

Welcome

To

Death

A Nero Wolfe Mystery by
Glenn Dixon

Written 1995 Glenn Dixon

To Rex Stout

It's a naive wine without any breeding, but I think you'll be amused by its presumption.

--James Thurber

One

I was a little sore at things in general that morning, and that didn't help any. Cold and gray January mornings aren't normally enough to get me down: a good brisk walk in the cold is often just what I need to clear my head and get the day's plans sorted out. But I had just finished a walk to the bank and, returning to the brownstone where Nero Wolfe, my employer and I, Archie Goodwin, live on West 35th street in Manhattan, I wasn't feeling any better than when I had started out.

I couldn't put a finger on what was eating me, and that bothered me even more. Wolfe and I have been working with (or against, depending on who and when you ask) each other as private investigators for some time now, with Wolfe providing the brains and me providing absolutely everything else including mobility, motivation, and guts. I said everything else, but a brain as great as Wolfe's also requires fuel in the form of three gourmet meals cooked daily by Wolfe's personal chef, Fritz Brenner, and visual stimulation, namely orchid tending in our roof greenhouse, which Wolfe does every day from nine to eleven in the morning and four to six in the afternoon with Theodore Horstmann. Fritz and Horstmann also live with us, Fritz having his personally decorated room and den in the basement, and Horstmann with his room on the roof where he can watch his, or rather Wolfe's, babies grow.

There is really no doubt that Wolfe has a great head, certainly the best detective head in New York, if not the world. The problem is with the transmission. Getting Wolfe's thinking into high gear is part of my job and is far from easy. So usually when I'm this way I'm sore at Wolfe for not kicking into action when he should.

But that morning, having come back from depositing a ten thousand dollar fee for completing a neat little job that had collared a penny-ante con man who tried to bite off more than he could chew, I wasn't upset at Wolfe for not performing. Like I said, I just couldn't put my finger on it.

Even though I wasn't mad at Wolfe, habit forced me to take things out on him. When I walked into the office on the ground floor of the brownstone and saw him at his custom-made desk leaning back in his custom-made chair reading, I had to say something.

"I have decided, now that the check is deposited, and since I do the bookkeeping around here, that I will pay myself a bonus for that job we just did. After all, it was me who put it on the line when things got rough."

No response. When Wolfe is reading, he doesn't like to be interrupted. Which, of course, made it imperative that I do just that. I went to my own custom-made desk, which is against the east wall of the office. Wolfe's desk is there too, in the southeast corner, but he has his desk arranged so he sits

behind it with his back to the wall. His desk insulates him from people, especially female, whose visits he must tolerate as part of his work. I sat at my desk and turned to him,

"I've been thinking of quitting the detective business and becoming an honest-to-gosh policeman. They've had three cops killed in the city proper in the last four months, and they could use an intrepid man of action like me."

Wolfe slowly leaned forward in his chair, and made a face that told me I had gone far enough. He turned down the corner of a page in his book, set it on the desk, and turned to me.

"Archie, kindly confine your remarks to substance."

I had my own ideas about substance, and had a suitable reply, but I capped it. After all, how could anyone know more about substance than Wolfe? He had a seventh of a ton of it, nearly twice what I had, tacked to his five-foot eight-inch frame. I smiled and said,

"Okay, I'm sorry for interrupting you, and I won't dip into the till beyond my usual salary. But the cop killer, whoever he is, has really got the boys in blue scrambling. I saw Purley Stebbins yesterday when I went down to the precinct to talk about the Rawlings case, and he's fit to be tied."

"Perhaps so, but it's not our affair. Leave it to their Homicide Department. They have shown themselves very capable in these matters."

"That was before Inspector Cramer took early retirement. Now that Homicide is being run by that Lennings guy from the East side, Stebbins says that nothing is being done right."

"That may be," Wolfe conceded. "Despite his occasional animosity toward us Inspector Cramer was an adept investigator and administrator. Filling his shoes won't be easy."

"But we have more pressing matters to attend to," Wolfe continued, leaning onto his desk and pressing the button under the top, one short, one long, to signal Fritz to bring Wolfe's favorite beer. "The propagation cards for the *Cattleyas* have been waiting too long, and we need to order more Ciphogene gas."

Of course, Wolfe's including himself when mentioning the work was figurative only, so I swung my chair around to my desk and began on the cards, which kept track of the genealogy of the ten thousand plus orchids on the roof. If Sergeant Purley Stebbins of the Homicide Department had known that Wolfe considered paperwork more pressing than finding the murderer of three policemen, he would have uttered an appropriate word and continued uninterrupted with his duties, the duties being the harness bull of the department who got the mundane stuff done while everyone else was noodling. Stebbins has a simple philosophy: there are good people and evil people. Good people are the citizens of New York, his coworkers, and especially Inspector Cramer. Evil people are liars, cheaters, murderers and private investigators. It makes it simpler for me to deal with him when

I know where I stand with him, but with me, he can't quite make up his mind because he has the notion that someday I would make a good gumshoe for the department. So every once in a while he cuts Wolfe and me a break when we need information.

Stebbins was pretty upset when Cramer retired. No one expected a career man like Cramer to hang up his hat early, so Lennings, who really had a pretty good record and was liked on the East side, had a rough go from the start. But other scuttlebutt I've heard makes me think that the Homicide Department really is having problems that go deeper than who's in charge.

The murder of the three policemen wasn't helping things any. One of the cops, Joey Martinez, was found stabbed to death, floating in the Hudson not far from here, near 29th street. Things can get a little rough around the river at night, so he may have just been a statistic, but I knew Joey, since his beat used to cover 35th street, and he was as tough as they come. And smart, too, so I'm not so sure. The other two, Jim Bannock and Mike Hu, had been together on a routine assignment in the financial district, gathering evidence at a bank for a fraud case. Their bodies had been found in a garbage bin behind the First New York Bank and Trust. The police had pinned down the clerk who saw them last, and tried to get any angle they could on him and everyone else involved, but could turn up nothing at all. That was four weeks ago and Homicide had been a pressure cooker ever since, with no relief in sight. I used the singular in discussing the murderer with Wolfe because my theory was the killings were related somehow, but according to Stebbins homicide doesn't even know that much. No one likes to see a cop killer get away, not even me, so I was hoping something would break.

But Wolfe was right. It wasn't our affair.

After I had been at the cards about a half hour I noticed a change in Wolfe's breathing pattern and looked up at him. He was leaning back in his chair with his book and was beginning to breath in response to the lunch aroma from the kitchen: beef in Stergay sauce with an asparagus and carrot casserole that was one of Fritz's specialties. The phone rang and I picked it up.

"Nero Wolfe's office, Archie Goodwin speaking."

"Hi, Archie, this is Sue. Have you forgiven me yet?"

