved with a little difficulty, and dressed in my last clean set of duds. But before I saw Wolfe I had an unpleasant personal chore to do, and I had been putting it off until it was almost too late. It was almost noon and if I didn't do it first I might not get another chance to do it.

Thirty Three

A little while after the chore was finished I was at the door of the Great Hall, trying the lock. There had been a huge crash inside, like a chandelier had fallen. The door had an ancient lock, and it was locked. The guard, the one who knew English, was at his post down the hall, and saw me knock. There was no response from within. I went into the library and tried the door, and it was locked too. I might have been able to jimmy the locks; they didn't look too difficult. But I decided to forget it and headed for Wolfe. Probably every servant had a key to those locks, and I wanted to get out of there.

But as I started, it occurred to me that the peephole should be checked. I went down the hall to the alcove, and was surprised to find that the door panel was ajar. I opened it.

Bahar was in there, wearing the same clothes she had worn to town and sitting on the stool. She had returned, and it was obvious something was wrong. She didn't even look at me, and her skin was off-color: as white as it could have been with her coloring. I started to ask her if she was okay when she toppled right off the stool. I barely caught her.

She had fainted. I shook her a little but she was out. The best thing to do would be to get her head lower, so I sat on the stool and draped her face-down on my lap. I opened the panel to see what she had seen.

I could see all right. Pretty much all of it. No wonder she had fainted, with that view. My own head was reeling a little. I considered what to do. She had started to move and moan a little, so I had to act quickly. I scooped her up, left the peephole and kicked the door shut with my foot, and took her post haste to the library. The guard pretended not to notice, but of course he did.

She moaned my name, then her eyes got wide and she tried to sit. I pushed her down.

"There there, my sweet, you just rest. You've had a shock, but after you've had a chance to settle down you'll be okay."

"But Archie, I, I . . ."

"I know what you saw. I saw it too. And I can't blame you for fainting. Did you see who did it?"

"Well, I . . . no. I can't. I . . . Archie, your face. Did he do that?"

"Don't try to talk. Listen. I know you're covering and I normally don't approve but it's okay this time. I'll give you some advice. Don't tell anyone what happened. No one, okay? I'm going to get Mr. Wolfe. You just lay here and rest. If anyone asks, you just aren't feeling well. But whatever

you do, don't tell anyone what happened in there until I return. You can trust me, Bahar. Have you got that?"

She nodded a weak yes. I decided that would have to do and got up to see what I could do about Wolfe. This was a mess, but things were a mess before this had happened, so what's the difference?

I'm sure you're wondering what it was that happened. I don't blame you and I'm not one to hold up the story just for dramatic effect. And I wanted another look myself, so I took out my penknife and tried the library door. It opened easily, and I looked at the busts.

There, on the right, was the bust of Nero Wolfe in pieces on the marble floor. That was what had caused the crash. And in Wolfe's place on the pedestal was the head of Ahmed Tayel. The head was very lifelike. It should have been, as it couldn't have been more than five minutes since it had been on the shoulders of Tayel himself.

Blood? There was plenty running down the pink marble and on the side of the head, but only a few small splatters on the floor and the carpet. The head must have been carried upside-down to the busts. But there was a small pool of it coming from under the wooden screen. I dodged the small splatters and headed to the opening in the screen. There was the rest of Tayel on his prayer rug, the legs stretched out. He had been killed while praying, and there where his head should have been was the sword of the prophet Muhammad.

I looked around. The towel to the washbasin was missing, and there was a second prayer rug, empty, next to Tayel. I inspected the floor. There were no telltale footprints so the killer had probably got away clean.

I stepped to the case the sword had been in. That lock was old and by the dirt and furniture wax on the working edges of the latch I doubt it had been locked. I headed back to Bahar. The second prayer rug meant there had been someone in there with him. And Bahar had seen the whole ugly thing from her peephole. There in the wall. I was surprised she hadn't screamed.

Of course, she was covering for the person who did it. I could appreciate that: I would have done the same were I in the same circumstances, believe me.

I couldn't help taking another look at the busts and went to get the details. I looked behind the busts. There was the towel from the washbasin, on the floor. The killer had apparently used it to wipe up after throwing Wolfe on the floor and putting Tayel in his rightful place.

I looked around once more, just to see if I had missed anything. There were a lot of strange things in that Hall. The peephole, the busts, the prayer alcove. And now there were even more: Tayel's

head there were Wolfe had been, and his body in the prayer corner. But the strangest thing of all, at least to me, was that bust of Wolfe, lying there in pieces on the floor. The pieces showed it clearly.

Wolfe's head had been hollow. Full of air.

Thirty Four

As I closed the library door behind me and let the latch lock again, I considered what to do. Of course, there was only one answer. There was always only one answer: Nero Wolfe. Now was the time to pull him back from his little vacation, whatever the cost.

But we were interrupted. Abbas came into the library. He saw Bahar, who was sitting up and looking more or less normal now, and asked her a question. I caught the name Tayel. It might have been my imagination, but Bahar looked a little afraid of him.

“He’s asking if I know where Mr. Tayel is. He says Mr. Tayel sent for him, and told him to meet him in the Great Hall, but it’s locked. Archie, what do I tell him?”

“Tell him Mr. Tayel left unexpectedly, and to go back to whatever he was doing.” Praying, I suppose. She told him.

Abbas bid Bahar goodbye and left. It may have been my imagination, but there seemed to be some dark spots on the white garment he was wearing under his darker outer robe. The hem extended below the robe, and there was definitely something there. Blood? I don’t know. The outer robe was too dark to show any blood, and the spots were small.

I sat on the edge of the couch next to Bahar.

“Are you going to make it?”

“I think so.”

“Okay. Those are the last words you are going to say until I come back. It’s best this way. Not even to Takhti if he comes. Especially not to him. Got that?”

“All right, Archie. I . . . I understand.” She reached out a hand. I stayed businesslike.

“It might be a while. Just stay put. And rest in peace.”

Poor choice of words. I regretted them as soon as I said them. And it made me realize that her life might be in danger, too. So I decided I had to take her with me. I said,

“I changed my mind. It would be better if you came with me. Do you think you can walk?”

“Yes, but I want to stay here.”

“Just come. We’ll see if Wolfe can figure out what to do about this.”

“But I don’t want to talk to Mr. Wolfe.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t want you to talk to him either.”

I helped her to her feet and gave her an arm for support as we walked. All this time the belly-guard had been at his post, and he probably had seen something. But I would leave that for Wolfe if

he wanted it.

We went to the kitchen. The chickens had been cleaned up, but Wolfe was still there, talking to the chef and making notes on a piece of paper with a pencil. The notes would probably be the basis of a technical paper on their experiment. The chef left when he saw us.

I tested Wolfe.

“General Carpenter wants to see you. We’ve lost the bid, and he wants to roast you alive. I told him there was no way you could get roasted clear through in less than ten minutes, so forget it. You wouldn’t be palatable.”

He ignored me. Then I said,

“Okay, here’s another one. Ahmed Tayel is dead. His head has been chopped off, and it is there where your bust used to be. Your bust is in pieces on the floor.”

Still nothing. He was deeper in, as I was now just a hornet buzzing around his head.

I sat Bahar in the chair next to Wolfe, and got ready. It would be tricky, there at close quarters. Of course, I knew how to bring him out of his relapse, that wasn’t the problem. The problem was that it would be painful for both of us, especially with my face the way it was, and who knew what good it would do after he was out.

I tried to turn so it would be more tempting for him to use his left hand. I’d known him to use both hands, with two beer bottles, on a woman who had a knife and was trying to stab him. It would hurt me less if it were his left hand.

It didn’t work. I grabbed his shoulders and with all my might yanked him around to face me. Wolfe couldn’t stand being touched by anyone, except for a handshake and even that was sometimes inadvisable. His reaction was swift and strong. I thought I had prepared for it, but when he slapped me on the left side of my face, the side that Tayel had hit by proxy, it stung enough that I almost lost balance and dropped into Bahar’s lap.

But it did the trick. It took almost a full minute, but eventually the glaze in Wolfe’s eyes turned to comprehension, and he looked at me.

“Archie, your face. What happened?”

“It got hit by Tayel. Or one of his goons on his order. Then someone else, never mind who, added some icing. It will be okay. The real problem is that Tayel is dead. No, that’s not the real problem; he deserved it. The real problem is that we’ve lost the bid.”

“Pfui. Of course we did. Confound that woman! Sit down. What’s this about Mr. Tayel? Why did his man hit you?”

I took the third chair at the table, the one Scorsi had been in, opposite Bahar.

“Okay, here it is, fast because it has to be. At about 10:20 this morning that guard interrupted me as I was eating your chicken at this table. I was ushered into Ahmed Tayel’s office where I waited about an hour, only to get beaten because I didn’t know where Bahar was. Tayel thought I’d done something to her.”

Bahar tried to interject, but I put up a hand.

“Tayel’s brother Saad came in and interrupted us. I’d be much worse off if not for him. I went to my hut and tried what I could. A lady doctor also came under Saad Tayel’s direction and gave me some pain pills, which are in me now and probably affecting my judgment. General Carpenter came to my hut in a panic and said we’d lost and what are you going to do about it? Then I took care of a personal item. This brings us up to the noon call for prayers.”

I continued,

“There was a very loud crash from inside the Great Hall. I tried the main door and it was locked. No one answered my knock. I went around and tried the door in the library. It was locked, too. I decided to look through Bahar’s peephole and found her in there. She was having serious difficulty breathing and she fainted in my arms.”

“Hmpf,” Wolfe said, “surely a female attempt to . . .”

“No sir. It was the real deal; she had provocation. I looked through the peephole and there, where your bust should have been, was the head of Ahmed Tayel. The real thing, sans body. Your bust is in pieces on the floor. That’s what caused the crash.”

“The devil. Tayel is dead? Confound it, what did you have to do with this, Archie?”

“Nuts. You should know better than to ask a question like that. Anyway, I put Bahar on a couch in the library and did a quick investigation. Tayel’s body was in the prayer corner on a prayer rug. A second rug was unrolled there also, but it was empty. Tayel had been killed with that sword of Muhammad from the case. I think the case had been unlocked, so anyone could have got it. Looking around I decided it’s possible, though not completely sure, that the person who did it got away clean, that is, not much blood splattered. You can’t predict what blood is going to do. In this case, it looks like the killer got lucky.”

I paused. Then added a little commentary.

“Of course, with both doors locked and me right there there’s the question of how the killer got away. Actually, those locks are easy, so anyone could have got in or out, no trick at all. I was there when the crash happened so whoever did it didn’t exit immediately unless he hid in the library when I

was checking that door and exited later. I don't buy that. I think he was in there and didn't answer my knock for obvious reasons, then got out as soon as I left for the peephole. That guard could tell you. I could get him."

Wolfe was about to say pfui, but I kept going.

"I know. You're thinking all you need to do is ask Bahar, since she saw it. If you want to ask her, go ahead. But she doesn't want to tell, and I'm on her side. I've told her to say nothing to anyone, and that includes you. Besides, if your brain is any good, you've probably already figured it out. It might be too late even now, though. Since the bidding is over, I presume our Persian and Serbian friends are making for the exit."

He was going to say pfui again. I added the last item.

"Abbas showed up just after I finished looking and closed the library door. He said he had been summoned by Tayel to the Great Hall, but that the door was locked. It may have been just my imagination, but he seemed to have some small splatters of blood on his hem."

"Pfui," He said it anyway. "Confound it, this is ticklish . . . kittlish. Once again, you have . . . no, wait."

Wolfe leaned back as much as he could on that small chair, and closed his eyes. He was motionless for a moment, then I saw it. Just a twitch at first, but then more regular: his lips were working on the problem. Out and in, out and in; like clockwork. That chicken was fueling something. I checked my watch, and motioned for Bahar to keep still, though it wouldn't have mattered. After he'd been doing it for exactly three minutes and five seconds his lips stopped and his eyes opened. And I caught something that made shivers go up my spine. There was a glint in his right eye.

I lived for that glint. It showed he had it, and that it was only a matter of time. That glint had never been wrong. Not once.

"Satisfactory." Wolfe said. He made a circle with his lips and whistled without sound.

Thirty Five

“If you say so.” I answered after a moment. “It doesn’t seem so from where I look.”

“Pfui. It is exactly what we need, Mr. Goodwin. You and I have no experience in matters of espionage. I did, once. But that was too long ago. When it comes to dealing with death though, we are the experts. We now tread familiar, albeit macabre, ground. How are things arranged?”

“As described. Both doors are still locked and Bahar and I, oh, and of course the killer are the only ones who know.”

“Very well. Now, Mr. Goodwin, I need your help. We have had our differences, and this is more delicate than our last case. Are you with me on this one?”

I knew what he wanted. He wanted to know how far I would go on his behalf. I knew what that could mean, and how distasteful it could be. Could he count on me? I said,

“Yes. On this one, at least, I’m with you all the way.”

“Satisfactory. We must move quickly. Get everyone in the library. Except Colonel Tayel. Arrange chairs facing the Hall. Two rows. Mr. Takhti, Mr. Abbas, and Stritar and Bathory in front. You and General Carpenter too. The Hitchcocks, Mr. James, Mrs. Harrington and Miss Ferdowsi in back. Have Mrs. Harrington bring, as discreetly as possible, any tools she will need for that device. Have her conceal them somewhere in the library before the others arrive. Have Miss Hitchcock bring that contraption.”

“Her computer?”

“Yes. And whatever else she may need to pay Mr. Stritar and his wife.”

“All that will take a while. Do I tell them anything?”

“No.”

“Then I doubt I’ll be able to get the Iranians and the Stritars to come. They are almost certainly getting ready to go, and they will suspect a trick. Also, there is a snag. Ty James as much as said that if the Iranians won the bid he had orders to kill Stritar and his wife.”

“Pfui. Tell that man to show constraint. Perhaps all is not lost yet. You can get Mr. Takhti and Mr. Abbas by saying it involves Miss Ferdowsi. It does, after all. Mr. Stritar and his wife may come once they learn that the buyers are going to be there. Use your ingenuity. If all means to propel them fail, mention the name Tarkolo. That will bring them.”

“Tarkolo? What’s that?”

“Just a name. An inconsequential label given to a family who once lived. It should mean nothing, but it will bring her. Don’t use it unless you have to. Go. Hurry. Miss Ferdowsi will stay here with

me. And fetch my stick, too. My door is not locked.”

I went. It would be a tall order to get everyone together before that body was rediscovered, so I broke into a trot as I headed to the patio.

It turned out to be a cinch. Lunch was served on the patio and there were two groups at the tables. The British/Americans, and the Serbs/Persians. The Serbs were still moving, so James had already showed constraint. I went to the friendly group, which did not seem so friendly. Some had eaten, others apparently didn't care to. Carpenter wanted to know what I'd done about the situation.

“Plenty, but there's no time to explain. We need you all in the library. Mr. Wolfe has something of great importance to tell you. My job is to get the people at that other table to come, and it won't be easy.”

They had questions, and Marian Hitchcock asked about my face. But I shook my head and continued,

“No questions. I'm serious, and this is vital. Hitchcock, get your computer and anything else you need to pay for a bomb, bring it here, and wait. Harrington, I have instructions for you. I'll give them to you as I accompany you to your hut. James, Mr. Wolfe says all is not lost, so show some constraint. Don't ask me to elaborate. The rest of you stay here until I come back.”

They didn't like it. Especially General Carpenter and Ty James, who did indeed want me to elaborate. But they stayed. Julie Harrington came with me and I told her what Wolfe needed. She said she thought she could do it, though it would be better if she took everything. I just told her to make it fast. I fetched Wolfe's cane from his room and waited at Harrington's door.

She was fast. Five minutes later we were all back on the patio. Harrington had a case about the size and appearance of my overnight bag, so it wasn't too bad. I told them to try not to look like a herd of elephants, but to get into the library, and they did okay. It looked fairly casual. The problem was the others: to trick them into going for Wolfe's trick without suspecting a trick would be a trick.

I addressed my first remark to Abbas, through Takhti.

“Did you find Mr. Tayel?”

Takhti asked, and Abbas said 'no' in English. Abbas looked stoic. Anna Bathory's husband Gospo looked sick. He didn't have any food in front of him. He was definitely showing the signs, but I couldn't worry about that now. I said to Takhti,

“That's too bad. Takhti, I have some news of Bahar. She is here, with Mr. Wolfe.”

“She's returned?” Takhti was concerned, or at least, he looked like he was. “And I have been

asleep. Where are they?” His robes looked fresh, so he either had just got up, or had soiled his old ones somehow and changed.

“They will be in the library, and they wish to speak with you and Mr. Abbas about a matter of importance.”

“We will go. Thank you for telling me she is here.”

Bathory remonstrated.

“It is a trick of Mr. Wolfe’s. You should not go. We must leave.”

“I am sorry, Ms. Bathory. You may be right, but even if it is a trick I cannot leave Bahar here alone. She must come with us, so I will go to her now.”

Bathory didn’t like it one bit. She flashed,

“Then we will go with you. Mr. Wolfe cannot be trusted.”

Like I said, it was a cinch.

I stepped it up to the library and beat the second group there. Wolfe was not there and I assumed he wanted to make an entrance as usual. I told everyone in the first group to get a chair for themselves, and one other, and told them where to sit. I asked Harrington if her tools were safely concealed and she said they were. By the time the enemy had arrived everything was arranged.

I got the second group seated, then told them all I was going to fetch Wolfe and Bahar, and started for the kitchen. I didn’t make it, as Wolfe and Bahar were already headed our way. His not waiting for me to summon him showed he was feeling it too.

I went back in and sat in my chair on the front row. Frankly, I didn’t like the staging. I was used to sitting where I could keep an eye on everyone, not as part of the suspects. Wolfe entered with Bahar, and Takhti jumped up and went to her. She assured him she was all right, though I don’t think she was too convincing. I indicated her chair, and we all sat except Takhti. Bahar was at the end of the second row closest to the door, and he was second from the end on the first row. He tried to move his chair back to Bahar, but Wolfe said,

“Mr. Takhti. If you please. Some of my remarks will be directed to you, so it would be better if you were on the front row. I understand your concern for Miss Ferdowsi, but it can wait. If you please?”

Takhti returned his seat to its original position and sat, between Abbas and Anna Bathory. I tried to get a better take on the dark spots on Abba’s outfit, but I just couldn’t tell. Wolfe started,

“I do not thank you for coming. Some of you may have noble motivation, others ignoble. But none of you came by courtesy’s beckon. We do not share a common tongue. By necessity, then, I

must either speak all twice or even thrice, or I must speak directly to those I wish, and leave the rest of you to glean what you can from other avenues of communication. I choose the latter method.”

Then the son-of-a-gun then started speaking in Arabic, or maybe Farsi. I didn’t like it. Hell, I hated it. I couldn’t keep an eye on what was going on, and now I couldn’t even understand it. I made motions to protest, but Bathory beat me to it.

“Speak in English. It is what the majority of us understand.”

“I will when it is appropriate. I was merely asking Mr. Abbas if he was truly a sayed, a member of the prophet Muhammed’s lineage.

Wolfe asked the question again and Abbas responded. It wasn’t a simple yes or no. Wolfe said to Bathory,

“He claims direct lineage to Ali. If so, he is not only a sayed, but he is in the upper echelons.

Anna spoke up again,

“What has that got to do with anything? You are trying to trick us. It won’t work.” She turned to Takhti, “Lets go now. Bahar may come with us. We must hurry. We have a deadline.”

Wolfe ignored her. So did Takhti. Takhti was wary, watching Wolfe. Wolfe continued conversing with Abbas in his language.

I hated it. But I didn’t have to stay put. I got up, circled behind the group, got another chair, and set it next to Bahar on the second row. Wolfe didn’t stop talking.

“Translate.” I whispered to her. My tone wouldn’t accept no for an answer.

She whispered, “He is asking Mr. Abbas about his duties as a religious and government leader. He asked if his position and influence in Islam extends to Egypt, and Mr. Abbas said yes. Now Mr. Abbas wants to know why he is being asked questions, and why the meeting was called.”

“This is ridiculous.” It was Anna again, in English. “We are leaving.”

Wolfe responded to her.

“No, Madam. You are not. If you left now, you would be returned here under police escort.”

“Why? We have done nothing wrong.”

“Pfui. It wouldn’t matter. A murder investigation defers to the convenience of no one.”

“Murder? What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the murder of Mr. Ahmed Tayel. His body is behind me, in the Great Hall, and his killer is in this room. The authorities have not yet discovered the body; I hope to deliver both the news and the killer in a single package to them. That is why we are met.”

There were various reactions. I have always had notion that you could ferret out a murderer by

watching how he or she reacted to such surprise announcements. It had never played out, though, and this time I didn't even bother. Anna was more suspicious than ever.

"This is a trick. There is no body in there. You are trying to keep us here, and we will now leave." She got up to go. No one, including her husband, took her lead.

Wolfe spoke to me,

"Archie, the door."

I knew which door he meant. I got up, opened my penknife, and jimmied the door to the Great Hall. I looked in; nothing had been disturbed. Bathory was immediately at my shoulder and saw what I saw. She tried to enter, but I said,

"Not until Mr. Wolfe says so."

Others got up. Wolfe was making no objection so I opened the door wide enough for all to see. All came except Bahar, whom I couldn't blame, and Gospo Stritar and Harrington. General Carpenter uttered words not fit to print, and Ty James said blast. Takhti began,

"Forgive me, but I think Mr. Tayel may have earned . . ."

But Bathory was having none of it. That sight didn't make her sick, it made her furious. I think she suspected Wolfe of doing it himself, or at least of having it done, just to bollix up her plans. She interrupted Takhti in a loud voice,

"It doesn't matter! This is not our business! Mr. Takhti and Mr. Abbas, come. We are leaving."

Wolfe made a sign to me, and I backed quickly to the outer door. Wolfe said,

"Madam, you are not thinking. You cannot leave. It would be futile. You are trapped, here with all of us, until this matter is completed to the authorities' satisfaction."

"I am not trapped. I have diplomatic immunity from my country."

"Pfui. A paper shield. It will not withstand this."

Anna was livid.

"You think you have trapped us, with your tricks and your fancy words and your magnificent brain. Fui! We are leaving. Even if we are delayed, it does not matter. You will have lost in the end."

"Perhaps not. I think time is your enemy. Every moment delayed brings the hounds closer to your heels. Is that not right?"

She tried to hide it, but her emotions had the floor, and she couldn't. Wolfe was right. She grabbed Takhti's arm.

"We must go now. Or the deal is off."

Takhti considered. Then he looked at me. He didn't want to go through me, but he knew he would have to in order to get out. He shrugged his shoulders and made a gesture of resignation towards heaven, then spoke a word to Abbas and the same one to Bahar, and said,

"I am sorry, Archie. We must go. Please step aside."

I replied,

"I'm sorry too, but nuts. You'll have to go through me. No bludgeoning with fake knives allowed."

Takhti looked to the other door, but James and Wolfe and the Hitchcocks were there. He said to me,

"I won't need a knife, my friend. I have my father's talent for the fight, and I do not wish to hurt you."

Anna became impatient. "Just go!" she commanded. But Bahar interjected in her native language. I caught my name.

Takhti turned to Bahar and spoke to her. Then it was Abbas' turn to say something. He appeared to be arguing a little, but eventually stopped. Takhti turned back to me and said,

"It appears we stay for the time being. You have a champion, Archie. I told Bahar I could take care of you without hurting you much, but Bahar says you have been hurt enough already, and Bahar is the daughter of the woman I love. A woman who is now a widow and in need of my support. My dear friend Mr. Abbas does not like it, but God is apparently against him today. We will stay until this matter is settled."

Anna's face was something to see. She was beyond words. At first she was going to jump Takhti, then it was me. But finally she settled on the right person. She spun to Wolfe.

"You!"

I wish I could give more, but she reverted to Serbo-Croat. It was obviously scathing, enough that I was thinking of abandoning my post at the door and coming to Wolfe's defense. So far, Wolfe was taking it, just sitting back with his eyes closed. I was watching for signs of her getting physical when the doorknob behind me pressed into my back. My reaction was to push back, but then it pushed with some real weight behind it and I let it swing open.

It was Saad Tayel, with the belly-poking English-speaking guard. The guard didn't wait for a cue from Tayel, but said,

"What is going on here?"

Bathory's words froze, and she turned. Round one was lost, and her face showed it. But as far as

I could tell, our side was no better off.

Wolfe did not seem to be upset by Tayel's intrusion, though. He spoke a few words calmly and plainly to Tayel. From Tayel's reaction I could tell Wolfe was breaking the news. Tayel ran to the Hall and went in. The guard followed him, which left the door unguarded, so I remained at my post.

There was a wail. An agonizing sound, deep from Saad Tayel's soul. At first it was just sounds, but then it became a mournful procession of words unintelligible even to those who knew him. He was really hurt. I could hear his words coming from the area of the busts, then shift to the prayer corner and renew their agony. We all momentarily stopped our petty arguments and gave time to the grieving.

It was Wolfe who broke the spell.

"Please," he said. "Resume your seats. We all wish to see the end of this as quickly as possible."

Bathory protested, but not loudly. When she saw that the others were cooperating she took her seat as well. I was the last. My chair next to Bahar was closest to the door, so it was pointless for anyone to try to make a run. Bahar was visibly shaken by Tayel's mourning, and was weeping. I gave her my handkerchief and told her firmly that there was nothing she could do; she needed to compose herself. I looked at Gospo Stritar's face, which was in profile. He was obviously hurting from something not related to Tayel's death, and he hadn't even bothered to get up when the body had been revealed.

When everyone had settled, Wolfe spoke,

"Mr. Tayel came sooner than I had hoped. We do not yet know who caused his grief. He will be himself again presently, and will want to know. I wish to resume my work with that aim. You may not wish to cooperate, that is your right. But I am not responsible for how an uncooperative attitude will be interpreted by Mr. Tayel."

Wolfe turned to Abbas again and began another question. It sure seemed he was focusing on him. I suppose he could have been a killer. James said he was unpredictable, and he had been in the general area when it had happened. There were those dark spots on his clothes and the empty prayer rug, too. But he just didn't seem to have enough emotion in him to do anything more passionate than brushing his teeth. I turned to Bahar, who had settled a little, and said.

"Please, again." This time it was a request. She started whispering.

"Mr. Wolfe is asking Mr. Abbas more about his authority. Mr. Abbas says that his authority extends throughout the world."

By that time she was in sync with the speakers. Abbas had a habit of considering each of Wolfe's

questions carefully before he spoke, so Bahar had time to translate.

The next question was Wolfe's:

"Does your lineage entitle you to a leadership position in Egypt if necessary?"

"Yes. In Egypt. In Islam."

"Has that always been?"

"It has always been, since the Prophet Muhammad, blessings to him and all of his family, was upon the earth."

I thought this was a strange line of inquiry. But I knew better than to doubt the man. Wolfe continued with Abbas and I heard through Bahar,

"There have been times when the family of Muhammad did not rule."

"Yes. There have been times. God did not allow them to endure."

"And the princes of the family of Muhammad ruled here in Egypt as well?"

"Yes. For as long as Egypt has been part of Islam."

"Today as well?"

"No. I cannot say that."

"But they will rule here again."

"Yes. With the blessings of God. Why do you ask this?"

"For my enlightenment. And those who are with us."

"But it has nothing to do with the death of Mr. Tayel."

Wolfe sat back.

"We shall see."

Bathory said,

"You will please tell us what you said."

Wolfe switched to English.

"I was merely getting a history lesson."

"You need no history lesson. You lived there. What tricks are you playing now?"

We didn't find out. Saad Tayel had resumed a professional decorum and was with us. The guard was there, too. He spoke with Wolfe in a low voice. Bahar could only catch a few words.

"Mr. Wolfe is inviting my uncle to join the group. He doesn't want to, and says he must call the police. I think Mr. Wolfe is trying to persuade him that this will be short. That it will be over soon."

A compromise was apparently reached. The guard was given instructions, and he went to the outer door, called another guard, and passed some instructions. Then he posted himself in front of

the Qu`ran and watched us. Tayel sat in the seat on the front row I had vacated earlier.

Wolfe began talking to Tayel in soothing tones. It was hard for Bahar to hear, but she did her best. If some parts were missed, it wasn't her fault.

"Tayel. That is an interesting name. Not common in Egypt."

"No. There are not many of us."

Now there was one less. Wolfe was being a little abrupt.

"Did that name come from the surname 'Takel'?"

"Possibly."

"That name has significance in Egypt, does it not?"

"No. Not today."

"But at one time it did."

Bahar missed a couple of the following exchanges, and we had an interruption from Ms. Bathory again. Wolfe ignored her. Bahar continued translating.

"As I recall, two of the Marmaluke princes of Egypt named Takel escaped the massacre after the banquet given by Muhamat Ali. They escaped to Nubia and attempted to gather an army of vengeance. They failed."

"Perhaps."

"Yes, perhaps. And perhaps they did not fail, but left the task to their descendants. You have the coloring of an Egyptian, but your brother did not. Are you both Marmalukes?"

"I will not answer that. You said you would find my brother's killer. This has nothing to do with that."

"Perhaps it does. To some, perhaps even many, your brother was chosen to be the next leader of these people. There are those in this room who did not wish it so. And now your brother is dead."

"This is ancient nonsense."

But Tayel's face had dropped its demeanor and was showing emotion. This wasn't nonsense to him. Wolfe continued,

"But it is not nonsense. You have such a man on your right. Mr. Abbas is of the family that believes they are the rightful heirs to the thrones of Egypt."

"He is not Egyptian."

"Bah. Neither are you, if your lineage is traced back far enough. Few kings of Egypt have been Egyptians. Mr. Abbas claims the leadership of this country is in the hands of an infidel."

There you have it. Wolfe was pitting those two against each other. I had seen it coming, and I

didn't like it. Something was going to give. I looked at Abbas. He was as stoic as ever, but he spoke up.

"I did not say that."

"Very well, I withdraw that. I will change the subject. Archie."

Bahar didn't have to translate that last word, but she did. I gave him a nod. He said, in English, "Yesterday, Mr. Tayel was reading the Qu`ran, there on the stand."

"Yes."

"Perhaps the passages he was reading will shed light on our problem. Could you go see?"

I got up and went to the stand. Why was he asking me? I could no more read that book than cross Broadway against the light. I said,

"It looks to me like the book has not been disturbed since he was reading it. It seems to be opened to about the same place."

"Very good. Please illuminate us and tell us what passage the book is opened to."

"I can't read it. It's in Arabic."

"Nonsense. Don't keep us in the dark any longer. Look at the clock."

I got it. It takes some of us a little longer, but his reference, three times, to the lights finally got through to me. He wasn't interested in the Qu'ran, he wanted me next to the light switch there near the door. But I had to answer his question. I looked at the clock above the door. It had the same type of dial as the clock radio in my hut. The hands were in the right place, 1:05 PM. It was marked in twelve hours, and there was an Arabian numeral next to each mark. The ten, eleven and twelve positions had double digits, just like our Western clocks. A lot of the numerals looked pretty similar to our Western numbers.

I looked at the left-hand page, and there were numerals at the top. I read them to Wolfe.

"There is a five, a two, and then a mark, then a figure I can't read."

"Yes. It reads right to left so it would be a twenty five. Satisfactory. As I thought. Please stay there; we may need more enlightenment."

Enough with the clues. I waggled my right index finger a little to let him know I had it.

Anna protested again, and Wolfe conversed with her in Serbo-Croat. I got the feeling that he was telling her it wouldn't be much longer, and to have patience, but I really couldn't tell. Whatever he said quieted her for the time being.

Then he switched back to Tayel and Abbas. I didn't have a translator any more, so all I could go by was the inflections and expressions, and Abbas was no help there. His face looked the same no

matter what was happening. Tayel, though, was getting angrier at Wolfe, and at Abbas.

Finally, Abbas said something that really got to Tayel. He got up and stood in front of Abbas. They exchanged words. Abbas stoic and Tayel getting angrier. Takhti was right there in the seat next to Abbas, and I could tell from his position that he was ready to intervene.

But he didn't get a chance to. At least, not in time. Abbas said a single word. It sounded like 'ghenz' and Tayel reeled back as if he had been struck by lightning. Then he went for his gun.

That was obviously my cue. I turned the lights out and tried for Abbas, to get him out of the way. But the guard was in the way and that made me too slow. A woman screamed, and Tayel's gun went off. I saw the flash, but it seemed to be aimed at the ceiling.

It wasn't totally dark since light was coming in from the Hall, and eventually my eyes adjusted. The shot brought another guard and with the hall door open there was plenty of light to see with, and plenty to see.

The two guards had their machine guns pointed at Tayel. That wasn't who they were aiming at, though. Who they were aiming at was Takhti, who was behind Tayel and had Tayel in a half-nelson, with Tayel's arm, the one holding the gun, pointed straight up in the air. Takhti's other hand was under Tayel's other arm, and was holding his dagger at Tayel's throat. No, it wasn't *at* his throat, it was *in* it. A good half inch. Takhti's dagger had shed its fake blade, and a bright-white triangular blade made of ceramic, triggered, doubtless, by some trick mechanism in the handle, had emerged stiletto-style from the handle. Takhti had the tip of that blade in Tayel's neck, touching the artery. A small stream of bright red blood was trickling down the white blade, and onto the carpet. Tayel was helpless in that grip, and could do nothing but shield Takhti from the guards. An Arabian standoff.

There was nothing I could do. I quietly returned to the light switch and turned it on. Wolfe was speaking. Carefully, quietly, he got Tayel to say something through his clenched teeth, then Takhti. Slowly, Wolfe unraveled that tangle. First, on Tayel's command, the guards lowered their weapons. Then one of them came forward, removed the gun from Tayel's hand, and placed it on the floor. Finally Takhti loosened his grip, dropped his dagger, bowed, did what looked like an apology to Tayel, and produced a handkerchief which Tayel pressed against his wound. During the whole thing Abbas hadn't moved. Not even a flinch.

With those machine guns there people had been reluctant to move, so they had stayed in their seats. Tayel, still angry but somewhat subdued, gave an order to the guards. They helped Abbas to his feet, and the guard who had come at the sound of the shot, the one who had hit me, got Takhti's knife and escorted Abbas out of the room. Tayel closed the door to the Hall, made sure it was

locked, then through the other guard told us to stay there in the room. He posted the guard at the outer door and left.

Takhti, who was still standing, turned to Wolfe and spoke in English.

“Gad, you did that skillfully. I did not realize what you had done until it was too late. I commend you, sir.”

Wolfe nodded his head an eighth of an inch: a magnanimous gesture. Takhti spoke to Anna Bathory,

“Ms. Bathory, I must go now and help my dear friend Mr. Abbas out of the trap Mr. Wolfe sprung on him. The poor man did not see it coming. How I thank Mr. Wolfe for not choosing me for his trap! And, in light of the comment my friend made, I think it may still be a little too soon for our country to have that . . . item. We still have some growing to do, I think. My country therefore withdraws its bid.”

“You can’t do that!” Anna. “You have made a pact!”

“No. It is merely a business transaction. And my country has decided not to purchase. Goodbye. I do not wish you luck because I don’t like you.”

Takhti addressed the room,

“Forgive me, I know this is crass, with Mr. Tayel’s death so recent, but someone in this room has done me a great service. My special thanks to him. Bahar, my dear, I am truly grateful you are all right. I am going now to rescue my poor friend and I think it would be wise for you to leave this place. I leave you in the hands of my good friend Archie Goodwin. He can be trusted.”

He looked at me with a smile,

“At least, I *think* he can. Bahar, perhaps you could put in a good word for me to your dear mother? I will go to comfort her as soon as I talk Mr. Abbas out of his predicament.”

Bahar smiled, the first one in what seemed like an eternity. It was refreshing. She didn’t say anything, just nodded yes.

Takhti turned. There was the matter of the guard, who understood English and had caught everything Takhti had said. He was getting ready to belly-poke Takhti as he approached.

But to Takhti he was no bother. In a single swift move he grabbed the barrel of the gun with one hand and the stock with the other and swung the stock against the side of the guard’s head. The guard went down, out for the count. It was amazing, and I had mixed feelings about it. I was upset because he had done it to the wrong guard, but I was damn glad he hadn’t had to do it, or something similar, to me. And I didn’t want to admit it, but it was true—Takhti had been the hero while Wolfe

had me playing silly parlor tricks with the lights. I hated that part.

Takhti turned once more.

“That was a favor for you, Mr. Wolfe, and I will do what I can to delay the authorities from coming here. I do wish *you* good luck. What a game you play! You have lived beyond your reputation; it has been a true honor. *Adieu*. I hope we will meet someday under more favorable circumstances.”

He opened the door and strode from the room.

Thirty-five

Bathory was simmering.

“Well,” she said. “I suppose I have no choice. I accept your bid, Mr. Wolfe.”

It was Wolfe’s turn to be stoic. He said, through half-opened eyes,

“Very well. As I recall, my bid was one dollar.”

“No. Your second bid. Two-hundred and twenty million dollars.”

“No, Madam. That bid was placed by General Carpenter without my approval. As you recall, the military is not to be involved in this, so that bid is not valid. The bid stands at one dollar.”

General Carpenter piped up.

“Just a moment, Wolfe. I placed that bid in good faith.”

“It was not accepted in good faith. Withdraw it.”

Anna looked at Carpenter. Carpenter’s face was a sight. He had orders to get that bomb at any cost, but he had just witnessed what Wolfe could do, and Wolfe’s current tactic was too deep for him. Finally, he said to Bathory,

“I withdraw that bid.”

There were noises coming through the door to the Hall; something was happening in there. Anna cast nervous eyes at the door. She said to Wolfe,

“Talk sense. Or I go now.”

“Where, Madam? To the waiting arms of the hallway guards, or to the Russian agents who are outside these gates?”

Her eyes were big, and her mouth was working. No words were forthcoming. Finally she said,

“And what about you? You are in the same predicament. Even if I accept your one dollar, you can do nothing either.”

“That is where you are wrong, Madam. Like Mr. Takhti, I have means at my disposal to leave this place. You would be wise to accept my bid.”

Wolfe waited. He had her squirming. He was either enjoying it, or just conserving energy. It had been a full two and a half hours since breakfast. But the authorities could come in at any minute. I admit that if she were tied up and thrown to the sharks it wouldn’t bother me any, but having that device running around without a leash didn’t make good sense either.