"Of course not, dumpling, and I never shall. But I'll take you back in a flash as soon as you're ready to dump the creep."

Sue Spinnick, Sue Langston until about a year ago, had been an occasional dancing partner of mine until she began dating, and eventually married, one of the Assistant District Attorneys where she worked as the secretary for Manhattan's District Attorney, Archibald Skinner. The "creep" was Bill Spinnick, an up-and-coming attorney, and really a fine specimen of manhood, so I didn't be-

grudge her marriage. Especially since I don't like to mislead a girl who has marrying on her mind. But I enjoyed a little banter with her now and again.

"Not likely." She said. "Anyway, I'm sure your day is filled with personal calls from girls on the string. But this is business. Mr. Skinner wants to consult Mr. Wolfe at his earliest convenience."

That was a surprise. It was my impression that Skinner would never give Wolfe the time of day, much less consult him. Over the years, our run-ins with Skinner have been just that, run-ins, and none too pleasant for either side.

"Consult with Wolfe? You know he'd have to come here, since Wolfe doesn't leave his house on business, right? Are you sure it isn't just something to sign?"

"Archie, you know he doesn't tell me what anything is for. He just said to make the appointment. It must be important, because he said that he would go anytime Wolfe could fit him in."

"Okay, let me see." I swiveled to Wolfe. "This is Sue Spinnick, Archibald Skinner's secretary. Skinner want to consult--his word--you at your earliest convenience."

"Indeed," said Wolfe, which for him was an expression of extreme surprise. "Tell him we can meet with him tomorrow at eleven."

"I think you should cut him a little slack. He must be awfully anxious to meet if he wants to consult a worm like you. I believe worm is the word he used when we last talked with him."

"Very well," Wolfe said while making a face. "Tell him to come at six-o'clock this evening. That should still leave time to prepare for dinner."

For Wolfe, preparing for dinner meant sitting back in his chair anticipating and sniffing for at least a half hour. We had enough time, since we usually eat at seven.

I swung to the phone. "Sue, Wolfe says to have him come at six today. And don't forget, I will always have a place at the table for you at the Flamingo."

"Thanks, Archie," She said, meaning it. She was a good dancer. "I'll tell Mr. Skinner."

I got the cards caught up and put away after lunch, just as Wolfe was leaving the office for his four o'clock appointment with the plants. I figured that Skinner must be consulting us on the cop killings, so I pulled the newspapers from the cabinet to review. We always keep the previous three week's *Times* and *Gazette* on file in the cabinet. Then I went to the basement to a room that had a billiard table and other assorted items, including the newspapers going six weeks back. I took them upstairs and began reading. There wasn't much on Joey's killing, although it was rehashed when the Bannock and Hu murders broke. Joey Martinez had been on the West side his entire career, and had become good at smelling out rotten things on the riverfront. His partner, Sid Howe, was usually

with him, but they would break up occasionally on a quiet night to cover more ground. They made sure they saw each other at least every half hour.

They had been apart when Joey had disappeared with no trace. No radio, no yelling, nothing. From what Joey was doing, Sid supposed he had disappeared somewhere about two blocks upstream from where the body was finally found floating three days later, which would have put the murder within six blocks of our brownstone on West 35th street.. Joey had been stabbed once in the back, the knife still in him. The police suspected he had surprised some smuggling or drug operation, but all the leads had fizzled out.

The murders of Bannock and Hu were even a bigger puzzle. They were investigating a simple wire fraud case, and had gone to the headquarters of the First New York Bank and Trust, in its skyscraper on Wall Street, to trace some wire transactions. The clerk gave them access to a terminal and they spent an hour or so looking, thanked the clerk, and left. That was the last time they were seen alive, or at least, alive by anyone who admits it. After they had left the clerk one of the building's maintenance women had been doing the janitors' laundry in the basement when she heard some dull thuds coming from the overhead garbage chute that leads from the ground floor to the building's garbage trailer. The trailer was one of those huge containers hauled by diesel trucks, parked in a below-ground slot made for it behind the building. She had gone upstairs to investigate, and had found nothing. Later, curiosity had got the best of her and she went up, plugged her nose, and stuck her head down the chute. She didn't see much, except what looked like smears of blood in the chute, and she got one of the janitors to check it out with a flashlight. They found a foot sticking up out of the bin. When the police finally hauled Bannock and Hu out of the container, they were both dead with two bullet holes through each of their pumps. One of the bullets had gone through Hu's body and lodged in the wall next to the chute, so they had been shot right there and dumped, which was what the woman heard.

Of course, the police covered that wire fraud case from all ends, and got it in short order, but couldn't find a single thing that connected to the murders. Bannock had been on loan from homicide, and had also investigated Martinez' death, so the cops checked that out too. They thought that they were onto something when they found that two shipping companies, Sterling and Adriatic, had offices in the bank building, and accounts at the bank, and that each had ships moored on the river the night Martinez was killed.

But if there was a connection the police couldn't find it, even after they had checked out the companies' financial records so thoroughly that both outfits lodged a protest with the Mayor's office. Those leads all went sour about two weeks ago. The papers were still running stories about the

murders, but had run so dry on any new developments that they were doing human interest stuff, such as the surviving families' Christmas. None of the newspapers were hinting that Homicide was lax in doing its job, but that would probably start when the family stuff dwindled to nothing.

After I had reviewed the papers I stuffed them all back in the cabinet in case Wolfe wanted to see them, went to my desk and dialed Lon Cohen's office at the Gazette. Lon holds the title City Editor but it's hard to pin down what his real duties are. He seems to have his finger in everything, and is good for the latest information, as long as it's tit for tat. Saul Panzer and Fred Durkin, who you will meet later, and I get together with Lon at Saul's place every Wednesday night to play poker.

When I got Lon, he said,

"Archie! How be you? Feeling guilty about last week, right? Want to give me a chance to win it back?"

I had won twenty or so from him last Wednesday.

"Yeah, I feel guilty all right. Like Fort Knox without guards. Anything new on the cop killings?"

"You and Wolfe got something going? I don't see why not, everyone else is in it."

"Nothing going, Lon. Just chalk it up to curiosity. Wolfe doesn't even know I'm calling."

"Damn. We could use something for tomorrow. We're running out of things fit to print."

"I'll say. Christmas without Dad? Pretty hard up, don't you think?"

"Yeah. But there isn't anything new at all. Maybe we could send a guy out to get Wolfe's angle on the case. How about it?"

I did my best impression of Wolfe,

"Pfui. If someone comes, they won't be admitted."

"C'mon, Archie, have a heart. I try to make an honest living at this."

"You can't convince me of that after you bluffed on that pair of fives. Nothing doing. By the way, anything you're holding back on?"