Finally Wolfe said,

“I will amend my bid. One hundred million dollars. For every minute you hesitate, the offer will decrease by ten million dollars.”

“That is not enough! You have bid two hundred and twenty million. You must pay that!”

“No. You have forty seconds, and the offer will be ninety million dollars.”

Anna was visibly faltering.

“You have a way out?”

“Yes.”

“Past the guards? I do not believe it.”

“That is your prerogative. Accept the bid and find out.”

She wanted to mull it over, but hate was in control and she couldn't do it. Her jaw was working and she looked like she was about to give in, when Wolfe said,

“The offer is now ninety million dollars.”

“No! I accept the one-hundred million!”

“It is too late. The offer will be eighty million in fifty-five seconds.”

She only took five. She was hating it.

“Very well, I accept! Ninety million! Now let us see your great powers.”

“They are not mine, they are Miss Ferdowski's. Miss Ferdowski, if you please?”

Bahar got up and went to the far end of the library, opposite the outer door. The wall had a couple of bookcases on the sides, but there were wooden panels in the middle. One look at the panels and I knew what was there--the size matched the panel to the peephole. This must have been what Bahar wanted to show me in the library, but had never had a chance to.

Bahar got her fingernails under one of the panels and pried. It opened and revealed a dark stone-lined hole.

A secret passage. Those Egyptians sure love their mysteries.

Thirty-six

The hole was really a very steep stone staircase; almost a ladder. It slanted down for about thirty feet and was narrow enough that Wolfe's passage was questionable. No one spoke; there was no need to. Harrington grabbed her bag from behind a plant near one of the bookcases, and produced a flashlight. I had my penlight, and Ty James had one too. Bahar went first and led the way, followed by Gospo and Anna, then the military, the Hitchcocks, and James.

Wolfe was next. He negotiated the steep steps by putting his hands on the shaft opposite them, and did fine, though it was a little slow-going. I held the penlight in my mouth so I could have my hands free to catch him if he fell; a sort of death-wish. I think everyone breathed easier when the shaft darkened as I closed the panel.

The staircase ended in a low and narrow hallway that was about eighty feet long and curved to the left. The air was dank, but not too bad. I judged roughly that we were passing to the East of the huts. We were held up at the end of the hallway as Bahar, and maybe others, did something. I found out what it was they were doing when Wolfe and I got to that spot. There was a block-and-tackle arrangement that had been holding a large slab of marble over the end of the hallway. The pulleys were brass, and the cabling looked like it was braided copper, as it had a green patina to it, and releasing the cables lowered the stone to reveal what was beyond. It was a circular chamber with limestone walls, about twenty feet across. Spaced at four-foot intervals were other stones similar to the one that had been covering the entrance; they looked something like tombstones, but were larger and thicker, and the top wasn't as rounded. Like tombstones, though, they had inscriptions carved in them. The inscriptions appeared to be in Greek. To the left of the entry hole we used was a relatively large hallway that started with more steps leading down.

Once we were through and all in the chamber, James and I pulled the cable, and the slab tilted up. When there was about a one-foot gap between the stone and the wall, it became manageable without the block-and-tackle, and we stuffed the cables into the gap and let the stone settle into place. Very slick. The slab looked just like the rest of the tombstones lining the wall. The flashlights were flicking around, and the shadows on people's faces made things look surreal, or more like a bunch of kids playing at a slumber party in a backyard. Rats would have added to the effect, but I didn't see any.

Wolfe was the first to speak.

"We can talk now. Miss Ferdowsi believes she is the only person who knows of this passage, but that is by no means certain, so we should hurry. We are in one of the necropolises that riddle the

ground in this area. It has been discovered and explored, but I doubt all the tombs were opened, so it seems likely the passage has not revealed itself from this end. It is possible though; the builder of that passage in a fit of humor engraved the stone with the Greek name Odysseus—the builder of the Trojan horse.”

Wolfe continued,

“We may be trapped as well. Things have changed since Miss Ferdowski explored these ruins as a child, and she knows at least one of the exits have been barred by an iron door. We will trust to luck. Ms. Bathory, what means of communication do you have with you? Can you summon a car?”

“I have a telephone, but I do not think it will work in here. Also, I think it can be overheard.”

“But you can have a car meet us somewhere.”

“Yes.”

“How quickly?”

“Within five minutes.”

“Satisfactory. Mr. Goodwin has a telephone that is more secure, I believe. You may use it.”

“I would not trust such a device.”

“Very well, you will have to use your own telephone. We will place our trust in swift movement and, again, luck. If we locate an exit you will be able to use your phone then. Miss Ferdowski?”

Bahar led us out and down the steps. This passage was long as well, and in a couple of spots the stones had crumbled, and someone had installed steel braces to keep the roof intact. We entered another chamber similar to the first, then another, larger one. They were never on the same level, so each hall had stairs up or down. The large chamber had two exits, but there was an iron door blocking one of them. It was similar to the one I had seen on the ground-level entry at the back of the palace grounds. Bahar pointed to it, and said,

“That led to an exit. The other one is blocked by an iron door, too. I’ve seen it from the outside. I don’t know how we can get out, except the way we came.”

I went to the door to see. It was hopeless. The door had a hasp and a padlock, and I might have been able to do something but the door was locked from the other side, so I couldn’t even get at the lock.

“Let’s try the other door,” I said.

Bahar took us through the other hallway to another chamber. This one was rectangular and narrower and had no tombs. It looked more like a receiving area. Steps led up the other side, to the iron door I had seen on the southwest corner of the grounds. Bright light was coming through holes

in the door, which was different from the other: the door had a deadbolt and the lock was built-in. The keyhole didn't show much promise, though.

"I might be able to get it, but it will take some time and tools," I said.

Julie Harrington spoke up. "Let me try."

I stepped aside and she put her tool bag next to the door, opened it, and withdrew a device with two cylinders about eight inches long. It was a cute little mini-welder. She put on some dark glasses and gloves, told us not to look, struck a flame with a button on the side and adjusted it, then melted through the bolt in about ten seconds.

Even then, it took a little while to get the door to move. It was rusted shut, and there were debris under the jamb. But there were bars we could grab, and James, Harrington and I eventually got it to open enough to let us through, once we realized we should be pushing instead of pulling.

We were back in real air. We turned off the lights, and waited in the stairwell while Anna Bathory called for our chauffeur. I took the opportunity to whisper a few words to Bahar.

"Thanks for your help."

"You're welcome."

"So I've been wondering. Why didn't you offer that exit to Mr. Takhti and Mr. Abbas? They are your countrymen. And it appears Mr. Takhti will soon be your father."

"Archie." She put her hand on the hurt side of my face and stroked with her fingers. Softly. "Does it hurt?"

I said not much, which was a lie. She said,

"Mr. Wolfe talked to me in the kitchen. He told me what you were bidding for, but of course I knew it already. I told him that Mr. Abbas knew he would get the bomb because God was on his side. Mr. Wolfe said, oh, how did he say it? It was in English. He said, 'man is never as vile as when he is accoutered by his God'. That is true, isn't it? I gave you the chance because I knew you would destroy the bomb. That's the best, isn't it? Besides, I like you, Archie Goodwin."

I admitted I like her, too, then asked,

"So why did Takhti withdraw his bid?"

"I don't know, but I think it was because of one of the things Mr. Abbas said. When you were there, at the door. He said a man should not hesitate to use his sword in the name of God. That's all. Those kind of things are said a lot by our leaders, so I don't know why it changed Resa's mind, or even if it did."

"I should think it did. One more thing. That word Abbas said, the one that made Tayel draw his

gun. What did it mean?"

"Oh. Oh, I don't know. Unbeliever, blasphemer, coward, um. . ."

"It doesn't translate well?"

"No."

Of course not.

Thirty-seven

There were arrangements to be made. Anna Bathory, who was up a few steps with her phone, pointed to Bahar, and whispered for her to come and tell the driver where to park the car. Wolfe turned to General Carpenter.

“You will stay here, General. I presume the authorities will search the grounds eventually; delay as long as you can, then let them discover you.”

“No. I’m going with you. This is too critical . . .”

“You will stay here. I’m sorry, but you know the conditions. You can do good here, by convincing the authorities they need not come after us.”

“That’s impossible. They’d probably put me in jail.”

“An endurable sacrifice. I, too, have spent time in jail.”

He had been in jail for all of three hours. Sheesh. Wolfe continued,

“Your role here is vital. Any delay you can arrange will be necessary. Please place Mrs. Harrington under my direction.”

The General didn’t like it, but he acquiesced, and told Harrington she was now under Wolfe’s orders.

Wolfe gave the General a few more instructions regarding our personal effects, and all of us gave the General our hut keys, including Bahar, who had finished telling the driver where to wait for us. We had a pretty high-class bellhop, you have to admit. Though frankly I think I would have preferred someone like Muhammad the servant to get my personal stuff and my Marley back to me in good time. Generals just don’t worry the details.

Wolfe then spoke with Elder Hitchcock and James.

“I presume the Israelis will need to be told as quickly as possible that the situation may be tolerable. What are your arrangements?”

James spoke,

“I can call our embassy, and General Carpenter can call the American embassy. Hopefully, both of them together can convince the Israelis there is nothing to worry about.”

“Pfui. There is a great deal to worry about, as you know. If you and Mr. Hitchcock left here now, could you find transportation to Isreal without the knowledge of the Egyptian authorities?”

“You mean, just walk out of here into the city now?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know. I mean, I guess we could. There is a boat that might be able pick us up. It’s

bloody irregular, though. And a bit risky, I should think.”

“We’ve risked as much already. Both of you please take as direct a route as you can to Israel. After you’ve finished reassuring them, arrange for transportation to get Mr. Goodwin, Mrs. Harrington and Miss Hitchcock out of Egypt as quickly as possible. Mr. Goodwin will want to return to his home by the fastest method possible as, I’m sure, the others will as well. Can you do that?”

“What about you?”

“I doubt I will be with them.”

“Why?”

“My destiny lies elsewhere. Can you arrange the transportation? It will need to be surreptitious.”

The General broke in, taking care not to let the enemy overhear.

“We have people standing by to get you out.”

“We will resort to your methods if we must, but I think Mr. Goodwin would prefer having that as an alternate. Mr. James?”

He got an affirmative.

We waited a little while in the sun, then Anna Bathory came and told us the car was coming. She asked Bahar if it would be better to wait at the rendezvous, and Bahar asked Wolfe what he thought.

“Miss Ferdowsi, I fear the going will be somewhat dangerous now, and you will not be able to accompany us. Can you find somewhere to go once we are outside the walls?”

“Yes. I have friends in the city.”

“Satisfactory. We could safely wait in the necropolis, I suppose. Ms. Bathory, how will you know the car is at the rendezvous?”

“I will get a call on the phone.”

“Then you cannot wait in the necropolis, and one exposed is the same as all of us. Miss Ferdowsi, if we proceed to the rendezvous, what are the chances of our being spotted?”

“The biggest problem is just outside the exit. It is the entrance to the Egyptian naval base. There are guards at the gate.”

“Indeed. And how sure is our discovery?”

“Well, there are bushes in front of the exit. They line the wall, all the way to the other corner.”

Bahar pointed to the Southeast corner, and continued,

“I can squeeze behind those bushes, and no one has seen me yet. You might have more trouble.”

“We will have to chance it. And at the rendezvous?”

“I think that is all right. There is a place to wait that is out of the way.”

“Very well. We will go. Ms. Bathory, turn off your phone until we are in a safer place. The rest of you as well, if your phones are on. Mrs. Harrington, what do you know of these portable telephones? Can the Egyptians tell where we are if they are on?”

She said they probably could, within a half-mile or so in the city, and within two to fifty miles in the desert.

“I ask you all to keep them off, then. Ms. Bathory, you will miss the call from your driver, but we should still find him. Let us sally forth.”

Tally ho. Past the noses of the guards, through the woods, and into the strange city. Since this was obviously going to be my last adventure, not counting rotting, or maybe mummifying, in an Egyptian tomb, I decided to make the best of it and keep a positive outlook on life. The trees were lovely, and the birds. The weather was balmy and bright, and I had marvelous company: A genius, a despot, a sick man, and two lovely ladies. See how bright my outlook was? Even Marian Hitchcock looked lovely.

I sprang to my feet and helped the others up the stairs. None of them really needed it except poor old Gospo, who had found it necessary to sit on one of the steps the entire time. I could see him swallowing repeatedly-- his mouth was full of cotton. I didn't really feel sorry for him, since he was probably as evil as his wife, but on the other hand, the brotherhood of mankind demanded that I do him a favor. I am too much the gentleman to describe what he was married to with a single word, but he was married to it, and therefore deserved some consideration. So as I helped him up, I whispered to him,

“Arsenic.”

As clearly as I could. I had no idea what the word for poison was in Serbo-Croat, and any of a number of poisons could have been causing the symptoms he had. But it was certain he had something bad in his system, and I knew where it was coming from, and I guessed that a chemical name like Arsenic might be the same in his language. He didn't respond, so it was probably a dud. Oh, well. At least I could hold my head high the next time the brotherhood took roll call.

We left General Carpenter scowling in the stairwell and proceeded to the door. Bahar produced a neat little key that she must have procured in her childhood, perhaps right off her stepfather's keyring. The door opened easily and Bahar once again took the lead with me at the rear. As I closed the door and let it latch, I looked at the bushes. They were really a hedge, and were not that bad. There was a nice space, ranging from one to three feet wide, behind them and the bushes

themselves were fairly thick. I caught a glimpse of the gate to the naval base as I left, and it was a good forty feet to our right. I could see the water of the harbor straight ahead about a hundred feet. Between us and the water was the roadway, with a little traffic, and then the quay.

The biggest problem was that someone might notice the hedge shaking as Wolfe brushed through the bushes, and he did plenty of brushing. The rest of us flattened with our backs against the wall and negotiated the bushes sideways, but with Wolfe sideways didn't make any difference so he just used his cane as best he could to get the major branches out of the way, and plunged through.

We made it to the far corner, and stopped, still against the wall. I wanted to reconnoiter, but there wasn't an opening where I was. Bahar was doing something, and we waited while she slid back through the bushes to talk to us.

"We need to cross the highway. There are some buildings across the street, and an alley between two of them. I will tell you one-by-one when it is safe to cross, then you go to the alley. That is how I do it."

Wolfe nodded, and she slid back to the front.

It took a little while to get everyone across the street, as Bahar was waiting for the traffic to clear. There were people working at the quay but at that point, when I could finally see something, I noticed that the buildings Bahar had mentioned were partially blocking the view from the harbor.

Wolfe took the longest, as Bahar had to make absolutely sure nothing was coming. That yellow outfit would have made a good target: good enough that the APB on us probably mentioned the fact that we had a fat man in yellow with us. But luck was still with us, and we all made it across the street. Bahar and I crossed together; we made a nice couple. I wanted to veer a little to the left and look up the wall to the palace entrance, but they would have been too risky so I resisted it.

The alley was far enough from traffic that it looked like most of the danger had passed. Bahar led us as a group to the southeast, down a very narrow road lined with apartments. Interesting, and sometimes offensive smells were coming from some of the open windows. Dinner was being prepared. We passed women, completely covered in shiny embroidered coverings with scarves, but they seemed to take no notice of us.

The road led further away from the quay, and we eventually emerged at the side of a good-sized mausoleum. I knew it was a mausoleum because it appeared the smaller one on the palace grounds had been modeled after it. The street we were on was narrow, but I could hear the traffic of the larger highway passing to the other side of the building.

The car was there, parked in, and pretty much blocking, the small roadway. Another car had to

pop up on a building's first entry step to get past it. The driver, who looked Egyptian, got out and exchanged words with Anna Bathory in English. From her attitude toward him, I got the impression that he had little idea as to what was going on; he was just a hired hand. She just told him to get in, they were in a hurry. Then she got in herself.

Wolfe bid Mr. Hitchcock and Ty James goodbye. Bahar started to tell them the best way to get a taxi, but James said he knew the city and would be all right. Marian Hitchcock told her father to be careful and gave him a kiss on the cheek. They continued down the roadway, and disappeared around the mausoleum.

Wolfe turned to Bahar.

"You have behaved admirably under trial, Miss Ferdowsi. We thank you. We must part now."

"Yes. And thank you for your help, Uncle Nero."

She reached up and gave Wolfe a kiss on the cheek. He took it all right. She turned to me.

"Archie. Thank you too. Please call me at the University."

I told her I would the first chance I got. I didn't tell her it would probably be in twenty years, after I'd served my time for spying in Egypt. I said,

"Goodbye, Scheherazade. Your stories were spectacular."

I got my kiss, and it was worth the wait. We separated before it got too embarrassing for the others, and she started to leave with a wave.

I said,

"Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"Don't worry, Archie. I know Alexandria."

There was another understatement. We all watched as she disappeared around the mausoleum.

Thirty-Eight

In New York City there are always sirens going somewhere, so you tend to ignore them. But I heard the ones coming from the direction of the palace just before I got into the car. It was a good bet they were wailing just for us, so we had to get a move on. But someone was missing. I hadn't noticed he had left, but Anna did, which was a mild surprise to me. She had been completely ignoring him. Gospo Stritar was not there.

He had definitely been in the group when we arrived at the mausoleum, so he had deliberately left. My message had registered after all, and he had run for his life. It would be tough going for him in Alexandria since he only spoke Serbo-Croat, but if he made it to a hospital his symptoms would speak for themselves.

Anna, perturbed, got out of the car and retraced a few steps, but didn't spend long looking before she returned. She said,

"I will look for him later. He does not know where we are going, so it doesn't matter if he is captured."

What a wife.

We took the side streets at Anna's direction to the driver. It was a little slow going, but once we rounded the harbor and started heading west, things went better. The big problem was space. The car was large compared to the others I'd seen going to-and-fro, but it was really only medium sized. Wolfe, Marian and I were in the back with me in the middle, and Harrington and Bathory were up front with the driver. It was a tight squeeze on our seat; Wolfe was oversized and Marian seemed a little frosty.

The city finally thinned into an industrial area, where we had no choice but to follow the lone highway that more or less followed the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Eventually even the factories thinned and we had desert and sheep on the left and clusters of homes and occasional villages on the right. Our luck was holding, as we had apparently left the city before the police could watch the exits.

Wolfe was doing fine. His jaw was set and I could tell he was resolute, but he didn't complain or close his eyes, even when we passed within six inches of a bus coming the other way.

About twenty miles outside Alexandria the road curved to within fifty yards of the Sea, and Bathory told the driver to turn right onto a dirt road. It led to a lone white adobe-looking house that was built on a rise overlooking the sea. It was much fancier and bigger than the dwellings we had passed on the way. At a lower level was a matching garage, and we stopped there. We took

Harrington's tools from the trunk and entered the garage from a side door. Bathory paid the driver in American dollars and he left, with the car.

The garage was lit by a single light bulb, and the truck was in there, guarded by a couple of men sitting in the front seat. Looking at it, I had the distinct impression we were back in World War II again. It was an old military surplus hulk that had been painted khaki and rust with a canvas covering on the back and extra fuel tanks strapped to the side.

Neither of the men in the truck looked like terrorists. One was bald, in his fifties and looked like somebody's father. He smiled at us. The other was a college student majoring in looking serious. He had curly dark hair and wire-rimmed glasses. Anna spoke with them both in something other than English, then we all were invited into the back of the truck. The bed was up high, but Wolfe managed without too much trouble by stepping onto the bumper first. The truck had a bench on each side with an old headlight lighting things, and the bomb was in the middle.

I really didn't know what to expect. Do you know what one of those things looks like? But there it was, and I didn't expect it to look like that.

For one thing, it was smaller than I expected, a cylinder about three feet in diameter and sixteen inches high. It had the shape of a giant tuna fish can, with a couple of brackets on the top for attachment. And the case was shiny and clean. It had some Russian words stenciled on it, instructions on how to push the button and not get killed in the process I suppose, but there was nothing else to show what it was. The top had a single circular electrical connector near the edge, and the cable connected to it went to a plastic box about six inches square attached to the top. The box was obviously not part of the original bomb itself, but was some sort of homemade controller. On the side the plastic box had one of those dark red plastic windows you see on TV's that have remote control, and next to it was pasted a yellow sticky-note with a few Russian characters handwritten on it with a felt-tipped pen.

Like I said, I didn't know what to expect, but it seemed it should at least have had some slogan regarding capitalist pigs scrawled on it. The end of the cold war sure made things boring.

But I didn't feel that way, not really. The thing that was really bothering me was that it looked too clean; too clinical. Once, in one of her drives to culture me, Lily Rowan had taken me to an exhibition on the bombing of Hiroshima that included plenty of pictures of the aftermath. Those things make me very uncomfortable, which I guess is what they're designed to do. But there should at least be some rule that whenever one of these bombs is made, the case should be etched with pictures like those, just so people know exactly what they're dealing with when they look at it.

The two men had accompanied us into the back, so it was a full house. Anna stood at the cab end, with the headlight shining down over her shoulder. Harrington, Marian Hitchcock and Wolfe were sitting on her left and the two men were on her right. I was still standing, and bent over to ask Wolfe what the sticky-note said.

“BpemeHA”

It sounded like ‘Vrrremya’. I waited. He knew that wasn’t what I wanted.

“It means ‘on’. Armed.”

The thing was live, and it didn’t take a nuclear scientist to figure out what that red window was for. Bathory could set that thing off any time she wanted to. I sat next to Wolfe.

A discussion ensued, I think in Russian, between Bathory and the older man. There was a bit of softness, maybe even affection, in both of their voices. This may have been one of the ones she had decided to use her charms on. She turned to Wolfe,

“I warn you now. There is a timer in the bomb, so if we do not proceed quickly we will be killed. I can also trigger it with this device.”

She held up a gizmo that was literally a TV remote control. It must have been adapted to set off the bomb, and to enter some sort of code to disarm it. Bathory continued,

“You have seen the bomb. The agreement is for an initial payment. We will set up to do it now.”

“The agreement was for a payment when the bomb’s authenticity is verified by Mrs. Harrington.”

“We wish a payment now. Surely you can see it is authentic.”

Wolfe said,

“I will not haggle with you. This is not a tug-of-war. We will pay ten million dollars now, and twenty more when Mrs. Harrington has examined it. We will pay the balance after she has rendered it useless.”

She sighed as if it were a huge concession and said okay.

She spoke to the student, who took a bag from under the seat and pulled a computer from it. Marian took that as her lead and set up her own on her lap.

What followed was a little technical. In about five minutes, Marian said,

“I’m connected. Give me your account details and I will transfer a dollar into your account to make sure everything is working.”

That was nice in principle, but the student was having trouble with his connection. He tried this and that, even powering down and back up, then turning it off and back on. Neither technique worked. The computer just wouldn’t cooperate. Bathory was getting impatient.

Marian said,

“Let me try. I might be able to do something.”

But that wouldn't sit with Bathory; she didn't trust us.

She told the operator something, probably giving him an ultimatum, then sat and tried to look patient. That lasted for exactly seven minutes and ten seconds by my watch before she started a tirade in still another language, the kind sailors speak. They weren't English swear words, but there was no doubting what they were. The student's ears were turning red. She ended by pulling a canvas bag from under the seat on Harrington's side, unzipping it, and producing a .38 caliber revolver.

The Russian tried to intervene, but she wouldn't have it and pointed the gun at the student's head. I thought that was pretty stupid. For one thing, if she was going to threaten, she should have threatened the damn computer. For another, if she shot the guy then where would she be?

The Russian tried to talk sense to her and some of it got through. She lowered the gun, raised the remote control, and pointed it at the bomb. Great. One form of insanity replaced by another. Two minutes passed, with the student still trying everything he could think of. Finally, Marian muttered under her breath,

“So this is the way the world ends; not with a whimper, but a glitch.”

Then she said aloud,

“Let me try. I will tell you exactly what I'm doing every step. Your man can watch me. If I do anything wrong, you may have my permission to shoot.”

There was that stuffy royal tone again. But Bathory took her up on it. Marian stepped to the other side, took the computer and began to type, explaining what she was doing as she went. She mentioned all kinds of technical gobbledegook: IP addresses, gateways, display formats, etc. etc. Bathory and the student were watching her like a hawk, but she had them going. They were nodding and commenting, and the student was answering questions, mostly in English, but some through Bathory. When the connection finally got through, they almost cheered.

But they still didn't trust Marian. At Bathory's instruction the student turned it all off again and did it himself, this time with only a tip or two from Marian. He was finally satisfied that he was really looking at the right thing.

Marian returned to her computer and transferred that pesky dollar, and the student acknowledged with a smile that he had received it in Bathory's account. We were go.

Wolfe told Marian to transfer \$9,999,999.00, since one dollar had already been paid. He was

always precise when it came to expenses. She did it, and it registered on the other machine. I was thinking it sure was a big gob of dough to fit down wires, and especially to trust to just a couple of people. I'm sure arrangements had been made in advance to allow those kind of sizeable transfers, and I wondered who was monitoring all this back at the State Department, and who was trying to home in on the computer signals. I suggested they turn off their machines until it was time for the next transfer, and they did.

Once the first transfer had been verified, Wolfe nodded to Harrington and she went into action. She started by talking, in Russian, to the older man. He produced an old leather briefcase from the cab of the truck, and in it were the blueprints to the bomb. They examined them together and began discussing how to go about verifying it, always in Russian. The man, who obviously really was a nuclear scientist, was delighted to show off the design and speak in Russian. Then Harrington took a tape measure from her bag and began making marks on the bomb casing while referring to the blueprints. When she had made about a dozen marks here and there on the bomb, she got the man's approval and took what looked like a hand drill out of her bag, and a thin drill bit that had to have been a foot-and-a-half long. She fired up the drill and began drilling into that thing while it was still live, really putting her weight behind it.

The drill was very high speed, and sounded like a dentist drill. It made me feel damned uncomfortable. The soles of my feet were telling me they didn't like the fact that the bomb was still live, and my teeth were telling me they didn't like the sound of things. Not only that, the bomb had started emitting invisible radioactive rays that were affecting my calves. I could feel them weakening as Harrington continued drilling. She was collecting samples, or specimens from the bomb. For each hole she would put a piece of tape on the drill to gauge the depth, then drill in, and collect material from the bit when she pulled it out. Then she set up a small electronic instrument and put the samples, which she had placed on paper disks, one-by-one into the machine and recorded the readings.

She did this about a dozen times. Then she drilled some larger holes in the top of the bomb, and put some sort of a viewing device into the holes and looked at the inner workings through eyepieces.

She sure was thorough. After two hours of working she finally packed her tools back up and told Wolfe,

"I have verified that that device is a working hydrogen bomb with all necessary parts in apparently good working order. All fuel is in place and intact. I cannot tell if it is armed, but there is no reason to suspect it isn't. I have not disabled it, so it is probably still very dangerous. I know nothing about

the box on top.”

“Thank you,” Wolfe said. “An adequate effort.”

Hum. The least he could have done was give her a satisfactory.

Wolfe told Marian to transfer another twenty million dollars.

“No.” It was Bathory. “You are to transfer the entire amount. Two hundred and ten million dollars.”

“That was not the amount agreed upon, or the terms of exchange.”

“You tricked me. I do not have to pay for your tricks. You will pay two hundred and twenty million dollars total, or you will leave now.”

She had the gun, and to convince us it was there, she waved it a little.

“Madam, you know very well the authorities are closing. Who will arrive first? The Russians? The Egyptians? Or the Americans?”

She was not impressed. She’d fallen for that one once before. She just said,

“The Egyptians are still at the palace. I doubt there are any Russians, and your American Marines, who have a General Carter with them, are over two hundred kilometers away from here right now. If you do not transfer the money I will shoot you.”

“Then do so, so that the others may get on with it.”

She thought she was going to shoot him, but then turned her eyes on me.

“I won’t shoot you, I’ll shoot Mr. Goodwin.”

“Mr. Goodwin has been shot at before. Those who lived still rue the day they did it. If you shoot Mr. Goodwin, you’ll never rest from this day. I’ll track you to the ends of the earth. There is not a person alive who has ever escaped me. ”

“If you’re alive.”

“Even if I’m not.”

Wolfe then launched into Serbo-Croat. And Bathory didn’t like what he was saying. Then I heard the name Tarkolo, and she reacted. She literally spat on him. A big spray of spittle. I could see what was coming, so I had scooted closer to Wolfe. Just as Bathory raised her gun to shoot Wolfe, I reached around him, grabbed Marian’s computer and sidearmed it at her gun hand. Then I dove around that bomb to try to get the gun.

The gun had gone off, but I couldn’t worry about that. When I rounded the bomb I saw that the computer had knocked the gun from her hand and the gun was now in the far corner. The Russian was going for it.

I beat him to it. I raised the gun to her face and told her and the Russian to sit down. Then I checked Wolfe. He was unscathed. But Marian was on the floor, looking at her computer.

“You got the hard drive, Goodwin. Why did it have to be the hard drive?”

Her tone definitely implied that I had been the one who had shot the gun, and that I’d done it just to spite her.

“I’ve got to stop throwing things,” I mumbled to myself, and told Marian,

“I’ll buy you a new one. The latest model.”

That didn’t help much.

Thirty-nine

Anna Bathory was furious in defeat. With Marian's computer gone, there was no way to transfer any funds. With the gun in my hand, there was nothing she could do about it. But she still had the detonator and was holding it toward the bomb.

"Drop the gun or I will push the button. I have nothing to lose."

Wolfe said,

"Pfui. Detonate that device here? And kill a thousand sheep? Surely you fancy a higher reward for the sacrifice of your life. Archie, take that from her."

I didn't like it but I did it. I stepped to her. Instead of going for the device and bobbling it, I transferred the gun to my left hand and grabbed her wrist, with my fingers pressing the tendons. That grip, done hard enough, makes you lose control of your fingers. You can't contract them. Try it yourself if you don't believe me, but don't sue me for the bruises you'll get. Her limp hand dropped the device, and I picked it up.

Wolfe said,

"Mrs. Harrington, can you disarm that monstrosity?"

"I do not know the details of the box on top, but I think I can anyway."

"Then do so."

She went to the Russian's side and picked up the blueprints, then she started really scrutinizing them. Anna Bathory was rubbing her wrist and throwing daggers with her eyes at Wolfe and me. Pretty little jeweled daggers with wicked-looking white blades. But she wasn't done. After Harrington had looked at the diagrams for a full eight minutes, Bathory said,

"That timer will go off in three minutes, and I have the only code. Give me back the gun and the control, and I will reset it. Otherwise, you'll be killed."

Harrington ignored her. Harrington stepped to the bomb, unscrewed a ring around the connector, and simply pulled it loose. Bathory's head and shoulders deflated. Harrington said,

"The bomb is no longer active now, but it is not destroyed. That will take some time."

Wolfe gave her that satisfactory, then said to Bathory,

"Madam, you and your men will leave now. Our transaction is finished."

"It is not! You still owe two hundred and ten million dollars!"

"Pfui. Good day."

"Eighty million, then! It is only right!"

She sure wasn't giving up. And she was a great one to appeal to Wolfe's sense of fairness.

“Madam, I deplore violence, as you know. You are therefore lucky you are dealing with me, or you would be no more. Go.”

“But you owe me money.”

“Pfui. You destroyed the means of payment with your shenanigans.”

“She can use our computer.”

“Not possible. You have your life and ten million dollars. Count yourself lucky.”

“But it’s not just me, I have others I must answer to. Use our computer.”

She was losing all her dignity. It wasn’t pretty, and neither was she. The Russian said something to her, and got up. He motioned for the student to put his computer away, and the student packed it up and headed for the exit with the Russian. I motioned to them with the gun to stay put. I had no idea what other guns were around, and didn’t want them fetching one behind my back.

Their moving still didn’t budge her. She kept arguing, but Wolfe ignored her. I could tell he was about to tell me to boot her out when Bathory said,

“I will go, but you have not heard the last of me, Nero Wolfe. No, my dear Nero, you have not heard the last! You said you would hunt me, but I will be the hunter!”

There was a note of mockery in her voice; almost of triumph. I think it was just bravado. She left the truck with her men and I followed. The back of the garage was only about thirty feet from the Sea, and there at a small dock was moored a speedboat. A nice one, about twenty-five feet long. They got in, started the engine and sped off. It didn’t take them more than three minutes, and I had Bathory’s gun on them the whole time.

When they were a safe distance out, I rejoined Wolfe in the truck.

“They’re gone. Good riddance.”

“Indeed. Confound that woman, we need to take stock of our situation. Where are we?”

“On the shore of the Mediterranean. About twenty miles West of Alexandria.”

“Was what that woman said about the Marines correct?”

Harrington spoke up.

“It may have been a couple of hours ago, but it probably isn’t now. They are headed here as fast as they can come.”

“Why do you say that? Do they know where we are?”

“Yes. I took the liberty of transmitting our position to them when I took the tools out of my case.”

“How did you do that?”

She pulled a device out of her case.

“With this box. It has a satellite receiver and transmitter. By pushing this button I transmitted our position. They will be able to dispose of the bomb when they arrive.”

“Have you other communication devices as well?”

“Just a cell phone like Archie has.”

“Please let Mr. Goodwin see your phone and that box.”

She took out her phone and handed them to me. When I had them Wolfe said,

“Mr. Goodwin, take those outside and throw them into the sea.”

Harrington broke in, surprised,

“But why?”

“You are under my orders, are you not?”

“Well, yes, but . . .”

“I did not order you to summon your army. Mr. Goodwin, if you please?”

He was serious. So I took them outside and chucked them as far as I could, right at Bathory’s boat, which was just a dot on the horizon. They went far enough that the surf, small as it was, masked the plops. My resolution to stop throwing things hadn’t lasted as long as I had hoped. I returned. They apparently hadn’t conversed. Harrington was looking a little angry, a little puzzled, and a little chagrined all in one.

Wolfe said,

“We can’t stay here. Archie, is this truck drivable?”

“I don’t know. I’ll look.”

I looked. The tanks were full up, and there was even diesel fuel in the spare cans. But there were no keys.

“We have plenty of gas. I think it was all gassed up because they expected the Iranians. But they forgot to leave the keys. I might be able to hotwire it, but I wasn’t a teenager during World War II, so it may take a while.

Harrington said,

“Let me try. Maybe I can make amends for what I’ve done.”

She was sure a trooper.

Forty

She made quick work of it. No more than five minutes, and it was started and running. She must have grown up in Jersey. I opened the garage door and we had a quick powwow. I said,

“I expect this place has an owner, and that he has been paid to keep out of the way with his eyes closed. Do we just drive out?”

“Yes. Confound it, we don’t have time, but we must put this thing in a safe place. Archie, take us to Cairo, by the back roads please.”

“Back roads? You presume too much. I might be able to do that in Westchester County, but I don’t even know the front roads here. You’re presuming I can drive this thing as well, and I’m not sure of that either. Oh, and I’m not licensed in this area, though I admit that’s a minor detail. It would probably only add six months to the forty years I’ll get for carting this bomb around.”

Marian broke in.

“I know the roads here, at least as they appear on a map. I’ll ride with Goodwin. I’ll learn how to drive this too, if he doesn’t want to.”

Annie Oakley. I didn’t react, but just said let’s go. Wolfe told Harrington she would have to work on the bomb as we drove, which made me a little nervous but didn’t phase her, and he and Harrington stayed in back. Marian and I climbed into the seat, and I managed to back the truck out after trying three gears.

Marian told me to turn right, away from Alexandria.

“We will try highway at Al-Alamain. The main highway to Cairo has a toll booth halfway, and they would certainly notice us there.”

We went another five miles along that highway that followed the seashore, then turned left onto the highway Marian had mentioned.

It was paved, and it had some traffic in the form of trucks and buses, but it only moved as fast as the slowest thing going our way, which for us was a truck loaded with what looked like hemp of some sort. Other vehicles were passing the hemp truck and us, but I still wasn’t comfortable enough with that gear stick to try it myself. So I followed the thing for ten miles before it stopped and let us pass.

We were in the desert, with some mountains ahead of us. The desert sunset is beautiful with its red hues reflecting off the sand, and the scruffy little plants, far and few between, struggling for survival in the sand, and the highway, wending it’s way through the sand. And the sand, too.

I was getting thirsty, and was already hungry. The road wasn’t getting any better and there was

no oasis in sight. We were in a place where the road cut through hills of, well, sand, and the going got a little rough. I found a place to pull off and went to talk with Wolfe.

“We’re on a back road all right, since we haven’t passed a deli for at least a mile. I’m getting thirsty, so you must be dried up. You want I should stop at the next truck stop, in maybe, like the next two hundred miles?”

“I’m thirsty and hungry too, but we have no time to stop. I wish I knew of a closer place to go, confound it. Give me your telephone. I’m going to have to risk making some calls.”

I turned on my telephone and gave it to him. Harrington could help him with it, and we went on our way again.

The road started descending, and getting bumpier. And in one place it was all torn up, with signs showing construction work. Road construction must work the same way in Egypt as it does in New York: tear it up, put up barriers, then abandon it. There weren’t any workers that I could see.

Those bumps were bothering me. My head was telling me that the bomb was safe enough, but my seat was telling me that another bump like the last one and we start raising our own dust, in the shape of a mushroom. My empty gut was caught between the two and it had decided to twist into knots. Maybe you’ve seen the movie where the guy gets dragged under the truck in Egypt. Well, it was the right truck, but obviously not the right road, or the right guy. The road was too bumpy and the guy was too scared.

We passed through a real desert, complete with sand and nothing else. Eventually the road ended and we turned left onto a somewhat larger one. We finally crested a rise, and I saw a marvelous sight. Straight ahead were the lights of Cairo, and to the right were the waters of the Nile. The road curved toward Cairo and descended into the valley. Several miles away, I could see some pyramids. Maybe the Sphinx was there, too. And there were a lot more signs of life. Farms and towns and signs to tourist attractions. We passed a couple of places where we could have gassed ourselves up, but I kept going. It was probably only a matter of time, though, until we caught a roadblock with black-garbed guards looking for us.

When we were close enough to Cairo that I could definitely make out the Sphinx’s shape, there was a rapping on the window in back of me. Wolfe’s cane. I pulled off as far as I could, which wasn’t far enough, got out and went around. Marian, who was probably as saddle-sore as I was, came around as well.

“I have Farshad Mokhtarian on the phone. He wishes to give us some directions. He speaks no English, so I will translate. Where are we?”