"Are you kidding? We've shot the load. I wish there was, and we'd print it. About the juiciest thing is that Adriatic Shipping outfit lodged a diplomatic protest because the police were harassing them so much. Threatened to shut down American operations. We said we wouldn't run it because of 'international implications'. Hey, isn't the Adriatic where Wolfe grew up? Maybe we could get him to..."

"Pfui again. Give me a call if you ever get another couple of sawbucks you want to give away."

I hung up. It's the only way to stop him once he starts begging.

When the sound of the elevator, which Wolfe had installed in the brownstone to convey his mass vertically, came down from the plant rooms and Wolfe entered, I said,

"Lon gives you his regards. Wants to talk to you about your childhood. Nothing new on the cop killings, but I reviewed what there is. Do you want a report?"

"Why in the devil would I want a report?"

"Just in case Mr. Skinner brings it up when he consults us."

"We'll meet that contingency if it comes. In the meantime, don't pester me."

When the doorbell rang at six-fourteen, I was anxious to learn what it was that was so important that Skinner would stoop to see us for, so I was disappointed to see another face, one I had never seen before, through the one-way glass in the door. He had the face of a young lawyer. There had been changes in the DA's office, so it could be one of the new Assistant DA's. I opened the door as much as the chain bolt would let me and greeted him.

"Hello. Can I help you?"

"My name's David Ginosar. I'm one of Mr. Skinner's assistants, and I have some material for Mr. Wolfe."

So it was routine paper signing after all. I had read his name in the Times as one of the new attorneys on the DA's staff, starting just last week fresh from bar exams. He was apparently starting as errand boy. Not to discourage him, I gave him my best smile and opened up.

"Come on in. The working class is welcome here."

Helping him with his overcoat in the hallway I noted that the DA's office must be paying well these days. Both his overcoat and suit, a very businesslike gray number that fit him like mine do me, must have been from Sturges' and had set him back at least six hundred. But you have to look your best when starting out. Ginosar was well groomed; short dark hair with a trace of thinning that hinted more to come. His other features were well-placed, nothing unusual.

As I showed him into the office where Wolfe was behind his desk, I announced,

"Mr. David Ginosar from Mr. Skinner's office. Apparently Mr. Skinner still doesn't like worms," which drew a quizzical look from Ginosar that I let pass. When we have only one visitor, we seat him or her in a good-sized red leather chair that is at an angle near the far end of Wolfe's desk. Other visitors are seated in other chairs made of yellow leather scattered around the office, or on a yellow couch on the West wall. Wolfe likes the color yellow, and was wearing a yellow shirt. By the way, if you have the impression that either the office or Mr. Wolfe's attire was in poor taste, forget it. Most people as large as Wolfe have trouble controlling their attire, but Mr. Wolfe is always dressed immaculately, and is sometimes positively snappy. The office wouldn't win any interior decorating prizes because it's filled with eclectic things that Wolfe likes to look at, such as the three-foot world

globe in the corner, and a Hokoran rug on the floor. But it's a good office, and I like it too. As I seated Ginosar, he said to Wolfe,

"Its a pleasure meeting you, I was glad to get the opportunity to see you."

Wolfe grunted, for him a suitable reply, but did not rise. Standing and shaking hands are activities Wolfe avoids if possible. This time, he didn't even bother to explain why he didn't shake hands, but simply said,

"Yes?"

As usual, when we have business, I had taken my place at my desk with my notebook ready. When seated at my desk, visitors in the red leather chair face Wolfe, and I have a partial profile.

Ginosar said, "Mr. Skinner asked me to give you this," as he placed his attache case on his lap and opened it.

Looking back at what happened I don't know if it was what he said, or the way he looked toward me instead of Wolfe, or the way he reached into his case that tipped me that he had a gun. It must have been the way he looked at me, more like a target than a person. Whatever it was, I was already on the way down, under my desk, by the time Wolfe bellowed "Archie! Gun!" and the first shot was fired.

I don't carry a gun unless I'm on business outside, and Wolfe doesn't either, so I was out of options. In those situations you don't think, you just react. I pulled my feet into a squat under me, got as far under the desk as I could, and heaved the desk toward the shots.

There was a crash and a cry from Ginosar as the desk landed, but I was more interested in getting his gun. I couldn't see it because Ginosar and the red leather chair had gone down with the desk and they were behind it. I raced to the other side of my desk to find Ginosar's legs pinned under the top of the desk, with the gun nowhere in sight. The gun must have slid somewhere when Ginosar went down, so things seemed okay for the time being, and I started noticing other things: that I was shaking uncontrollably, that Ginosar was spouting a lot of words that had no substance, and that Wolfe had stood up.

But instead of looking at Ginosar, he was staring wide-eyed at me with what could only be described as a combination of surprise and fear...not of Ginosar, but of *me*.

"Indeed!" Wolfe said.

Two

Fritz, hearing the desk's thump, came in from the kitchen in his apron with his largest butcher knife in his hand. The knife was a Schapp, the best he had, and was sharp as a razor. His showing up with a knife would have been a stupid thing to do if Ginosar still had his gun, but was convenient now. I said,

"Fritz, keep an eye on our guest while I figure out why I'm not dead."

Fritz, showing no surprise and asking no questions, simply marched over to Ginosar, stood stiffly like a little Swiss soldier should, and pointed the knife at him like a sword. My first item of business was to make sure I truly wasn't dead, and calm down a little. An inspection of my would-be corpse showed that I was in remarkably good shape, with a small cut on my neck, probably from something under the desk, and a pain in my upper back that felt like a strained muscle. The area between the former and current position of my desk was strewn with the contents of my drawers, including the guns and ammunition that I keep in the lower right hand one. Since the guns weren't loaded and our guest was guarded, they would keep for a while.

Wolfe, recovering from his surprise, had come around his desk, and together we inspected the back of my chair, which was also custom-made but not as large as Wolfe's. It was still a good chair, though. We found three bullet holes, in nearly a straight line, running down the back of the chair, but no holes on the other side. I learned later from Carter and Sons, who had made our office furniture, and who also did the repairs, that the chair had a hardwood panel in the back that was a little over an inch thick, and that had stopped the bullets cold. I had remembered four shots being fired, and later found that the fourth shot had embedded itself into the top of the desk, apparently when it was headed toward Ginosar. Ginosar had obviously fired at the chair thinking the bullets would still hit me.

Wolfe inquired if I was all right, and getting an affirmative, said,

"That man needs medical attention. Get Doctor Vollmer."

But it was time to find his gun, which I did, to the side and a little under the yellow sofa. It was a Hutchinson 9 mm fitted with a small silencer good enough to keep the shots from being heard on the street. I put it on one of the bookshelves, went to the phone on Wolfe's desk and started dialing Vollmer's number. My phone was in the mess somewhere, and was probably disconnected. I muffed the number the first time, and had to start over. I rarely misdial, but you have to make allowances

for my condition. Doc Vollmer lived and had his office a block east, and was often kind enough to come on the run when we had a medical emergency. His nurse said he would come. I also called 911 because I knew that would be the first thing Vollmer would ask us to do. New York has a good emergency service, but I hate to call 911 because they feel like they need to know everything about not only the situation, but about you and what you had for breakfast. I managed to get them to commit to sending the cops and paramedics without giving away the farm.

Our guest was turning pale, and showing some signs of shock. His cussing had dropped to a murmur, and I told Wolfe,

"We've got to get that desk off him. Grab the other side."

We tipped the desk, which was heavier than I remembered, upright, and found that Ginosar's legs were cocked at a funny angle, both together. They were broken. Vollmer was ringing the doorbell, but I didn't need the doctor to know the breaks were bad. Ginosar was in a lot of pain. Before I went to let Vollmer in, though, I reached inside Ginosar's coat pocket and lifted his wallet. There was no fuss from him as he was on the verge of fainting.

Vollmer, tall, lean and in his late forties, saw me as I opened the door, and wanted to attend to the cut on my neck, which was still bleeding. I told him the real patient was in the office. Like the occupants of our brownstone, Vollmer was a bachelor, and Wolfe liked him because he was competent, readily available, and only said as much as was necessary. While Vollmer was attending to Ginosar, I told Fritz to go watch for the cops, and went to the couch to examine the contents of Raker's wallet. It was Jared Raker instead of David Ginosar, because that's what the driver's license and other items said. They looked real, although I would need a magnifying glass to tell for sure.

Once Dr. Vollmer was absorbed, Wolfe inquired, "Archie, how is it that someone from Mr. Skinner's office was shooting at us?"

"You mean shooting at me."

"Granted, he was aiming at you, but I was certainly next. Anyone wanting to kill me would naturally kill you first."

I suppose that was true but still, I was the sitting duck, not him. He was the sitting mountain. I didn't say anything, but continued with the wallet.

"Well?" Wolfe asked.

"No. Not well. We were set up, but hell if I know what kind of setup it was. This guy's name appears to be Jared Raker, and by the way he handled that gun one will get you ten that he's a pro. He probably kills someone, then writes novels about it afterwards for fun."

"Is there any point in questioning him?" Wolfe asked.

"I doubt he's in the mood to answer anything right now, and if he is a pro, he probably doesn't even know who hired him. You know how it works. An anonymous phone call with instructions, money transferred into a numbered account and the job gets done. We were damn lucky."

"Luck had little to do with it," Wolfe replied. "Your instinctive reactions were responsible for our safety. They originate in the base of the neck, you know."

He must have been right, because the base of my neck was starting to hurt like crazy. Vollmer had cut open the seams on Raker's pants, and stood up, saying,

"There will be a lot of swelling. He's bleeding internally and I'll have to accompany him to the hospital. Let me look at you, Archie."

I returned Raker's wallet to his pocket and stood up for Vollmer to do the neck. Salmon's, our dry cleaner, might be able to get the blood from my brown worsted suit, but my shirt, one of my favorite whites, was a total loss. Doc Vollmer bandaged my neck and examined my back and neck, telling me that I had probably torn a couple of muscles, and that they would start hurting soon. I refused his offer of pain pills. Having just proved myself a full-blown hero, pills seemed out of place.

When the Doc was winding up, Wolfe said to me,

"Get Mr. Skinner's office. There may still be someone there who can shed some light on this."

I picked up Wolfe's phone and dialed. I rarely have to look a number up if I've called it before. This time I got it right the first time, but it wasn't answered until the fifth ring.

"Yeah?"

"Purley? Is that you?"

The voice on the other end was unmistakable. Purley Stebbins answering Skinner's phone could only mean one thing-- someone was dead in Skinner's office.

We both emitted a word, the same one at the same time. But it wasn't funny. Stebbins continued, "Goodwin?! Goodwin! Oh, for crying out loud! It ain't bad enough to have the DA killed, now it's gonna turn into one of them goddam Nero Wolfe messes!"

"The DA is dead? Skinner?"

"Yeah, and don't tell me you don't know nothin about it. Whenever you and Wolfe screw around with our business, its a sure thing that you know more than you're tellin."

"When and how?"

"What do you care? You tell me something for a change."

I covered the receiver and spoke to Wolfe.

"Purley Stebbins. He says Mr. Skinner is dead. Wants to know why we called. How much do I tell him?"

"Confound it!" Wolfe exclaimed, "First this vermin comes in interrupting my dinner hour, and now the police will likely badger me until I have no appetite."

Fat chance, if you ask me. Wolfe, back in his chair, looking persecuted, sighed heavily, and spoke.

"Very well, they will soon find out for themselves, so tell them everything."

"Purley, I was just shot at, here in Wolfe's office, by a man claiming to be the David Ginosar in Skinner's department. Skinner had an appointment to come here at six, and this guy came instead."

"You got shot at by Ginosar? But he's not there. I just talked to him on the phone. He's on his way here."

"No, Purley, listen. The guy claimed to be Ginosar, who we've never met, but after the shooting, I checked his wallet, and his real name says Raker. I think he's a hit man, and Mr. Wolfe and I wanted to know how a hit man knew about our appointment with Skinner, and how he knew we hadn't met Ginosar."

"You was shot at and you ain't dead? Of all the rotten luck!" Stebbins said. There's gratitude for you, after all we've done for him, too. He paused, and continued seriously,

"Archie, I ain't gonna be sleeping at night, first with the cops, and now the DA. I ain't supposed to tell anything, but seein' as Wolfe's finger is in it already, I'll tell you this. Skinner was found about a half hour ago in his office by Sue Spinnick, and she's having a breakdown. He was strangled, and he don't look pretty. The thing that really gets me is it looks like maybe an inside job. Now you say the guy that shot at you knew about your appointment and knew you didn't know Ginosar, which clinches it. Somebody around here is dirty. Where's this Raker? Did you kill him? What do you know that would make someone go after you? Did Skinner tell you something?"

"One question at a time, friend. Raker is here on the floor, with two broken legs, waiting for the ambulance. He can talk, but hasn't said anything. He can hear, but I doubt it's registering. As far as what we know, that's easy. Nothing. Skinner has said nothing to us, and we don't have a clue as to why this guy took pot shots at me."

"C'mon, Archie," Purley pleaded, "I know you and Wolfe hold back, sometimes to get a fee, sometimes out of just plain spite, but this is different and you know it. You gotta come clean on this one. If this Raker was a pro, you would have had to be ready for him, or you'd be dead."

"Sorry, Purley, I'd tell you something if I could, but we really don't know a thing."

Purley emitted another word, same as before, and hung up with,

"Someone will be over."