Um, Egypt, I think. But Marian knew, and gave our location to Farshad through Wolfe.

I had heard the name Farshad before. Every year, just after February, a letter comes from Egypt for Wolfe: an accounting of matters concerning the house he owns. As long as I can remember Farshad Mokhtarian was the person who sent it.

What followed was complicated. I pulled my notebook and wrote it down. There were six turns and other details. Whoever Wolfe's friend was, he was trying his best to make the instructions easy, but the street names sounded like a cross between Egyptian, Spanish and something else, and I wasn't too sure I'd got them right. Besides, the signs would probably be in something I couldn't read.

But Marian said she recognized three of the streets, and we could probably figure out the rest. Wolfe then spoke some more, and hung up. I took the phone and turned it off. Wolfe said,

"He will be waiting for us. In a white car. He will blink his headlights. Stop when you see him."

So on we went. Three miles further, and Marian, whom I'd given my notebook to, had me turn right, onto a narrow street.

I won't detail that little trip, because I honestly don't know how we made it through those streets. I just remember farms, then rows of apartment buildings that all seemed to have their top floors vacant, lots of little cars and scooters and bicycles that treated you like you were stationary, and turns I had to back up and take another crack at to get through.

Once, the apartments stopped and some of the dwellings were dark, old and different.

"We are passing through the City of the Dead," Marian said.

"A cemetery?"

"Yes. Very old."

We made it through without adding to the number of mummies, and eventually reached a small opening that looked like it might be a marketplace during the day. It was our destination according to the directions I'd taken, so we stopped in front of a small shop displaying what looked like curtains.

A white car came from the other side of the plaza, flashed its lights, and stopped in front of us. The driver, who I presume was Farshad, got out and motioned to us, then he took a round basket from the car.

I got out and went around to the back to help Wolfe out. He was stiff, and almost toppled on the way down, but we made it. Farshad had come around, and when he saw Wolfe he made an exclamation of delight and shook Wolfe's hand furiously. Wolfe seemed genuinely pleased to see the

man, and they talked at length. By then my ears had tuned the tones of the languages Wolfe was using, and they didn't seem to be speaking in Arabic like Saad Tayel did, but instead in Farsi, like Takhti and Bahar used.

But that was okay. He had food and drink in the basket in the form of some of that flat bread and cheese, and fruit and even a couple of bottles of red wine, which must have been a little hard to come by. He passed glasses around and poured for us, and motioned for us to get into his car.

The car was smaller than the last one we'd been in, so three of us in the back wouldn't work. In fact, I told Wolfe he would have to have the back seat all to himself. Wolfe said that was all right, Marian and I would need to follow Farshad in the truck.

So we ate, Wolfe's yellow outfit hidden in the back seat of that little car, Harrington in the front passenger seat, and Marian and I serving ourselves from the hood. The food tasted good. It was dark and fairly quiet. There were people and traffic, but there wasn't much of either and we didn't attract a lot of attention even though I didn't know whether eating on the street like that was kosher in Egypt. Ooh. Poor word choice again. Nothing is kosher in Egypt.

Forty-one

The food tasted so good that Marian became a little jocular, letting her hair down and even cracking a joke about sheep. And the rest of us were jocular enough that we laughed at it; even the corner of Wolfe's mouth went up and eighth of an inch.

We were all anxious to move on so before too long we started packing the basket into the car's trunk.

I got in the back of the truck and turned on the light just to make sure everything was okay. Julie Harrington had really done a number on that bomb. It was still basically the same shape, but the top had been removed, and there was a good-sized pile of smashed-up parts swept into the corner of the bed. That bomb wasn't a threat, but it was still a mystery as to why it was so important to Wolfe that it be in a safe place, unknown to our military. Maybe he had struck a deal with someone to sell the parts himself.

We followed Farshad, and he took it easy on me, waiting patiently for me to negotiate some of the more difficult spots. It didn't take too long, maybe about a half-hour, and he pulled in front of a white block wall, and got out. Farther down the wall was a gate, and he used a key and opened it. He then motioned for me.

That was a job, there in that narrow street. I had to jockey back and forth four times, and then only cleared the edges of the gate by inches. But we got it in. There was a gravel drive, then a small garage made of the same blocks as the wall. The truck obviously would not fit into the garage but there was enough space in front of it to park the truck and still close the gate.

When it was closed, with all of us inside, I breathed easier. We had made it to Wolfe's house, the Egyptian one.

We were behind the house, but it looked nice from there. There were two floors, offset on a hill, both with balconies. The construction was generally white brick, but there were lots of red tiles and a couple of wooden beams as well. Wolfe surveyed the dwelling and, though he didn't show it much, I could tell he was pleased.

A woman in her fifties, about Farshad's age, joined us, and gestured a welcome. She was his wife. We started in, but Harrington spoke up,

"I'll stay here with the truck."

Wolfe said,

"No. It is safe enough there. Come in. You will insult the Mokhtarians if you stay out here."

"I'm sorry, I have to stay with the truck."

“You are under my orders. Come.”

“No. My orders were to destroy that bomb. The fuel is still there. I have to stay here with the truck. Please don’t make it difficult.”

Wolfe said very well and the rest of us went inside, through a hall past the kitchen into what must have been the living room. It had tapestries and pictures on the brick walls, and many rugs draped on the floor and sofas and chairs.

In the middle of the room a feast was laid for us. Dishes of everything imaginable, and a couple of unimaginable ones. And there were people, too. I learned later that they were Farshad’s children and grandchildren, about eight in all. Wolfe told me that they did not live there, but were summoned to honor our visit. He spoke with Farshad when he saw them, and Farshad was obviously trying to reassure Wolfe that they wouldn’t tell anyone we had been there.

We ate some more, sitting on the floor, and Wolfe tolerated the crowd, but he was anxious to leave. Farshad insisted Wolfe and the rest of us tour the house and grounds, so we did that. He had obviously treated the place with care and respect. The house was well-furnished and the yard, though not lush with vegetation, had some nice palm and date trees, and other decorative fauna.

Upstairs, we were shown the master bedroom. And the master bedroom. Yep, there were two of them. One of the women at the party, whom I had assumed was a daughter in her thirties, turned out to be Farshad’s second wife. Wolfe pointed out that having two wives was legal under Islamic law, and a sign of status. To me, though, it seemed a great sign of insanity.

The upper balcony was off the first wife’s bedroom. It had a marvelous view of the city: the great pyramids and sphinx to the left, and the city main to the right. It made me wish I were back in my own city.

We finally returned downstairs and ate enough more to be polite, then broke free from the party before it was polite and went back to the truck and Harrington. Wolfe thanked Farshad and his wives, and they left us. Farshad gave Wolfe the keys to his car.

“We have permission to use Mr. Mokhtarian’s car. We will drive a safe distance from this place, and then try to telephone General Carpenter. Mrs. Harrington, I ask you to reconsider. Will you come with us?”

“No. I can’t. I’m staying here.”

“Madam, you do not know everything concerning our situation. It is my judgment that our country would be better served if you came.”

“I’m sorry. It would be a serious breach of security to leave this unattended. And I would like to

have Archie's gun."

"No. If you stay, it will be without weapon and without communications."

"I'm still staying."

"Very well. Good Evening. Despite your stubbornness in this matter your efforts have been most satisfactory."

Wolfe made arrangements with Farshad for Harrington's comfort, and probably told him not to let her use the phone. We bid the family and Harrington farewell. It was down to three of us now. Marian, Wolfe and me. It would have been nice to have Harrington along, but frankly Wolfe used up the entire back seat, so I don't know where we would have fit her.

Wolfe told me to go back the way we came. I had looked for landmarks on the way in, something I would recognize by the headlights if I had to retrace our route: a sort of Hansel and Gretel, but not as crumby. I made it without too much help from Marian. Driving that little car through those narrow streets was a dream compared to the truck.

At length Wolfe told me to stop and get General Carpenter. We had made it back to the farms, and even though there was no such thing as a farmyard it still wasn't too hard to find a place to pull over. I didn't get Carpenter, though. As soon as I turned on the phone it rang, so I answered it.

It was a female with a raspy voice at the state department, who told me to hold. Eventually a voice came on.

"Wolfe?"

"No, Goodwin. Wolfe is here." It was our friend General Carter.

"Put Wolfe on."

"No. I have instructions to telephone General Carpenter, so I'm hanging up on you."

"No! Don't do that! Isn't General Carpenter with you?"

I covered the mouthpiece and spoke to Wolfe.

"General Carter. He's asking where General Carpenter is."

Wolfe made a face.

"Tell him where the General is, and report the results of our transaction. Do not divulge our location or that of the truck."

I told him where the General was and what he was supposed to be doing. He said he hadn't heard from any of us, except Ty James and Geoffrey Hitchcock, who were in Israel, and they had told him damn little. He asked,

"Did you get that bomb?"

“Yes. It has been destroyed.”

“Where are you? We flew in to where you transmitted your location, but there was no one there. The house was empty. I tell you Goodwin, this is damned stupid. We’re camped out in the middle of the desert waiting to pick up what’s left of that bomb. Why did you move it, and where are you?”

I decided it was time for Wolfe to talk and tried to give him the phone, but he said,

“No. I will not speak to that baboon. Arrange a rendezvous.”

“Mr. Wolfe is unable to come to the phone right now.” That was true. Crammed into the back seat like that, the phone would have to go to the mountain. I continued, “Do you have a way to get us out of here?”

“Yes. But it would be inadvisable for us to go inland very far.”

“Okay. Here’s what you do. The road from Al-Alamain to Cairo takes a sharp left just before it goes through those hills, or mountains. About thirty miles inland. We’re coming to you on that road and at that turn we will get off the road and follow the hills west. Look for us there.”

“Just use Harrington’s transmitter when you get there.”

“We can’t. It got wet and doesn’t work now. Just look for us at the base of those hills, west of the road. We’ll be there in about two hours.”

Two hours was cutting it close, especially if we got behind something slow. But I was as anxious to get out of there as Wolfe was.

“Two hours? Where are you?”

“Never mind. Just be there.” I hung up and turned off the phone.

It was really more like two-and-a-half hours, even though I stepped on it and we didn’t run into any real obstacles besides the roadwork. After we got through the hills and to that turn, I stopped the engine and listened. There wasn’t any traffic coming that I could hear or see, so I started the car and tried to find a break in the fence to our left. There was a small road that skirted the hills, near a power line, and there was a gate in the fence, made of welded pipes. The gate might have been a problem, but the wire fence next to it had been damaged by others trying to do the same thing we were, and we had no trouble passing through. Once through, Wolfe told me to stop and remove the license plates from the car, and anything else that would allow the General to trace it to its home. Marian had a nice little screwdriver set in her bag which we used to remove the plates. We took them and the registration, and hid them under a rock near the gate.

We went a good five miles in before I decided we must have passed them. I pulled the phone but found it didn’t work where we were, so doubled back and began looking more closely. The sand

road was bumpy and Wolfe was grim, but he took it like a Bedouin; sitting there with his lips clamped shut. There was a moon and about three miles back, to my left, I saw a shadow that looked unnatural. I turned off the road and approached it.

It was the Marines. They had covered a helicopter with a large tarp and were waiting in the dark for us. And they had a couple of guns trained on us, I suppose because they were expecting a truck and not a little white car. I opened my window and yelled,

“Don’t shoot! We’re Americans!” I hoped Marian didn’t mind the insult.

It was Johnson, the Marine who was on the plane. He came and shined the flashlight in my eyes.

“It’s them,” he told the General, who was approaching. “Harrington isn’t with them.”

Carter looked at me.

“Goodwin, where’s the bomb?”

I got out.

“You’ll have to ask Mr. Wolfe.”

He did. Wolfe didn’t answer until he had squeezed out of his seat and done a few test steps to see if his legs were still attached. Once he had satisfied himself on that account he said,

“The bomb is hidden away in a safe place. It is being guarded by a contingent of your Army.”

Some contingent. A smart soldier with a monkey wrench.

“Why didn’t you bring it?”

“Because I’m holding the pieces of that bomb for ransom.”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about going home. I want to return to my home in New York. I want to eat my cook’s food, and drink beer. I want to see my orchids, and sleep in my own bed.”

“Wolfe, if you got that bomb, we would let you do that.”

“Pfui. I did get the bomb, and Mrs. Harrington has rendered it safe. For the last three days I have catered to your convenience. I will do so no more. You are to give me the services of your pilot and machine, and all other means to get us home as quickly as possible. Once I’m there, I will telephone General Carpenter and tell him where the remains of that bomb are hidden. Not until.”

“Wolfe, you’re speaking treason. I order you to tell me where you’ve hidden that thing, or I will . . .”

“Or you will what? Have me court-martialed? Or brought to public trial? Pfui. You can do nothing and you know it. We are leaving now. That bomb is in as safe a place as I could find on short notice, but every moment’s delay brings it closer to discovery. Tell the pilot we wish to go to

Tel Aviv, there to rendezvous with Mssrs. James and Hitchcock.”

The General didn't like it. He said he had to make a call. Wolfe replied,

“No. I have left instructions with the caretaker of the property the bomb is hidden on. If we are delayed and he doesn't hear from me in timely fashion, he will tell the Egyptian authorities where the bomb is.”

“Wolfe, that *is* treason! I'll have you in jail for this!”

“Not until I get home. Then try. In the meantime, we are leaving.”

“I'm going with you.”

“You are not. Nor are your men. Just the pilot.”

“It takes two to fly that chopper.”

“Very well. Just those two.”

“So you're going to leave us in the desert here to rot?”

“Pfu. Carcasses don't rot in this desert. They are eaten by vultures and bleached by the sun. You have provisions?”

“Yes, but .. .”

“Then you are luckier than those left in this desert by the Pharaohs. I will release the helicopter back to your command once we are safely away from here, presuming that miracle takes place.”

We walked to the helicopter and got in. The General watched us. Then told the pilot to take Wolfe wherever he wanted to go. The Marines removed the tarp and the pilot started the engines.

Don't get me wrong. I was just as anxious as Wolfe was to get out of that place. But it sure seemed cheeky of him to go to all the trouble and delay of hiding that bomb just to make sure he got home in time for dinner.

The trip to Tel-Aviv wasn't long at all; about an hour, and Wolfe was managing fine. We had radioed ahead and Ty James and Geoffrey Hitchcock were there on the tarmac, with some Israeli officials who welcomed us and inspected our passports.

Geoffrey Hitchcock asked if all went well and got an affirmative; and he passed some information on to a couple of the Israelis. One of them got on a phone and the other told us, in English,

“There is an airplane waiting to take you home. We would like to talk to you about your mission in Egypt.”

“I'm sorry,” Wolfe said, “We are unwilling to discuss it beyond saying that to my knowledge, there is nothing in Egypt that threatens your country's safety.”

The official got a little sticky and thought he would hold us for a while, but Geoffrey Hitchcock managed to persuade him to let us go.

The plane was the same executive jet Marian Hitchcock and I had flown in on. Wolfe asked Hitchcock and James to come with us. Hitchcock came, but James said he had some loose ends to tie up. He then took Marian Hitchcock aside and discussed something with her.

We were off, so Wolfe's plan was working so far. I didn't know how fast we were going, but made a quick calculation based on our trip to Egypt and the time change, and decided that if Wolfe were lucky he would get home in time for Sunday dinner. That is, assuming the airport authorities didn't have his mug pasted on all their bulletin boards. There was still the minor detail of the warrant for Wolfe's arrest.

When we were over Greece, Marian Hitchcock became active and went to the cockpit to discuss something with the pilots. She then came back and sat in the seat in front of Wolfe. Wolfe had taken his usual position in the seat, eyes closed and white knuckles grabbing the armrests, so she had to speak up to get his attention.

“Mr. Wolfe, do you wish to get to New York as quickly as possible?”

“Yes. Confound it, yes!”

“Then it might be best to have the pilot divert to London's Heathrow Airport. We have just time enough to catch the 8:30 flight of the Concorde. It would cross the Atlantic twice as fast as the plane we are on. We would arrive three hours earlier.”

Awfully sporting of the girl. But Wolfe was having a tough time with the decision. It meant an extra landing and takeoff, and he would have to get up the courage to get on yet one more airplane. He finally decided.

“Yes. Have the pilot go to England. Confound that woman.”

So he was still blaming Bathory--I suppose it was her he was confounding--for his problems.

Marian said she would arrange tickets for Wolfe and I, and Wolfe told her no, that he wanted them, meaning the Hitchcocks, to dine with him in the brownstone. He would pay their fare. Marian said she would arrange it, and that Wolfe would probably be more comfortable in a first-class seat.

“Then get us all first-class,” Wolfe said, “We need to discuss some things.”

I thought that was downright generous of him. After all, since he was holding that bomb hostage, he could probably force the government to pay our fares as well. In fact, if he played it right he might be able to eek a living out of that bomb for a year or more.

It was at Heathrow that we got nabbed. Hitchcock had done great on the arrangements, even having a shuttle waiting for us on the tarmac, and getting first class tickets for the flight, at over six thousand a pop. We arrived in good time--at least fifteen minutes to spare--and since we didn't have any luggage for the airport workers to divert there didn't seem to be much that could go wrong.

But an older gentleman was waiting on the tarmac, and stepped forward to Wolfe when he disembarked.

“Are you Mr. Wolfe?”

“Yes.”

“If you and your traveling companions would come with me, please?”

“What for?”

“We have a dispatch from the Egyptian government asking us to make you available for some questioning regarding the death of a diplomat in their country.”

“We have disposed with that. If you will examine our passports you will find you cannot legally detain us.”

“I'm sure it won't take long.”

“We have an imminent appointment.”

“I'm sorry. I do not know anything about your appointment or your passport. If you will come with me, please?”

“No. We are leaving.”

The going was fully sticky this time. They were going to have a bit of a tiff. But Geoffrey Hitchcock broke in,

“Binky? Binky Blane? Is that you?”

The man was taken aback. It was obvious he hadn't been called that in years.

“Well, yes. Hitchcock? What are you doing here? I thought you were retired.”

“Now listen to me, Blane. Listen closely. I’ve come out of retirement to settle a matter of vital interest to the United States and Britain. And I still outrank you. I order you to let us proceed.”

“I would have to check, sir. I have not been informed of this.”

“Then check but be quick about it.”

Hitchcock had turned his back to us and was gesturing for us to get into the shuttle. As we got in, Binky thought he was going to stop us, but Hitchcock’s bearing and demeanor kept him occupied. As we drove away, leaving Hitchcock on the tarmac, I overheard him reminding Binky of something someone had done with some horse dumplings and a certain supervisor’s bowler. Of course, I couldn’t imagine what that something could have been, but it appeared Hitchcock had the goods on that guy and that we wouldn’t be having any more trouble with him.

We got off all right, just as the sun was lighting the patchy fog. There wasn’t much delay getting on but we did have to go through a security check so I ditched the gun I had in a trash container. Wolfe seemed more relaxed on that big supersonic duck than he had been on the smaller plane; he had his eyes opened, but his face held a fixed scowl. We were nearly alone in the first class section. There were three or four CEOs near the front, busy driving their companies to bankruptcy by flying that thing and shopping the in-flight catalogs, and the three of us were separated from them in the back of the section.

Hitchcock said she could change her father’s ticket for the next flight, and Wolfe said to do so, so she got on the phone that was embedded in the armrest between the seats and made the arrangements. She also tried to call her father but he wasn’t answering just yet.