As I hung up, I told Wolfe,

"Skinner was murdered, of course. Strangled in his office about a half hour ago, discovered by his secretary. Probably an inside job. It could be our friend here, but I don't think so because he would have had to use a rocket pack to get here. Skinner must have been behind schedule; he was apparently still in his office fifteen minutes before he was supposed to show here. Stebbins doesn't believe we don't know anything. Par for the course. Someone's coming. Do you want a full report?"

"No."

"Do you want me to go over there? I might be able to find something out."

"No. You'd be intolerably pestered, and until we learn more, we need not expose ourselves needlessly. If someone comes, they won't be admitted until after dinner."

Which Wolfe knew was futile, now that we had opened the can of worms, or rather, vermin.

The paramedics and first shift of cops had arrived by then, with Fritz ushering them into the office.

Three

As it turned out, Wolfe had plenty of time for dinner after all. The casserole and the sauce had been ruined by circumstances, of course, but Fritz substituted a cheese, bread and cracker assortment that Wolfe always likes. Both Wolfe and I were surprised that no one from homicide had come, but things were out of the ordinary at headquarters. When the paramedics and police arrived Dr. Vollmer took charge, and everyone recognized the urgency in his voice, so he was gone with his patient within ten minutes. As I opened the front door for the gurney, Vollmer, suppressing a grin, said in passing,

"Archie, next time you need some furniture moved, I know someone who has the right equipment."

So I take back what I said about Vollmer only saying what's necessary. The cops had fun with it too. Four had come, which was standard procedure when gunplay was involved, and I knew two of them somewhat because they had been on the West Side beat for a few years now, and we had chinned on a few occasions when there had been trouble at our place. The two I didn't know left with Vollmer. When I had sketched the details for the others they had to have a look at the chair and desk, and they made sure the gun was accounted for without touching it. Upon hearing that we had been in touch with homicide and that Skinner was dead, they knew they needed help and called in using Wolfe's phone.

Rolland, one of the officers, eventually got through to Stebbins on the other end but had a tough time making Stebbins understand what had happened. On the third time explaining the desk, he finally lost any professional decorum and started laughing out loud, which sounded more like a poodle barking than a laugh. I knew it would soon be around the precinct, and probably in the papers that I had done my own hit on a hit man, with a desk. I was going to take some ribbing, which I didn't relish, but hell, I was still intact. Which is more than I could say for the other guy.

So after Roland had hung up I figured that we would have visitors soon, but I was wrong. We were under instructions not to touch anything in the office, which was silly because Wolfe and my fingerprints were all over everything, and Ginosar/Raker had only touched the red leather chair and his gun, and what good were fingerprints anyway? After doing the required paperwork, Rolland and Davis, who was the other cop, felt like maybe they should stay and guard things or something. I

managed to convince them that we could watch things and they left after leaving the instruction not to enter the office until someone else arrived.

One of Wolfe's house rules was that business was not to be discussed at the dinner table, but what had just happened did not qualify as business in my mind, so I brought up the subject as the meal was winding down.

"Okay. I guess the first question is, are we still in danger? And how do we handle it?"

"Confound it, Archie, how should I know? I suppose that we must consider ourselves still prey until we learn otherwise," Obviously, Wolfe didn't consider it business either, probably because the event had infringed on his dinner hour.

"You once said," I reminded him, "that if someone really wanted to kill a person, he would almost certainly succeed, unless the person took extraordinary steps such as skedaddling and hiding in a cave. Is that what we are going to do?"

"Pfui. Our house will serve, since I don't venture outside unless necessary. You can exercise greater caution when out."

"Okay," I replied, appreciating Wolfe's great concern for my safety, "but there are some things we should do, starting with not admitting anyone we don't know and trust. I can call James Security in the morning, and see what they suggest. I think they have metal detectors that fit around doorjambes now. I'm also going to pack a pistol until we figure this."

"Very well," Wolfe said, making a face. Wolfe hates any form of violence, but accepts my carrying a gun as an occupational hazard. "But this is obviously a police matter, whether or not it is connected with the previous police killings. I doubt, with the fracas that is surely taking place at police headquarters right now, that we would get any cogent information from them soon. Indeed, we shall probably be badgered beyond tolerance and learn nothing. We may have to simply wait this out and be content with ignorance."

"Dangerous ignorance, if you ask me. Don't forget that the man you advised to hide in a cave was dead that very day. There are a couple of guys at homicide that I might be able to pull a favor from, especially if they think they might be able to get something from me. I can call them in the morning."

"Then do so, if you think it will help." Fritz had served the coffee, which we normally drink in the office. Wolfe shuddered slightly, probably thinking of the effort it would take to crack something like this. "The police are piqued, and they won't stop until this matter is settled. We may not need to do anything at all. I must admit, though, that the temptation to act is strong; no one should be allowed to fire a gun in my house with impunity."

"Right. But you forgot who he was firing at. I've got to do something. Maybe I really will quit and join the police. At least then I would know a little more about what's going on. "

"Pfui. Your talents would be lost in the morass of bureaucracy." Wolfe tried to lean back in his dining room chair, and grimaced. He wanted his chair in the office. "Let's see what develops when the officers from the homicide department arrive. Perhaps a course of action will reveal itself."

We discussed some other things, such as what to do when we were allowed into the office again. The officers had told me that a van would come for my desk and chair to be taken to the police lab, where they would attempt to dig out the bullets and identify them. I argued with them about it; they would have the gun the bullets were fired from, why did they need my furniture? Bullets stopped by my chair and desk would be impossible to identify anyway. But they just told me to take it up with Stebbins, because he gave the order, and he would be visiting soon.

By the time the coffee was finished, it was after eleven and I had pretty much decided that Stebbins was going to hold his visit until tomorrow. I did sneak into the office for two items. My favorite gun, a Marley .32 with ammunition and shoulder holster, and the book Wolfe had been reading, which he asked me to get. Wolfe often reads more than one book at a time, but this time, it was only one: *Between Silk and Cyanide* by Leo Marks. I delivered it to Wolfe, who was now sitting in his second-favorite chair, an overstuffed wingback in his bedroom. Then I went to the kitchen to help Fritz clean things up, and to thank him for his help with Raker.

"Archie," Fritz said, "you were magnificent! Guarding him was the least I could do."

Fritz, always the proper diplomat, would never discuss the office business directly, but had his ways of making his concerns known. Mostly, his concerns went along the line of whether we had a client or not. Tonight, it was obvious his mind was on our safety.

"You know, Archie, I have that shotgun on the wall in my visiting room. I could bring it up here and have it ready."

The shotgun he was referring to, a beautiful antique, was mounted under a picture of pheasants being flushed by hunting dogs. I doubt it had been fired for longer than I had been alive.

"That's okay, Fritz, you just keep your knife handy, and don't let anyone in you don't know."

We had talked a little longer when the doorbell rang. Normally Fritz gets the door when it's not business hours, but figuring it was Stebbins I told Fritz I would get it. Rounding the corner into the hallway, the view through the one-way glass brought another surprise. Though I was expecting Stebbins the person at the door was even better known to both Wolfe and I.

It was Inspector Cramer, recently retired from the homicide department. As I approached the door I didn't need a metal detector to tell me that the lump under his coat, caused by the Browning that he always wore when on duty, meant he was back on the job.

Four

Cramer, standing a stout six feet even with a head of all gray-white hair always had a round red face, but it got redder whenever he talked with Wolfe.

Putting on my best and most sincere smile, I opened the door and said,

"Welcome, it's wonderful to see you out and about again."

All I got was a grunt in return as Inspector Cramer crossed the threshold. That was pretty much business as usual. As he hung his overcoat on the rack in the hallway, he turned to me and said,

"Is he in?"

This was often Cramer's first question, usually uttered as sarcasm, because Wolfe is always in. This time, the tone and the tiredness in his eyes meant that he was just asking if Wolfe was available.

"I'll have to see," I replied businesslike, realizing Cramer was in no mood for jokes. "Mr. Wolfe is upstairs in his bedroom, but may be willing to come down. Please wait in here."

I ushered Cramer into the front room, took the stairs two at a time up to Wolfe's bedroom, and knocked on the door, getting a positive response from Wolfe within. Entering, I was glad to see that Wolfe was still fully dressed, reading in his chair.

"We have a visitor from Homicide, but it's not Stebbins, it's the man about the chair. Off retirement I presume, because he's carrying his service piece."

"Indeed," Wolfe said, "Mr. Cramer?"

"The man about the chair" was how we referred to Cramer in the presence of company who didn't need to know who we were talking about.

Wolfe continued. "Normally I'm loath to entertain at this late hour, but I'll make the exception in this case. Tell him I'll be down directly."

I returned by way of the stairs to the front room. I never use the elevator-- I don't need it for one, and I couldn't fit in it with Wolfe at the same time for another.

"Mr. Wolfe will be down soon." I told Cramer. "Things must be really hopping down at the precinct for them to get you to quit your life of leisure."

All I got was a disgusted snort, which chopped off the possibility for further conversation, but after a pause, Cramer continued,

"How come I'm in here? What's wrong with the office?"

"Your beat boys sealed it under Stebbins' order," I replied. "We aren't allowed to go in until Stebbins blesses it."

"What for? Is there something I don't know about that makes your office hot? Stebbins told me what happened, but I don't get why he would seal the office."

"Me neither. I think he was just playing it safe. I can't think of any good reason to keep it off limits. The evidence van is coming for the furniture, too. I don't see any reason for that, either."

"I'll take care of the van. Lets go in the office," he said, getting up and moving past me before I could reply.

So I had a chance to show off my desk and chair to the inspector. I had moved both of them back into place, with the help of Rolland when he had been there, and had looked them over. Besides the holes in the back, the chair was in perfect condition. The desk had a broken drawer, and a corner of the top was broken right off, but it was still in pretty good shape. The end of Wolfe's desk had also taken a hit, but it wasn't bad. The red leather chair, where Raker had been sitting, had a small gash in the leather on the front skirt but was still usable so I seated Cramer in it, disregarding the fact that it still probably had Raker's fingerprints on it.

It was hard to tell whether or not Cramer was impressed by what he saw. All he did while I was explaining was grunt often enough to show he was following me. He had pulled one of his cigars out of his pocket, and was chewing on the end, and he didn't like to talk a lot when he was starting on a fresh one. He never lights them, just chews.

When I asked him if he wanted to take the gun, he finally said something,

"I'll get it when I go. The boys downtown are looking into this Raker to see who he is, and when Wolfe comes down we can discuss it. But none of us could figure how you managed to pull it off. I see it now. You had guts, but were darn lucky, too. I'd ask you why you were fingered, but I know it wouldn't do any good until Wolfe is here.

I sat in my chair, faced him with a smile, and said simply,

"Yep."

The sound of the elevator coming down interrupted us, and we were soon joined by Wolfe, who had noticed us in the office instead of the front room. Wolfe rarely stands when a guest enters the room, and now, detouring around Cramer to get to his desk, Cramer didn't bother to stand either. Wolfe nodded his head about a half inch, which for him was a magnanimous gesture, and said,

"Good Evening, Inspector. I'm pleased to see you again."

"Likewise."

"Thank you for returning access to our office."

"Don't mention it."

Silence ensued. Wolfe sat, leaned back, laced his fingers over his stomach, and regarded Cramer through half closed eyes. Cramer was leaning forward in his chair, fingering his cigar.

Wolfe finally spoke. "Would you like something? Beer, perhaps? That is what I'm having." Wolfe looked at me. In the late evening refreshment duties usually fall to me unless prearranged with Fritz. I waited for Cramer's answer.

"Naw, I don't need anything. Just enjoying silence after the fiasco down at the station. I've had a lot of quiet since I retired, so I've gotten used to it."

"Your retirement was a surprise. Neither Mr. Goodwin nor myself suspected you were contemplating it."

"It was a surprise to me, too. Someday maybe I'll tell you about it, but not tonight. I'm working again. Temporarily-- for Internal Affairs."

"Of course. Mr. Skinner's death. All resources are surely involved." Wolfe said, nodding to me. I went to the kitchen to get Wolfe's beer, and found Fritz already preparing it. He was also pouring a glass of milk for me, something I enjoy in the evening, but I told him,

"Thanks for the milk, Fritz, but could you make it brandy and a couple of aspirin instead? My neck's killing me."

"Certainly."

I returned to the office. Cramer was speaking.

"It's an awful mess. The Mayor's down there, and everyone else you can name. My people can't get anything done because everyone wants a report every half hour."

So Cramer isn't as retired as he thinks he is, still referring to the homicide squad as his people.

Cramer continued, "And that's not all. The uppity-ups not only want reports, they want to take charge, for crying out loud! And they're looney-- they want to hire anyone they can think of to help. They've got the FBI down there, and they've even talked about hiring a psychic! That's why I'm here instead of Stebbins-- they want to hire you!"

"As a psychic?" Wolfe asked. "I'm afraid my thought process, convoluted as it may be, does not yet tread the ludicrous."

"Not as a psychic, as a consultant. The brass wants you to help on this. I'm not sure I agree-- you've been a pain in the neck--but sometimes you pull off some good work."

Good work, nothing, I thought as I took the conversation, in my own brand of shorthand, in my notebook. Wolfe has pulled off some miracles, and Cramer knew it. Cramer just didn't like to swell Wolfe's head any more than it already was, which was an okay philosophy by me, though impractical.