I had managed to get a little rest on the flight to Heathrow, but now my brain was working. Of course, you know Abbas hadn’t killed Tayel. If you think he had, you’re not quite getting any of this. He was just a convenient victim for Wolfe-- in the wrong place at the wrong time. If that was blood on Abbas’ robe he must have dropped by the kitchen to watch the activities there. But the thing that was bothering me was Wolfe himself. Pegging Abbas for the murder was necessary, I suppose. After all, it got us the bomb. But holding that bomb hostage just so we could get home faster was really starting to irritate me. I had stuck with Wolfe through this one, but the question of what happens in the future was by no means answered. I sat and thought about it for way too long.

Breakfast was being served. A nice croissant with butter and jam and some fresh fruit and orange juice and coffee. We were in first class, so it was served with metal utensils. Hitchcock and I got ours first, and then the stewardess brought Wolfe’s. I was interested in his reaction to real airplane

food and wasn't disappointed. He stared at it, then at the stewardess.

"What's this?"

"Your breakfast sir."

Wolfe stared at it again, incredulously. The stewardess left to serve the CEO's. I said,

"Quit your griping. It's airplane food."

"Food? You called this food? This . . .this child's plaything? Confound it, tell that woman to bring more. Is this not a French vessel?"

Wolfe had often said the French knew how to feed people right, so he had expected more. But I was sore at him. I got up and sat in the seat next to him.

"Look. Tell her yourself. Or better yet, call your friend General Carter and tell him to airdrop a pig or two to you. Tell him you'll rat to the Ruskies if he doesn't. But whatever it costs, let's get you home in time for Sunday brunch."

"The devil. That's what you think? You think I'm diddling those people so I can go home? Pfui."

"Of course that's what I think. That's what you told General Carter."

"Bah. Use your head, man. Look at me. What do you see?"

"A lemon. Too big, too yellow, and too sour."

"Exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I should have been hacked into small pieces while still alive; each piece thrown at that woman's feet, as Harun did to ibn-Layth. Or I should have had my arms and legs cut off and the stumps tarred so I would not bleed to death, then left in the desert sun as the mystic Al-Hallaj. Or covered with an ass's skin and burned . . ."

Geez. Enough already. Someone was going to have to stop him or the movie would pull an R rating.

"Okay, okay. I get it. And don't think I haven't thought of all those things and more besides, in great detail. But what's your point?"

"The point, Mr. Goodwin, is that I'm intact. Not just intact, but completely unharmed. When last I left that woman years ago, it was under circumstances that left no doubt that if we ever encountered each other again, one or the other of us would not survive. With the circumstances I found myself under in Egypt there was no doubt my life was forfeit. Do you think I gave you my house on a whim? Do you think I gave up Fritz, my orchids, and all the comforts I have cultivated

with a capricious act? Do you think I embittered you because of spite?"

"Well, I . . ." Actually, that's what I did think.

"Pfui. I did those things because, having learned who I would be dealing with, there was absolute certainty that I would not be returning. Yet here I am, unhurt, bound for New York. It is unthinkable."

"Yeah, well she did try to harm you. I stopped her."

"Bah. An impetuous act on her part. She had no intention of shooting me, or she would have done it the moment she had that gun. Or even the moment she arrived in Egypt. No, there is only one possible explanation for my survival."

"And that is?"

"That our encounter is not yet over."

"You mean she is waiting for you in New York?"

"No. Probably not. I mean that she has devised a way of killing me that would delight those poetic demons within her. A way that would feed her malevolence while simultaneously cutting me down in my moment of triumph. Such an arrangement would appeal to her."

"So what do you think she has in mind?"

"I don't think, I know. There is only one possibility."

I waited. He sighed and leaned back. He spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"There is only one possibility. That there is a second bomb. Set to go off in New York City, close enough to the brownstone to destroy me, and as many others as it can possibly enscope."

That sent chills up my spine and made me sit back and breath a little because I knew the instant he said it that it was true. I realized that one of the reasons Anna Bathory's little speech she gave me in her hut had been so scary was not just because those thoughts were comforting her, but also because there was a note of anticipation in her voice—she was *looking forward* to the things she was describing. She was looking forward to the destruction of a good part of my city. I tried to gather my wits.

"You're right," I finally said. "From the things she said and the way she said them, she has it all planned. Don't you think you'd better tell someone?"

"Who? Confound it, that woman knew exactly where our military was and what they were doing. We can't risk telling the military or the police. We must assume that bomb is ready to go off at the push of a button and that any overt act would trigger it. No, it appears it is up to us."

"The three of us?"

“Yes. I was hoping for Mr. Hitchcock as well, but it couldn’t be helped. And Mrs. Harrington. I need to know whether or not that bomb could be delivered by airplane, and she’s not here to answer. In her absence, we must assume a tall building will be used.”

“Great. That narrows it down to about a hundred.”

“Pfui. You heard her. Think.”

I had heard her. Wondering whether it would reach to Central Park, the UN building, the World Trade Center. And Wolfe had said it would have to be close enough to the brownstone to destroy it. There was only one building in Manhattan that met those specifications.

“The Empire State Building,” I said.

“Yes. We are going there. As fast as we possibly can. I didn’t want to waste precious time hiding that bomb, but I think the delay was justified. It has given us the military’s unwitting cooperation and has given them something else to think about. At any rate, she will not detonate that device until she has verified I am there. Not unless she is provoked. Now please leave me to eat this trifle. Confound it, I have some things to think through.”

I left the seat. I was a little shell-shocked, and chagrined. The second bomb was most of it of course, but also the fact that Wolfe had not had his selfish interests at heart when he hid the first one. Or in other things, either. I had some chewing to do on what he had said.

But first, I stepped to the galley to see what I could do about getting more food for him.

Forty-three

Wolfe had finished his child's playthings, five of them, and had sipped some coffee. I also thought I had seen a little lip-twitching, but if so it had been very short. We were about halfway to New York. I was pretty wound up, and if Wolfe had told me to hijack the plane and land us on the top of that building I probably would have only paused long enough to ask which floor.

I had shared Wolfe's conclusion with Marian, and she thought we should at least call General Carpenter. He could be trusted. She went to the seat next to Wolfe and discussed it with him, and came back, apparently convinced that we were on our own. She and I talked it over a little. The only thing we could come up with was to go to the building, start at the top and search down, looking for anything odd or out-of-place. It wasn't much help.

Wolfe interrupted us, pointed to the phone in his armrest and asked,

"Can others overhear a conversation on this phone?"

"I don't know." I turned to Marian. She didn't know either. I said,

"It works by radio, so I suppose it could be overheard. It might be scrambled, but I don't know how well that works."

"Get Saul."

I moved to the seat next to him, swiped my card through the phone, and dialed the number. I got his answering service, a girl named Marge, whom I'd spoken to before. Never mind the radio link being bugged, if you ask me it's more likely Marge would listen in.

"Marge my dear, this is Archie. I need to be put through to Saul. It's an emergency."

"It's always an emergency with you."

"Yeah. I like to cry Wolfe. Put me through and I won't buy your company and fire you. Hurry."

She did. Saul answered on the third ring. I told him it was Archie, and that Wolfe had instructions for him.

"Wolfe? You're with him?"

"Yeah. Just listen, okay?" I put Wolfe on.

"Good morning, Saul. I'm sorry to disturb your sleep, but it was unavoidable. I am on an airplane bound for New York. We have come from Egypt. Archie is with me, along with Miss Marian Hitchcock, who works for her father in London."

There was a pause.

"Yes, that's right. There is an errand that can't wait for our arrival. I'm hoping you, and Mr. Durkin and Mr. Wyatt will be available to help with it. We will help as soon as we arrive. There is a

shipment of orchids that was sent erroneously. They were meant to come to the brownstone but were sent to the Algonquin instead. It is important that shipment be intercepted without the competition knowing about it.”

By that time Saul must have been scratching his head. ‘Algonquin’ was a word I hadn’t heard for a while. It was the hotel razed in 1930 to make space for the Empire State Building. Other places had that name too, but Wolfe was obviously hoping Saul would catch on and that anyone who happened to be listening didn’t know that piece of trivia. He continued,

“The orchids are a mix. *Miltonia atomus spectabilis* and *Miltonia bombus siene*”

Wolfe had spouted those Latin names quickly and unobtrusively, but the words *atomus* and *bombus* were not part of those orchid’s genus or species names. Saul, who kept the germination records whenever I was on vacation, knew that, and those words would poke out at him, too. I didn’t know if *atomus bombus* was Latin for atom bomb, but it was close enough. And Saul knew the *Miltonia* genus liked high altitudes, so Wolfe was telling him the bomb would likely be at the top of the building. Saul would get it. He did. But even he couldn’t believe it. There was a pause, and Wolfe said,

“Yes. You heard correctly. They will be in a planter, at least three feet in diameter and a foot and a half high, so look for that size container. They are very delicate; so if you find the shipment don’t let anyone near it until we arrive. We do not wish the shipment to blossom prematurely. Have you got that? Satisfactory. You’ll get Fred and Steve? Satisfactory. We will join you as soon as we can.”

Wolfe handed the phone to me. I said,

“You still there, Saul?”

“Sure, Archie. What else can I do?”

“I know this will be hard to do on a Sunday morning, but Miss Hitchcock and I need suitable equipment. For the cold, and whatever.”

“I got you. I’ll have something. Look for me near Melvin’s.”

“Right. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

I don’t think there was anyone in the world who could have got that message as fast as Saul did, if they even got it at all. It’s great to work with the best.

Forty-four

Melvin's is not just a place, he is a person. The truck docks to the Empire State Building face west on 33rd Street, and that street is so narrow and busy with trucks that there's a special worker on the job whenever the docks are open. That person is Melvin and his job is to keep the trucks moving so things don't jam up, and to keep an eye out for suspicious objects like bombs. Saul was telling me to meet him in Melvin's area. Long ago both Saul and I, seeing the advantage of cultivating a friendship with Melvin as an extra pair of eyes and ears, had bought him a few drinks and tried not to ignore him when we had business in that building. It had paid off on several occasions. Besides, Melvin had style. He could jockey those trucks around like he was juggling eggs. It was fun just to watch him in action.

But this was Sunday and he wouldn't be there. The docks aren't open on Sunday anyway.

Marian had stationed herself in the seat in front of Wolfe and had caught his side of the conversation. I briefed her on Saul and the others, and told her that Wolfe's message had been so brief that Saul would be figuring out his own approach to the problem. I told her there was no one better to do that, besides Wolfe.

We landed at Kennedy without incident. The sky was just brightening in the East. But an incident occurred when we attempted to clear customs. We had no luggage so that may have actually raised some suspicion. But one of the customs agents asked Wolfe to step into one of the rooms to the side; one of those rooms with the bright lights and the rubber hose and various blunt instruments. Wolfe did not put up a fuss, but followed the agent. He told us,

"You two go on. Hurry."

We did. It was the luck of the draw with the taxi driver, but we got a good one; one with dry palms and heavy feet. With the early Sunday morning traffic we made it in record time. I had him let us out at Broadway and 33rd and we walked into the truck area. Saul was there, in coveralls, hanging out across the street in front of Wong's Chinese deli. He had some dirty coveralls for us, and light jackets. Don't ask me where he got them.

"Wolfe?" he asked.

"Detained at the airport. It's just us."

"You're janitors," he said as we donned the coveralls and added the jackets. Hitchcock's was too big. Hitchcock mussed her hair so I did too, a little. Saul continued, "It's the only thing that works on a Sunday morning, unless you want to carry a Bible. Fred and Steve are in there looking, starting at the top like Wolfe said. Fred's taking the odd floors, Steve the even. They've probably finished

about ten floors. They can't get into some of the offices without taking a lot of time on the locks and besides, there are alarms. So they're just checking the hallways and anything else they can."

"Okay. That's probably the best they can do. Anything down here?"

"No. Quiet as a Quaker in Harlem. Here, your equipment."

"Saul handed each of us a gun. Mine was a small snub-nose .38 and Marian's was a little smaller. We pocketed them. Saul said,

"You sure this is coming down today?"

"Not really. Wolfe thinks it was planned to happen as soon as he gets home, so today is the most likely day. Besides, Marvin's gone"

"Yeah. Someone's got it in for Wolfe? Enough to blow up the world?"

"I'll say. And it isn't me, either. But Wolfe is back, in one piece, and we need to keep him that way. You wouldn't believe what has happened the last two days so don't even bother asking. I'd just make something up."

"Okay, Archie. Suit yourself. Do we start looking too, or wait here for something to happen?"

"I don't know. I wish Wolfe were here, but he isn't. If you ask me, though, if it isn't in the top floors, eighty six or above, it isn't there yet."

"Yeah. I was thinking the same. Stupid to put it lower."

"Okay. We'll stay here and watch. If it shows up, we need to figure out what to do."

So we discussed it. If the bomb wasn't in the building, we decided the best bet was to assume those delivering it wanted to live, so they would get away a safe distance before it went off, either by timer or remote signal. All we had to do, then, was find it and wait for the delivery people to clear out, then disarm the thing.

Right. That was all. Assuming we could find it, and let the delivery people go without noticing us, and disarm it without raising a ruckus and without Harrington. Piece of cake.

Saul's phone vibrated. It was Fred reporting their progress. They were down to the observation deck, on the 86th floor. The top floors had been easy because they were so small, and some weren't accessible. I thought they were all marvelous to be doing this when they could have taken their loved ones and been in Connecticut by now.

The truck finally came at 8:20. We didn't know it was the truck of course, since it was just a normal delivery truck, but it parked in the middle slot, the easiest one to get into, which gave us a glimpse of the contents when they unloaded it.

It was on rollers. And I was utterly astonished. Either Wolfe knew that woman and her warped

sense of humor so intimately that he divined her thoughts, or he was in on it himself.

It *was* a planter. A nice brown earthen urn with a tessellated pattern around the outside. It had a bit of an Egyptian flavor to it. It was just wide enough to house the bomb and had enough extra height to include some potting soil and some orchids. Yes, orchids. Common *doritaenopses*, but orchids nonetheless. About five sprays from where I could see, all sporting.

If that's not enough to convince you it was the bomb, this should: it had a yellow sticky-note stuck to the side with writing on it. I couldn't make it out from where I was, but I'll bet it was in Russian, and that next to that note was a dark red plastic window, like you see on TV's.

Saul and Hitchcock had seen it too, and didn't have to be told. We watched as the deliverymen, three of them, rolled it to the freight elevator. One of them produced a key, which could have been obtained in any of twenty ways, and opened it. They had their backs to us, so we couldn't get a look at their faces. They rolled the flowers into the elevator and started up.

The three of us headed to the back entrance. There is a guard station there next to the door, but it is a public building and the guards are there mainly for decoration. The Empire State Building, besides being a tourist attraction, is just an office building. There is no grand entrance like the Chrysler building has. Just a hallway, a giant office directory, and the elevators. None of the elevators goes all the way from the bottom to the top--the building is too tall, and each elevator only covers a section of floors. Saul told us the freight elevator ends on the 35th floor, so we took an elevator that would stop on that floor.

They were closing the doors to the second freight elevator, the one that covers the upper floors, when we got far enough down the 35th floor hallway to see them. So we took another elevator, this time to the 72nd floor. The elevator didn't come right away and we had to wait. It was nerve-racking. I was afraid we would miss them somehow.

Saul told us the 72nd floor was the last stop for the freight elevators. Anything above that level had to be taken on the passenger elevators. It was stupid to worry about missing them, though. They were right in front of us when the doors opened, waiting for the passenger elevator to take them up further. We got off, and, not knowing anything better to do, we waited with them. It was then that I finally got a look at their faces. Two of them were nobody to me, just deliverymen, but the third one was Peter Zov. Yeah, the guy who had murdered Marko Vukcic and then dropped out of sight. He was older and grayer but otherwise the same, which meant if he really looked at my face he would recognize me. I tried to stay behind Saul, but he was too short, so I moved behind Marian.

The elevator arrived, and of course we had to enter it with them--we had been waiting for it. Zov

even held the door for us as we got in. I stepped to the very back, behind the bomb, and Hitchcock did the same on the other side. Saul stayed with the rest of them. Zov pushed the button labeled 86. The observation deck. Saul, for good measure, pushed the same button on his side.

The observation deck is not very big, and it is all set aside for tourists. It would be open in about an hour, and they would fill it, which was one of several reasons I avoided it when I could. There certainly was no room for a bomb on that deck; there was barely room for two small gift shops, the observation deck itself, and the elevators, whose doors were situated in a hallway. The hallway was really more of a breezeway as the outside doors were always open and there was always a breeze at that altitude.

So the bomb was probably going higher. Elevators to the very top started on the observation deck.

But as I took the ride to the observation deck my thoughts were more immediate. All Zov had to do was turn around once and it was over. And that damn bomb was emitting the same invisible rays the other one had; making my calves and knees weak and frozen so they wouldn't move. I was wishing to hell that Wolfe were there to tell us what to do.

But Wolfe *was* there. When the doors opened onto the hallway, instead of hallway we saw bright yellow. Nero Wolfe was looking at us, standing with his cane, his yellow outfit flapping in the breeze. Geoffrey Hitchcock was behind him.

Zov hadn't recognized me, but there was no missing Wolfe. Zov had moved amazingly fast when he plugged Wolfe in the leg, and he moved fast again. He spun around with something in his hand. I had my gun out, but the angle wasn't right, and there were the other men to worry about. The duty fell to Hitchcock, and she shot. Zov went down, but it wasn't enough. He was still conscious and had that remote control and was pushing the button. Saul kicked it from his hand and put a gun on him. I covered the other men, who were completely bewildered. I made them lie down and put their hands behind their heads anyway.

Obviously, the bomb had been a dud.

Forty-five

Wolfe looked at me, pointed at Zov, and said,

“That’s Peter Zov. He’s been shot in the leg.”

“I know. Poetic justice.” I pulled the alarm button on the elevator to keep the doors open. Wolfe asked,

“I trust, then, that all went well?”

“Sure. Like a piece of cake.”

“Satisfactory.” He pointed at the bomb. “Turn that thing off.”

“Lets wait for someone who knows how.”

“No. There is a timer. You saw Mrs. Harrington do it.”

“I don’t know. This one might be different.”

Marian Hitchcock broke in,

“I think I can do it.”

“No, Miss Hitchcock,” Wolfe said soothingly. “Mr. Goodwin will do it. After all, that is what I pay him to do.”

Disarm nuclear bombs? I didn’t know that was in my job description. But I went ahead and felt in the potting soil. Right there where the red window was. There was the box . . . and the cable, . . . and the connector. I unscrewed the ring and pulled it. All the way out, above the soil. Then I took the sticky note off the bomb, crossed out the Russian word and wrote *OFF*.

Five minutes after that, things had settled a little, but not much. There had been people on the deck getting things ready for the tourists and there was a security guard that had come up with Wolfe and Hitchcock. The guard took a look at the situation and wisely deduced that it was too much for him. The wisdom came from the muzzle of my gun as I told him what to do. He went back down in another elevator to get reinforcements in the form of the police.