I looked up to get Wolfe's reaction. I honestly didn't know how Wolfe would take the idea of working for the police. It's a cinch that under normal circumstances Wolfe would refuse. But Wolfe, even though he had not said so, was committed to finding who was responsible for hiring Raker--no one could shoot at one of his men with impunity, as he put it. And to do that he would need the cooperation of Cramer and the police. Wolfe also knew that if he refused to take the job, I might really up and quit. Wolfe, making a grimace, replied,

"Preposterous. Your department can't afford my services. I charge exorbitant fees."

"Don't I know it." Cramer said. "But we thought you might be willing to make a concession, seeing as how you are involved already. We are prepared to give standard consulting fees--maybe a little more."

"Pfui. An ego, once seduced by cupidity, cannot afford a charitable precedent."

"Phooey yourself," Cramer retorted. "This isn't a precedent. You've been known to work for the government pro bono before. Well, we're the government too, you know. The New York City government, which is still part of the good old USA, I think, although you wouldn't know by looking on the street sometimes."

Wolfe made a face. The idea that Cramer and the homicide department were part of the United States government--which Wolfe respected, having seen alternatives--was a bit of a stretch.

"Hmph," Wolfe snorted. He paused as Fritz entered and served Wolfe his beer, in a chilled bottle, and me my brandy and aspirin. Wolfe opened the bottle, and dropped the cap into his top drawer. He uses the caps to keep track of his weekly quota, which is about a drawer-full. He poured the beer into his glass and let the foam settle until there was just enough to cover his upper lip, then he drained the glass. Taking a handkerchief from his top right hand drawer, Wolfe dabbed at his lips, and sighed.

"If Mr. Goodwin and I were to work for the police, we would need some guarantees and information. I will not be stonewalled or fired if I begin poking sensitive flesh. Do you have authority to provide such guarantees?"

"If you take the job, I'll do my best to make sure you get everything we have, and that no one will shake you loose without a legitimate reason. That's the only guarantee I can give you right now," Cramer replied.

"Hm. From you, that's sufficient," Wolfe said, paying Cramer a compliment. "But before I jump, I must know more about the pit. What can you tell me?"

Cramer pulled out his cigar and inspected it, sitting back. Then he suddenly jammed it back into his jaw and leaned forward.

"Okay, I'll spill it all, except a couple of things I promised we'd hold till tomorrow. First of all, we know that Skinner's dead! I saw the corpse myself, and it wasn't moving at all! I didn't even have to needle the medical examiner to figure that, so you can see that my investigative skills are still as sharp as ever!"

Cramer pulled his cigar again and looked at it as if wondering where it had come from. Then he continued,

"Somebody hit him on the head, probably with this smooth carved marble ball, about the size of a baseball, that was displayed on his desk. Then they cut the cord from the blinds in the office, wrapped it around his neck, and tied it tight. To get leverage, they tied one end of the cord to the leg of his desk, and pulled on the other end while he was down. We don't know yet if it was the blow that killed him, or the cord, but looking at it I'd say it was the cord. Judging by his position, and some other things, we think he was working at his computer, with his back turned from the door to the hallway. Someone could have sneaked in, done the job, and been out in less than five minutes. Other than that, we don't know a damn thing."

"Surely you know more," Wolfe, sitting back, eyes half closed, mused. "What was he working on? Who did he confide in? How was the shooting at this office connected? Don't you have any suspects?"

"One at a time, dammit. His secretary says that by the way he was acting, something was up, but she didn't know what. She had gone to the copying service on the first floor, like she does every night, and had been gone for about twenty minutes when she came back and found Skinner on the floor. No one else knows much, either. As for what he was working on--everything. He liked to keep his finger in just about anything going, as you know. We think it's connected to the cop killings, since that was his hottest deal, but we don't know anything about what he found out. The shooting in your office is a zero too. No one, including Ginosar, knows anything about it. As for suspects, well, there's the mayor..."

"The mayor is a suspect?" Wolfe slightly opened his eyes.

"Lemme finish. There's the mayor. He's the only one who isn't suspect. He was giving a speech in Harlem at the time. But hell, you might as well throw him in, too, since he could have had it done. So we've got it down to the residents of the metropolitan area and the burgs, unless you want to look into plane schedules." Cramer snorted in disgust.

"Surely you've narrowed it down. Do you not know who was in the District Attorney's offices at that hour? Don't you keep any logs?"

"Yeah, sure. We keep a log all right. A worthless one. We used to have a person at the entrance to every department in the building who would sign visitors in and out, and keep an eye on everything else. But someone got the bright idea that they could save a few bucks by putting in these fancy electronic card badge scanning gizmos. Now there are electrically locked doors where the people were, and you have to slide your badge through a slot in a box next to the door to get in or out. The boxes send your badge number to a computer that keeps the log for you. Pretty high tech, huh? But totally useless. Even though everyone is supposed to use the cards, when someone goes ahead of them, they just slip through, too. Anyone who really wanted to could defeat the system with no trouble at all. But they didn't need to in Skinner's case. That's because Skinner liked to make visitors to his department feel welcome, so he would prop the doors open. Bam... a two buck door stopper, and there goes your whole security system. Skinner had the doors propped open from about four in the afternoon until about five-thirty, when a security guard came by and closed them. Not only that, but Goodwin can tell you that Skinner's office door is around the corner at the end of the main hall, and it's next to the fire stairway. Anyone could have come in by way of the main hall, or the stairway, done the job, and come out without being noticed at all.

Cramer looked disgusted.

"We're pretty sure Skinner had his office door propped open, since that is how it was when Spinick came back. Skinner liked to make people feel welcome in his office, too. So because Skinner wanted to provide a welcome, we have no idea who was there."

I was thinking, Skinner provided a welcome all right. . . a welcome to death.

Cramer pulled the stogie.

"We checked with the security office to get a printout of the computer log on the off chance that it might tell us something anyway, and they couldn't do it! They said no one had ever asked for an actual printout of the log, and no one knew how to make the computer cough it up! How do you like that?"

"Not surprising," Wolfe mumbled. Wolfe's attitude toward computers is the same as his attitude toward any machine including, and especially, cars, trains and airplanes: they are untrustworthy and dangerous. A few years ago Wolfe bought a computer for the office when he visited Lewis Hewitt, who raises orchids on his estate in Long island, and found he was using one to keep track of propagation records. We bought the same model and the right program and I started keeping the germination records on it. A little later, Wolfe had hybridized a cross between a *Brassacattleya* hybrid from Charles Briggs in Boston, and one of the stock he had received from John Dikes, an orchid hunter in Brazil, and it was good enough to name. But when I tried to get the germination record so

Wolfe could register it, the record was gone. Gone from the computer, gone from the backup disks I had made. We got experts in, but the record was simply not there. Wolfe eventually figured out what the record was, but has never trusted computers since. We have now switched back to germination cards kept manually, by yours truly.