But someone beat New York’s best to it. As soon as it looked like things were somewhat under control Geoffrey Hitchcock got on his phone and spoke to someone. And no more than three minutes after the guard left there was a thumping noise outside. A chopper. The cavalry had arrived in the form of the Army and they were depositing men on that deck over a cable they had strung. Before three more minutes were up there were twenty of them herding the workers into a corner and sealing the elevators. Five of them surrounded the bomb and us, and one spoke to Wolfe.

“You’re Nero Wolfe?”

“Yes.”

“I’m lieutenant Ross.” He identified his unit. “We were sent here by General Carpenter. Our orders are to place our services at your disposal.”

“Very well. This man is named Peter Zov. He is the leader of this group, and he needs medical attention. I suspect the other two were just workers for the delivery service Zov used. Doubtless they thought they were transporting flowers. Do with them what you will. I need somewhere to sit.”

The only place to sit was on the edge of that planter, and I’m sure that didn’t appeal to Wolfe. But the lieutenant had an equipment box brought into the hallway from outside and Wolfe sat on that. A soldier was examining the planter and I told him I had pulled the connector to turn it off. He asked how I’d known what to do and I said Julie Harrington had taught me. He replied that she had trained him in Russian devices too. And asked why she had trained me, a civilian. I told him, with a mysterious look, that I was not the mild-mannered man I appeared to be.

So Wolfe had finally let the military know what was going on. I learned from him as he sat there that he had been detained at the airport by an order from Carpenter, who had finally extricated himself from the mess in Egypt. Wolfe had told Carpenter all, including what Bathory had learned about the military in Egypt, and Carpenter had taken extra precautions in setting up the Army this time. He had called Harrington over Farshad Mokhtarian’s phone and apprized her of the situation, and someone was sent for her and the truck. Carpenter was expected to come, with Harrington, as soon as possible.

It was all over, except for the waiting. The soldiers had to do all sorts of checking to make sure the bomb was safe to move, and they didn’t have the nice blueprints Harrington had. But they had a communication set, and they somehow got through to her. She let them know it was okay to move, and told them to get it into a secure area where they would dismantle it when she arrived.

The military had not only sealed off the building, but probably the whole block as well. Ross told us an armored truck was coming for the bomb.

Wolfe was getting impatient. He finally said to me,

“Get Fritz.”

I was delighted to do just that. I pulled my phone and turned it on, but its battery was dead. So I borrowed Marian Hitchcock’s and soon had Fritz.

“Archie! I’m so glad to hear your voice! I’ve been hearing many sirens. And the radio says something is going on here and to standby for instructions. That’s what the man said, ‘standby for instructions’. Is he all right?”

Leave it to Fritz. Maybe it was the tone of my voice, or the hubbub, or divine revelation, but he knew Wolfe was with me. I said,

“He’s fine. And he’s hungry, so he wants to talk with you.” I gave the phone to Wolfe.

“Good Morning, Fritz. Did you sleep well? No, I’m fine. But we will be having guests for luncheon. Yes. Mr. Hitchcock and his daughter. Saul, Fred and Steven. Archie and me. What do you think? Ah, you have been preparing something already? The *saucisse minuit*? Satisfactory. Put it on a bed of sourdough bread with Dijon, and *croustillants de pomme de terre* with *la gelée de citron aux carottes rappées* and *la salade de pâtes au thon* and to drink, the Brazilian *guayara* in four parts club soda, with a dash of lime and the caramel and molasses mix. Yes. As we discussed.”

“Wolfe listened a little, then,

“Very well. Have it ready when you can. We will wait if necessary. And Fritz, large portions, please. I have an appetite!”

No kidding.

We waited more, but with that kind of fodder waiting at the end of the rope, Wolfe's patience was getting thin. Finally he spoke with Lieutenant Ross.

"Lieutenant, our work here is finished. You and your men have taken over now. We are going to my home."

"I'm sorry sir. Please stay until we've had a chance to make the area safe and then we will debrief you."

Too bad. And with the bomb right there under their noses Wolfe couldn't very well hide it. Wolfe said,

"No. The debriefing will take place with General Carpenter in my home, so we are leaving. That is an order."

"I'm sorry sir, it is my judgment that you should stay."

"Young man," Wolfe was condescending. "Lieutenant Harrington of the Army was under my orders yesterday, and disobeyed me. It has worked to her disadvantage, as you now know. Are you not explicitly under my orders?"

"I am, sir."

"Then obey them. We go, now."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry sir. I'll arrange transport."

He got on his little khaki phone and talked a while, then spoke to Wolfe.

"Sir? The streets are jammed with emergency vehicles. I can have a transport here, but it will take a forty five minutes or more."

That was *not* satisfactory to Wolfe. He made a face, then looked at me.

"Archie, how far is it to the brownstone?"

Unbelievable, but you heard him. The brownstone was a mere four and a half blocks away and he was asking how far it was.

Of course, he knew exactly how far it was from the Empire State Building to the brownstone. He studied maps and knew New York by heart, and could probably give the distance in feet, miles or furlongs if he thought about it. But, unbelievably, he had never walked it. What he really needed to know was how hard would it be to walk that distance? How many cliffs would he have to scale? How many haystacks would he have to sleep in? I did a quick mental calculation and said,

"Thirty five trips to the dining room and back."

Wolfe pinched his face and said,

“We shall walk.”

The lieutenant objected again, but Wolfe would have none of it. Additionally, Wolfe insisted on a military escort to see us home safely. There could still be danger, after all. And he insisted the lieutenant head the escort detail.

It wouldn't have worked, except that the lieutenant's superior arrived and took charge, and told the lieutenant that he had spoken with Carpenter and been informed by Carpenter in no uncertain terms that what Wolfe wants, Wolfe gets.

What a deal. Time to hit them up for reimbursement on those Concorde tickets. Or more, since it was now obvious those tickets were in the line of duty. But Wolfe just got up and went to the bomb, which had been pulled from the elevator and was almost ready to be moved downstairs. He asked me for my penknife and cut each of the sprays, one by one, from those orchid plants.

"I shall need something for the office and these shouldn't go to waste," he said.

The lieutenant had picked a half-dozen men to escort us, and we all started down the elevators. It took both the down elevators to hold us all.

At the ground floor the halls were crowded with soldiers, who still held the high ground. But near the front entrance a tape had been set up and behind it were all the police, firemen and other officials the city could muster, and that was plenty. All of us except Wolfe and the Army had been in the first elevator shipment, and we were headed for the entrance when I heard a familiar voice.

"Goodwin! Goodwin?!" It was Inspector Cramer, stuffed in there with all the other city sardines. He jumped under the tape.

"Goodwin! I might have known you'd be where the trouble is. What the hell is going on, and where the hell is he?"

I suppose I could have said 'where's who?' but by that time Wolfe had emerged with his escort. I pointed a thumb over my shoulder and said,

"He's in sheik's clothing."

Cramer pushed through us and headed to Wolfe.

"Wolfe!" he yelled, "Wolfe. What the hell have you done, and how many corpses did you leave up there?"

He headed to Wolfe, but he didn't make it. Lieutenant Ross, who was every bit as strong as Cramer and thirty years younger, put his hand in Cramer's face and pushed him back so hard that Cramer would have toppled if he hadn't hit the wall. Then the soldiers, every one of them, trained their guns on the Inspector. Oh, how we love men in uniform. Wolfe interceded,

“Lieutenant, your men may put down their guns. This man is no threat to me though he is, at times, an annoyance. Inspector, there are no corpses upstairs.” The lieutenant gave a gesture and the men stopped pointing the guns.

The Inspector took the smashed cigar from his mouth and spat some chunks. Then he addressed the lieutenant,

“Soldier, I’m inspector Cramer of the Manhattan police.” He pointed what was left of the cigar at Wolfe. “This man is wanted by the State of New York. There is a warrant issued for his arrest.”

The lieutenant replied in a military singsong, all the word strung together,

“I’m sorry sir this man is under the protection of the United States Army and cannot be taken please see liaison officer Hall for further details please excuse us sir.”

That got Cramer. His face was a beet and said he was damned and some other things too. He took a breath and tried to compose himself. The he yelled,

“Stebbins!”

Purley Stebbins ducked under the tape and came forward.

“Yes, sir?”

“Stebbins, Wolfe is going home. Make sure he gets there. And for crying out loud, keep him away from muggers and drug pushers.”

Stebbins protested,

“But Inspector, he don’t deserve our protection!”

That got Cramer. It got him good. He turned slowly to Stebbins and then yelled, right in Stebbin’s face,

“Stebbins! You’re thick! Thick as a goddammed post! Don’t you get it? It’s not Wolfe you’re protecting!”

Cramer threw his cigar against the wall, breaking at least three city statues that I could think of, and stormed out the front door, also breaking the yellow tape in the process. As he passed me I could hear him muttering,

“Let him have his parade. He’ll pay later.”

Which surprised me. I had been surprised when Wolfe had decided to walk. But Cramer knew from the beginning that Wolfe would be on the hoof. He *knew* it. Maybe I didn’t know Wolfe as well as Cramer did after all.

Forty-Eight

So that year the Manhattan parade season started two weeks early, and a grand parade it was, too. It started off a little disorganized—a lot of parades do. There were firetrucks and police cars and paramedic trucks and everything else you could imagine mixed with taxis and cars that had happened to be caught in the maelstrom. The block was cleared of civilians to Broadway, but after that the police had started letting people in, or a better way to put it was they had given up keeping them out. Broadway east of 34th was filled with news trucks and reporters, but the police were still holding that line so they couldn't do anything but film us as we passed. Some yelled questions, but it was obvious they were in the dark.

We kept on 34th Street, and by halfway past 7th Avenue the crowd was starting to form. The police started by thinking they weren't going to let the military pass, but the message came down to cooperate, apparently, as they began making way for us, and keeping the people to the sides of the street. In the middle of the block, right between 7th and 8th, a mounted cop had ridden in from the north, and Wolfe and Geoffrey Hitchcock stopped there, soldiers and all, to admire the horse. They asked the cop its name, and Hitchcock pined about his days in the Royal Mounted Corps. Wolfe described the marvelous equestrian trails in Central Park, and gestured in that direction with his cane, which I thought was odd as he had never even seen them.

And we were being followed. Not by muggers and drug pushers, but by City Officials, who some would argue were just as bad and even more expensive. I recognized Commissioner Hombart, and the Fire Commissioner, and there were other familiar faces. They looked a little lost, frankly. Some had uniforms, some were in suits. Some were trying their phones periodically but the phones weren't working so well. The rest were just, well, following.

While we were waiting for Wolfe and Hitchcock to exchange horse stories, the other Hitchcock turned to me and said,

“Goodwin, I have an apology to make to you.”

“Oh, you misjudged me after all?”

“No. Not that. I apologize that I didn't incapacitate Peter Zov. It was the first time I'd shot anyone, you see. I'm sorry I botched it.”

“No harm done. The bomb was a dud anyway.”

“A dud? Certainly not.”

“You saw him push that button. Yet it didn't go off.”

“It didn't go off because you had covered the remote control receptor with that yellow note when

we were in the elevator. I saw you do it. The bomb didn't get the signal."

"Oh. Is that so? Well how about that."

"So why didn't you tell Mr. Wolfe what you did? He actually ruined our plans, standing in front of the elevator like that."

"Nah. We don't need to tell him anything. It's his parade and he likes parades. Let him enjoy this one."

She thought a moment.

"You know, Goodwin, maybe I really *have* misjudged you."

"It's possible, but I doubt it. By the way, I owe you a computer."

"No. I wasn't really angry with you. It was just, well, of all things possible, she got the *hard drive*."

"Tough break. But that little machine saved us at least eighty million, maybe more, so I'd be happy to spring for another."

"Actually, Goodwin, I'm afraid that woman didn't get all she bargained for. I fear I made another error."

"Oh? How so?"

"When I was helping that man with his computer. I think I may have inadvertently set his display to read your American cents as dollars. It's all so very confusing, you know. Those computer programs and your American money."

"And even when he rebooted, the display was stuck displaying cents as dollars?"

"Well, yes. It was stored that way, you see."

"And somehow your computer got stuck in the same mode."

"Yes. So you see, we thought we were transferring ten million dollars, and they really only got one hundred thousand dollars. I'm sorry for that one too, you know. A breach of trust. Not that that woman didn't deserve it."

"Well, I say, chap, that is one for the Queen, you know?"

"Goodwin."

"Yes, Hitchcock?"

"Speak American. Your English is incredibly irritating."

"Sorry."

Saul came up and waited for us to finish. I made a motion to Marian and turned to him.

"You know Archie, I was thinking."

“Yes?”

“If the people who had that bomb were out to get Wolfe, they would have to know when he got home.”

“I follow you. You think the brownstone is being watched?”

“Maybe. It might be good to check before the crowd gets too thick.”

“Okay. Want help?”

“Nah. It shouldn’t take long.”

Saul left and melted into the people at the side of the street.

Wolfe and Hitchcock senior had finished with the horse and the parade proceeded, disorganized as ever. But then a black limo made it in from 7th Avenue South, and out stepped the Mayor himself, with about a half-dozen aides.

Every parade needs an organizer, and hizonor was the man. I had no idea how much the Mayor and his people knew, but when you think about it, how much a politician knows has no bearing on what he does in public. He began smiling and waving to the crowd, shaking hands and assuring everyone that things were all right, and shrugging his shoulders when the questions got too specific. He came up and shook all our hands too. Including Wolfe, who draped his cane over the arm that held the orchids and did a nice formal bow as well. By this time, the Army knew they were being had; that the escort was a joke as far as protection was concerned, but they went along with it and I even caught a wink from the lieutenant as we passed 8th Avenue.

The mayor’s appearance galvanized the rest of the officials and they fell in behind him. The police were getting their act together too. Somehow they had figured out where we were headed and barricades were set up, down 34th to 9th Avenue, then up 9th.

Halfway between 8th and 9th Avenue something strange happened to me. My imagination kicked in. Full force. That wasn’t too strange; it does that sometimes. But the subject was Marian Hitchcock, and as I’ve said, she was out of my specification.

But my imagination was chugging happily along, completely ignoring any rational thought, and I knew better than to ignore it. So I turned to Marian.

“You say you may have misjudged me. Well, I may have misjudged you. Why don’t you and your father stay on a few days and we can try to find out?”

“Well, that’s very kind, and I was planning to stay for a little while, but I promised Ty James a few evenings this week.”

“Here in New York?”

“He is very mobile. He can come here as well as anywhere else.”

“Pfui, to quote a famous man. You need to be shown New York by a New Yorker.”

“And you are a New Yorker?”

I was actually born and bred in Ohio, but this was no time for equivocation.

“Yep. Dyed in the wool, true blue, through and through.”

“Well, I suppose I could put James off for a few days.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“But I warn you, you shan’t take any liberties with me, Goodwin.”

Which is what King George said to the Yanks in 1776, but did they listen?

* * *

By the time we turned up 9th Avenue it was a full-blown parade. We had our cops clearing the way. We had our honor guard, complete with guns that had real bullets. And we had our dignitaries, waving and shaking hands, and assuring the crowd it was just another great day in New York. And police cars and fire engines were starting to follow, too.

And it *was* a great day. Some of the planter boxes at the side of 34th were showing daffodil heads, and the sun was shining brightly. The crowd didn’t know what to make of it, but they were giving us the benefit of a doubt. As I looked over the crowd, an old gent with a scraggly white beard caught my eye. He grinned and gave me the universal New Yorker gesture of friendliness with his middle finger. I grinned back.

“But wait a minute,” You say. “This isn’t a *real* parade. Where are the floats?”

All I can say is you didn’t see Wolfe, floating along gracefully with his cane and orchids in that gay-as-spring yellow outfit.

And giant balloons?

You didn’t see his head.

Forty-nine

The newshounds eventually caught on, and they were shuffling for position in front of the brownstone. The police kept them back a safe distance. Saul had rejoined us and stated everything was clear. So the seven of us, Wolfe, Saul, Fred, Steve, the Hitchcocks and I made our final approach to the brownstone. And there on the stoop awaiting us were Fritz and Theodore in their Sunday best. Theodore had even made an orchid wreath.

I thought good grief. It was one thing to have a parade. Sure, you save your city, you get your parade. I had no problem with that. But Fritz and Theodore on the stoop? Don't you think that was just a little much?

The parade ended with Wolfe mounting the stoop and giving the Mayor the wreath. You've seen the pictures; they looked great.

Wolfe bid the Mayor farewell, posted a couple of guards at the entrance to keep the news people at bay, dismissed the rest, then invited the group in. Wolfe and I were the last to enter, and we were home.

THE END

Epilogue

As I was typing this report, I reached the end of the parade and thought that was a great place to end the story. So I ended it there.

But some stories never end. It seems there is always more to be told, and this story is no exception.

The first item that needs mentioning is a strange thing that happened just after one of the greatest lunches, at least in terms of bulk, the brownstone has ever seen. We had finished our coffee and conversation and Saul, Fred and Steve had left with compliments all around. The time had come for the orchids to see their sugar daddy again, and for Wolfe to show them off.

So Wolfe got into his elevator and the rest of us started up the stairs. We were a little slow on account of the lunch, so we reached the roof just as Wolfe did.

At that moment the elevator gave a huge creak and a cracking sound, and the door stuck, about a third of the way open. I tried to force it open further, but it wouldn't budge. We all tried, but it wouldn't open or close. It was stuck. It was open just enough that if I had stripped naked and greased myself I might have been able to squeeze through, but what in the world would possess me to do that? It was obvious that Wolfe was stuck. That was the strange thing. The one mechanism that Wolfe trusts without even a second thought, and it had failed him.

He wanted me to call 911 and get them to bring the same tools they use to extricate people from cars. I told him they were called Jaws of Life, and nothing doing. This wasn't a life-and-death emergency. I would call the emergency elevator service.

So the orchid duty fell to me, much to Wolfe's consternation. We tried to keep him mollified by passing beer into him—he was drinking it now—but the obvious consequences of doing that for too long forced him to stop with a scowl.

The orchids were fine and the Hitchcocks were suitably impressed. Marian especially like the Cattelyas so I told Theodore to make sure there was a spray in her room every day.

The elevator repairmen came fairly quickly for a Sunday, and managed to make it through the crowd, mostly reporters, that was still outside. They shone their lights into the door and talked about braces and pinions and such. Then they tried the same thing we did: just pushing it. I told them it wouldn't work and it didn't. They told me I'd have to call emergency and get them to bring their Jaws of Life, which brought a hmph from inside the box.

It still wasn't an emergency so I called the normal number for the fire department. Their coming would bring more crowds, but it couldn't be helped. We were going to have to arrange a second

shift of guard duty. While we were waiting, The head elevator repairman, whose stomach wouldn't be getting a pot in a few years only because he already had one, came to me in the sun room, pointed a thumb back over his shoulder at the gap in the door and said,

“That thing is a relic. It's been around too long. The guy who designed it was a genius, but he's dead some twenty years now. You'd be better off scrapping it. Replacing it with something new.”

“You can't fix it?”

“I didn't say that. I could try. I'm just saying it will probably never be the same. Get a new one.”

The guy had 'li'l dix' embroidered on his workshirt. I could have consulted Wolfe, but I didn't need to. He loved that thing. I told the guy.

“Look. I want it put back the same way it was, you got it? Exactly the same. No difference.” I was poking his chest. He was surprised at my passion.

“Okay okay. Gee, buddy, if you feel that way about it I'll do my best to fix it. I never met anyone who felt that way about an elevator.”

“Yeah, well I do, and so does he.”

The elevator man headed back to the door.

The Jaws of Life arrived and it only took a minute or two for the firemen to get Wolf out, and they left. As the repairmen were leaving, they promised to come back the next day and start work. Li'l dix told me he thought he might be able to salvage some parts from an old brownstone that was being torn down for a tunnel. It had the same kind of lift.

The next item was an errand. The Hitchcocks graciously agreed to stay on for a few days, with Geoffrey in the room opposite Wolfe's and Marian in the South room opposite mine. I lent them each a pair of my pajamas, and that left me none as one of my pairs was in Egypt somewhere. But I managed just fine, and slept like a baby for a good nine hours. It was good to be in my bed again.

In the morning after breakfast I left a note on Wolfe's desk that I had an errand, then went up and knocked on Marian's door. She was still in my pajamas, and she looked good in them. Another triumph for my imagination. I allowed as she would probably need to do a little shopping, and asked if she wanted me along. She said she could manage fine, and I told her that she probably could until it came to something formal. Did she want to take in the symphony? The opera? Or the ballet? She said all three. So I told her she would need some nice formal duds, and only I knew the places she could get them. I also told her I would try to get tickets.

She agreed, so we made a date for that afternoon to shop for formal attire. That gave me the morning to run my errand.

I left a note on Wolfe's desk, told Fritz to expect me for lunch, and left. Even though Nathaniel Parker's office was a good ten long blocks and four short ones, I walked and it felt good. The Marines had been dismissed the night before, but it seems they had been replaced by a couple of beat cops who were given instructions to chase any loiterers away. I appreciated that. There were a couple of newshounds who thought they were going to follow me, but a quick trip through Cole's back entrance lost them.

I had to wait for Parker as I didn't have an appointment, but not long. He greeted me enthusiastically, told me he was delighted we were both back home, and asked what the hubbub had been about.

I asked what hubbub, and he laughed. Then said,

"I suppose you've come with instructions to cancel that title action."

"Uh, no. I want you to execute it. At least, partially."

"What do you mean? Mr. Wolfe is back."

"Look. I'll lay it out straight. I told you that I would never sign that thing, right?"

"Yes."

"And you said that was against Wolfe's wishes."

"That's right."

"Okay. I shouldn't have said I would never sign it. I should have said that I'd never take the brownstone. I want to sign that paper."

"You're not making sense, Archie, that would give you the brownstone. And Wolfe is back, in his right mind, I hope."

"Sure. But here's how I want to do it. You've heard of certifying a check? Holding it in reserve but not actually cashing it?"

"Of course."

"Okay. I want to certify the brownstone. Like certifying a check. I have no intention of ever following through on it, but I want something that says I could if I wanted to."

Parker looked at me, then threw back his head and laughed a good one.

"That's good, Goodwin. I'm tempted to actually do it. We could do it through a title lien. Too bad it's unethical."

"Why is it unethical?"

"Because Wolfe is back, of course."

"Have you heard from him?"

“No.”

“What were his last instructions?”

“To convey his property to you.”

“When?”

“As soon as possible. Look, Archie. Legally my instructions are explicit. I’m to transfer title to you free and clear. No liens are to be involved. But I also know Mr. Wolfe is of a different mind now, so I would have to call Wolfe before I did anything.”

“Wolfe is not answering the phone and is unavailable. Pesky reporters, you know. If you do not execute that order by tomorrow, you will not have followed Wolfe’s instructions. Like it or not, you have an obligation here.”

Parker chuckled.

“Okay, so no new instructions from Wolfe. But I have to transfer the title free and clear. No lien.”

“Fine. Once it is transferred I will hire you to transfer it back to Wolfe, with a lien attached. You’re stuck. And if you don’t do it my way Wolfe’s secretary will leave, and Wolfe will cease to function as a bill paying client.”

“So you’re saying you will leave if I don’t do this.”

“You’re smart. That’s why Wolfe hired you.”

“And if I do it Wolfe will fire me. I’ve made a lot of money from his account, you know.”

“I’ll do my best to see that he doesn’t fire you.”

He laughed again. What a funny guy.

“Okay, Archie, I’ll do it against my better judgment. The lien can be recorded today, and Wolfe will be notified by mail. It usually takes about a week. You have until then to try and make sure he doesn’t fire me. Just between you and me, I like it enough to do it free, but to make it on the up-and-up, I’ll have to charge a fee.”

“Of course. Send the bill to me.” Did you really think a lawyer would do anything free?

So I signed the paper in front of his notary. He even promised to put Wolfe off if he called personally. We both hoped that Wolfe would just assume the order had expired.

The third item was the conclusion of that unpleasant chore I had to do while I was in Egypt. The unpleasant chore had been to call Lily Rowan’s apartment and break the dancing date we had for Saturday night. It had been early enough that I got Lily’s maid Mimi out of bed, and all I could do was leave a message. Lily understands that in my line of work I often have a sudden change of plans,

but even so I obviously had a lot of catching up and explaining to do with her. Especially since I was going to hit her up for tickets for Marian Hitchcock and me to the ballet and the symphony and the opera. There was just no other way to get them on short notice.

So I called her and asked if I could drop by. She was home and welcomed me, wondering what I'd been up to like everyone else. I explained as best I could, which wasn't good enough, then asked her about tickets for a foreign guest. She was very gracious and insisted I use her personal season tickets, and said she was delighted I had taken such an interest in the cultural arts. Those were warning signs. She was being sarcastic--she had tried many times to get me more interested in those things. But I didn't have much choice and thanked her, promising I would make it up to her some day. That was going to be some day all right.

The fourth item was the purchase of a new computer for Marian Hitchcock, which we did on our shopping date. I bought the latest for her, and insisted she have all the doodads, then bought the same model for myself. I'm typing on it now, and it works pretty well.

We decided buying three formal gowns was too much, so I took her to a high-class rental shop I knew where she was fitted for two. But she did buy a third from Marcel on Fifth Avenue, and he personally fitted her. She looked stunning in it.

So Marian and I had great fun in a stuffy sort of way. On Monday it was the opera Carmen and the seats were great. I noticed Lily had also managed a seat across the hall, and she had her opera glasses trained on us a lot of the time.

Tuesday was the symphony: Saint Saen's organ symphony and the seats were great there, too. Somehow Lily had found a seat to it as well, and she had her orchestra glasses with her.

Wednesday was poker night. Marian said she preferred to stay in and read. Lily wasn't there. Lon Cohen of the Gazette was there, though, and he was fit to be tied. Fritz was toeing the line, saying we were unavailable. Zero. The official line had been that there had been a shooting on the observation deck and I said that was true. But he knew there had to be more to it, and even had a good guess on what it was. I told him nothing doing on any further info from me and that made him so mad he started harping on the constitution and free speech and freedom of the press. It made him drop two C's to Saul and me.

Thursday was Marian Hitchcock's last night and it was the ballet. Don't ask me what the name was or what it was about; I was all cultured out by then. And Lily wasn't there that I could see, though I admit she could have been in the ceiling sawing at the chandelier over our heads.

Ty James never showed up. It seems he was sidetracked by other matters: the disappearance of a

minor Serbian diplomat and his wife, and accounting problems with the Russian arsenal being among them. No rest for the intrepid, I suppose.

Wolfe did ask me to have Nat Parker come visit on Tuesday. I called Parker's office, and told Wolfe that Parker was not available this week. He scowled, and I said we ought to fire the bum. Reverse psychology, you know--Parker would appreciate it. Wolfe said never mind.

As for the warrant for Wolfe's arrest, Cramer never served it. I called Stebbins on Tuesday to see what was holding up the show, but didn't get through. So I pulled in a favor one of the other officers owed me, and he told me that the warrant had been quietly rescinded. He didn't know anything else, except that both Cramer and the acting DA were in a sour mood. I would pay a good piece of my monthly salary if someone who knows more about what happened would give me a call.

And if you're wondering what the name Tarkolo meant, or why it caused such a reaction in Anna Bathory, your guess is a good as mine. Once, several years ago, a package came for Wolfe from Salt Lake City. In it was a bunch of genealogical data and a bill. None of it seemed to be related to anyone named Wolfe, but Wolfe looked over the data and told me to file it and pay the bill. I vaguely remember the name Tarkolo being in that data, but I'm not sure. Wednesday I looked for that file and it was missing, which seemed even more mysterious. I guess it will just be one of those mysteries we will have live with, along with the mystery of what Wolfe's relationship with Anna Bathory had been. I have my opinions on both.

My days were spent typing on the new computer. I wanted to get this report recorded while the lies were still fresh on my mind. Marian Hitchcock helped me a little, but mainly enjoyed walking to the library and doing whatever it is librarian types do there. She also went on a few sightseeing excursions with her father, which saved me the trouble.

All in all, it was a marvelous week. I was really sorry to see them go. And Uncle Sam would be proud of me: I was the perfect gentleman, taking no liberties not freely given.

You may think I need to revise my specifications on suitable young women. Phooey. Hitchcock was just the exception that proves the rule. And if you think we started calling each other Archie and Marian to our faces, I don't think you're quite following any of this.

Finally, you need to know what happened with the military. General Carpenter arrived Monday and had a conference with Wolfe and Geoffrey Hitchcock while we were shopping. I learned later from Wolfe that it had gone well. The Egyptians had not discovered the General for a good two hours after we had left, and had grilled him pretty well, but it turned out they still thought they had their man and Takhti had persuaded them to let Abbas go under the immunity agreement. Takhti

would almost certainly be able to persuade the leaders back in Iran that Abbas had nothing to do with it, and that it was just an unpleasant twist of fate that prevented them from getting their item.

The problem in London had been the same one Wolfe encountered in New York. The General had ordered us intercepted to get an explanation. Geoffrey Hitchcock had managed to get on the next flight and had found Wolfe at customs. Together they had decided it was time to let the General know the score and had called him. That got them released from customs, and they simply went into the Empire State Building and ascended to the 86th floor with a security guard. They were planning to go higher when we arrived with the bomb. The first bomb had been recovered and removed from Egypt without incident.

My overnight bag arrived by express, nicely packed, on Thursday. I'm still waiting for my Marley.

Friday night I felt the need to think things through. So I went to a place I knew where I could contemplate, a place where I could meditate, a place where I could watch the Knicks clobber the Nets 108-84.

* * *

It was Saturday. The mail had come, and the lien notice from the county recorder was with it. I opened it and placed it second from the top in the stack on Wolfe's desk.

Wolfe had been sanguine all week. He was sanguine when he ate, when he read, when he spoke to me, and even when he slept. He was sanguine when he trimmed the roots of his orchids, and even when the elevator men said they would have to stop repairs until they got the parts they needed.

It was utterly sickening, so I was glad to see that letter in the mail.

I was typing when he came down, via the stairs, from his nine to eleven session with the orchids.

"Good morning, Archie. I trust you slept well?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

He arranged the flowers he had brought in his vase, sat, and rang for beer. I typed. He said,

"Haven't you figured out how to turn off that confounded clicking noise yet?"

"Sorry sir, this computer's still pretty new and I don't know how to do everything yet. I'll try to figure it out today."

"Do so." He reached for the mail.

The first item was a yellow note.

"What's this phone number?"

"It's to the White House."

“In Washington?”

“Yes. The White House in Washington DC, where the president lives.”

“They called? What for?”

“I don’t know. The operator wouldn’t say. Maybe to thank you, or to ask you to go on another mission. Or maybe they wanted your recipe for hominy grits de Wolfe for the federal prison system.”

“Hominy grits?”

“Sorry. A private joke. But the operator did say it wasn’t an emergency, so by your instructions I didn’t put her through to you.”

“Pfui. A rule you break at every opportunity. I would have taken that call.”

“Okay. Sorry. There’s a password so I’ll make the call for you. Do you want to do it now?”

That was bait. He never returned phone messages until he’d answered his mail. Would he this one?

But he didn’t. He took the note and stuck it to his phone.

“Why does that note say ByemeHA?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Just my idea of a joke I guess.”

“Hmph. The sooner that episode is forgotten, the better.”

“You’re right there, but speaking of that episode, I spoke with Bahar on the phone this morning.”

“Miss Ferdowski? In England?”

“Yes. I’ll deduct the cost from my paycheck. She was soused. Thoroughly snocked.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“On the nectar of knowledge. By the way, she sure sounds like an expert to me.”

“Pfui. Two of those stories she told you were from the historian Herodotus, who was noted for his imagination, not his accuracy.”

“Okay. Anyway, she said she was sorry she broke your bust. She would offer to replace it, but she didn’t think you liked it anyway.”

“Bah. You know very well that was a sham. So she told you she killed her stepfather.”

“No. Actually I figured that out myself. She didn’t want to talk about it for obvious reasons. It obviously it wasn’t Abbas. If he had been in there praying he would have been leading the prayer. It would have been a little difficult for him to get that sword if he was doing the talking. So you framed him.”

“I don’t recall calumniating Mr. Abbas.”

“Maybe not, but you implied it and Saad Tayel inferred it. With that nonsense about Nubians and

the throne of Egypt.”

“Indeed. You thought of all this yourself, Mr. Goodwin? Is it possible your neurons are firing again? Hundreds, perhaps even thousands of them?”

“Don’t get sarcastic. But I don’t get what made Tayel mad enough to pull a gun.”

“Pfui. Tayel belonged to the Sunni Muslem sect. Abbas was Shiite. Those two clans have been at each other’s throats for centuries. I merely poked at random until Mr. Tayel’s sensitivities were stirred sufficiently. So tell me, Mr. Goodwin, How did your marvelous gray matter deduce Miss Ferdowsi’s involvement?”

“I knew it as soon as she showed that secret passageway. That peephole was screwy. Why would they put the entrance right out there in the hallway where everyone could see you going in and coming out? No, it had to have a secret entrance, probably from the Great Hall. The library had a secret passage, so the Great Hall could, too. She used it right after she killed Tayel, and that’s why she was there when I looked. She fainted because of what she had done, not what she’d seen. And in that passage somewhere in a heap is a bloody chador. But I still don’t know why she took the trouble to put Tayel’s head there, or broke yours.”

“I commend you, Mr. Goodwin. A brilliant deduction. Miss Ferdowsi has shown me the passage in the Hall. It goes underground in the same manner as the library passage, but I was unaware there was also a passage to the peephole.”

“Then you didn’t know she had done it?”

“Pfui. Of course I knew. It was obvious.”

“How did you know, then?”

“I ask you. Why did she kill him?”

“Because of what he said to her.”

“No. She blamed herself for that.”

“He tried to rape her.”

“No, not rape. Something worse.”

“How could anything be worse than rape?”

“Judge for yourself. Mr. Tayel was forcing Miss Ferdowsi to marry him.”

“Marry him? He was her stepfather!”

“Allowed under Islamic law. If the marriage to the mother is never consummated the stepfather is free to marry her daughter. That passage of the Qu`ran you cited gives that law. Bahar’s mother was deeply indebted to Tayel. He had asked only minor favors, such as the occasional innocent

services of Miss Ferdowsi as she grew. But on this visit he found her, not the precocious child of the past, but an attractive and nubile woman. More than he could tolerate, given that her mother, who Miss Ferdowsi must certainly resemble, had never seen fit to bestow her affection on him even though he wished it more than life itself. His face showed his anguish. That morning Bahar finally returned from the city and reported to Tayel for her hostess duties. Tayel took her to the Hall where he revealed to her the price she must pay for the favor done for her mother. Abbas was summoned to perform the ceremony, which was to take place immediately, but before he arrived they were interrupted by the call for prayers. Tayel locked the doors and forced Miss Ferdowsi to kneel in prayer with him. She was bound by duty and only death, his or hers, could release that bond. The sword was handy, he was engrossed in his recrudescing religion, and she chose his death over hers.”

“Wow. Okay, I’ll admit marriage to that guy would be worse than rape, but why the bust? Why did she break yours?”

“Pfui. That was an accident. Do you think anyone would deliberately create that crash and risk discovery?”

“No, I suppose not. But why?”

“She was moving my bust to make space for Tayel’s head next to Khentkawes. My bust slipped on the smooth marble and fell to the floor.”

“Khentkawes? What does she have to do with this?”

“In an excavated chamber was found figures of Khentkawes’ servants, each one with their hands missing. According to the historians, Khentkawes’ daughter killed herself because her father raped her. The servants stood by and let it happen, so Khentkawes punished them by severing their hands. Even with the shock of what she had done, Miss Ferdowsi could not resist poetic justification of her act through revealing that parallel. The Persians have always been poets first.”

I took a breath. Mrs Tayel. I think I would have killed him myself if I’d known that. I said,

“A brilliant deduction, Mr. Wolfe. Your neurons must be firing, too. By the way, I took the liberty of inviting her here.”

“Miss Ferdowsi?”

“Yes. The next break she gets.”

“Not in this house.”

“Nuts. You’ve had killers, and women, and women who were killers stay here before. You know, Takhti probably hasn’t won her mother’s hand just yet, and he’s been too late twice now. I’ll bet if you put your mind to it you could beat him out. I’ll take Bahar, if it’s agreeable to her. It would be

perfect. They could sit here in the office: Mother fanning you, and Bahar fanning me. Fritz wouldn't be jealous because I doubt either of them has ever fried an egg. They could tell us the stories of the Arabian Nights. And think about it. If we married them, you and I would be ..."

"Archie!" I'd gone too far.

"Yes sir?"

"Shut up."

"Yes sir."

I turned to the computer, opened the control panel, and bumped the keyclick volume up a tad as Wolfe reached for his mail.

I might let him stay if he promises to behave himself. And buckle down to some work.

At least, until the next bomb goes off.

Author's Note

Nuclear bombs? Saving New York City? What business do such clichés have in a Nero Wolfe story? Nero Wolfe stories are not noted for such things, but for their refreshing departure from the hard-boiled American detective and suspense novels.

Rex Stout, the creator of Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin, died in 1976 leaving a legacy of seventy two Nero Wolfe stories written over a span of forty years. That should be enough reading to satiate any reasonable person, but I love Stout's characters so much I will always want more.

So I wrote these stories, even though I'm not a writer by trade. The first one was just a lark, written as a birthday gift to my brother Paul (who introduced me to Wolfe). The second was an exercise in learning to write better. The third was my first serious effort, written as a sorta tribute to Rex Stout. I say sorta because it is possible that Stout would not appreciate anyone copying his characters.

But I don't care. Stout's characters are so fun to write that it's his own fault when he gets copied. Don't forget though, that this book is fake Wolfe. A counterfeit. You should go to the bookstore and get the real things.

They are still available. My favorites are *Fer de Lance* (his first), *The Golden Spiders*, and *The Doorbell Rang*. My third story refers to *The Black Mountain* a lot. You can't go wrong with any of them, though.

Back to the clichés. Stout was very active politically, with strong and emotional opinions. One of his causes was his opposition to nuclear proliferation. He opposed nuclear weapons at a time when doing so was considered unpatriotic by most.

Now that we have far more weapons than we can responsibly deal with, his wisdom is evident. I believe we are in greater danger now than we were in the height of the cold war simply because of the sheer number of weapons in politically unstable places. So this is a mild-mannered call from a mild-mannered guy who says it's time we get rid of these things.

And my deepest apology to all New Yorkers. No one should have their city threatened, in fiction or otherwise. All I can say is, at least you got saved in style.

Glenn Dixon