We still use the computer for various jobs, but if you ask me computers are overrated.

Five

Cramer paused, and began looking around the office. He got up and walked over to the globe.

"Maybe I'll have a beer after all."

I got up and went to the kitchen. Fritz was still there, but I told him never mind, I'd get it, and took a bottle and glass from the fridge, opened it and put it on the tray Fritz brought. When I returned, it didn't look like anything had happened. Cramer was still over by the globe staring at it. I think he was trying to figure out how far the suspect could have traveled by now. Wolfe had his eyes closed. I put the tray on the small table that would be at Cramer's elbow when he sat again.

Eventually Cramer returned to the chair, poured the beer, and drank it down about half. Finally he continued,

"So we're going the rounds, asking who was where and what they saw, but haven't pinned anything down yet, especially with the brass stirring everything up. Most of the attorneys on the staff say they had left the building by then, but just down the hall at the Homicide Department most of the people were still around. That's about it. So I'm here to hire you, and also because we're hoping you might be able to remember some little thing you haven't told us yet."

"I gave you all I have, which is trifling." Wolfe said. "What makes you think Mr. Skinner's death is connected with the police killings?"

"Nothing specific, just a gut feeling, and the fact that murder is involved. It's a pretty sure thing, in my opinion. Now things are so crazy at headquarters that I'm worried that we're going to trip up somewhere, and either screw up evidence or get someone else killed."

Cramer leaned back into the chair, and said in a low voice, more to himself,

"Screw up evidence...huh."

Wolfe's eyebrows went up,

"Ah...some evidence has already been compromised?"

"Sure." Cramer replied. "Happens all the time." Cramer sat regarding Wolfe.

"Look," Cramer said at length, "I'm not supposed to tell anyone, but what the hell. There was some evidence screwed up. Lost, actually."

Cramer came forward in the chair and continued,

"We were investigating Joey Martinez' death on the riverfront. One of our new assistant DA's, Tammy Adrian, was assigned to Homicide and was collecting stuff on the ships that were docked at

the riverfront that night. Nothing special, just routine. But she lost the file. Or rather, she left the file in the stenographer's pool, and no one could find it after that. She should have known better than to leave it there where it could get lost, but she was new, and basically a nice kid, so we should have cut her some slack, I suppose."

I had not met or seen Tammy Adrian, but her reputation as the most attractive attorney on Skinner's staff had reached me from two different sources, so she was high on my list to meet.

Cramer went on,

"But I was having a rough day, and I lit into her a little when I found out what happened. Nothing more than I would do to any of my own people, but I told her she was off the case."

Cramer paused, leaned back, and looked disgusted.

"That would have been that, except for Mary Dunning."

Silence ensued. Wolfe led on,

"Mary Dunning?"

"Yeah. You know her, God's gift to feminism. She's Skinner's most senior staffer, and she took Adrian under her wing. Persuaded her to file a formal complaint against me. Sexual harassment." Cramer exploded, "Me! Sexual harassment! Hell, everyone knows I don't discriminate against females. I treat everyone rotten." He leaned back and tucked his chin into his chest.

He was right, about the discrimination, I mean. I've dealt with several of his female employees over the years, and the message is the same. Cramer is a good employer, but has no tolerance for mistakes. He would have given a male DA the same lecture. Maybe worse.

"I take it things degenerated after that." Wolfe said.

"I'll say. We had a meeting with a bunch of attorneys and me, to hash things out. Talk about a stacked deck. When it came time to present the complaint, there wasn't just the one thing, but a whole list! One complaint was that I made a pass at Tammy! Me! I don't know how Dunning persuaded Adrian to support that crap, but no one in my department manufactures evidence. No one!"

Cramer was livid. I couldn't imagine Cramer making a pass at one of his assignees. Of course, when it comes to sexual behavior, there are a lot of things I can't imagine that happen anyway. But with Cramer, it was just too far out in left field. He continued,

"I lost it. That Dunning woman is irritating enough normally, always wondering about whether she's being wronged instead of worrying about the case at hand. But making up evidence really got me. I ended up cuffing her. In a room full of leeches! How's that for smart?"

"You hit Ms. Dunning?" Wolfe asked.

"Yep. Not bad. Nothing that would show after an hour. But I was dead."

"Indeed you were. With a room full of wolves nipping at your heels you gave them your vitals. How did you avoid criminal charges?"

"Only by agreeing to take early retirement, and agreeing to keep mum. I was out the next day."

Now, you may be thinking that Cramer hit Dunning because she was a woman, or because she was making trouble for him. But I think it was more likely that he hit her simply because she had made things up. Cramer once took a swing at me because I accused him of being on the take, which I had made up because I was sore at the time.

"A regrettable loss to New York." Wolfe mused. "What made them ask you back?"

"That's how hard up they are, that they would get me back. By some miracle Commissioner Hombert and Skinner liked me, and tried to get me back earlier, but it was no go. Now things are hot enough that Dunning and Adrain finally said it would be okay if I came back until these murders are solved."

"A noble gesture." Wolfe said sarcastically. "I'm surprised you wanted to reenter that den of thieves."

"I would say to hell with it, if it weren't for Martinez, and Bannock and Hu, and now Skinner." Cramer paused. "The way Bannock and Hu were killed--shot, then dumped down the chute to the dumpster, really gets me. Bannock was my man, you know."

"Yes. The papers mentioned that. I thought they were investigating a fraud case, not a murder," said Wolfe.

"They were. We loaned Bannock to fraud because Bannock was good with computers. He knew how to find things in bank records."

"I see." Wolfe opened his eyes and looked at the wall clock. Quarter to one. My watch said the same. "And Bannock also investigated the Martinez murder?"

"Sure. Everyone did. But we can't find the connection, if there is one. Two shipping companies, Sterling, and Adriatic, have offices in the bank building where Bannock was investigating. Both companies had at least one ship docked on the Hudson the night Martinez was killed, but if Bannock and Hu went up to either office no one is telling, and we can't find anything else. Losing the file on the shipping companies didn't help any. The clerk that helped them in the bank is a doofus, and no help at all. All he says is they came with a subpoena, looked at the computer for a while, showed him what records they got, and left. Nothing more. The clerk is supposed to watch the officers to make sure they only get what they are supposed to, and it would have helped us if he had, but he was too damn lazy. An hour later, and the lady hears their bodies going down the garbage chute. We can't account for the hour."

The doorbell rang. Cramer and Wolfe both sat back in their chairs for a respite, Cramer chewing his cigar, and Wolfe with his eyes closed and fingers laced over his middle.

Fritz entered. "Someone I don't know, sir, so I didn't answer. Perhaps Mr. Cramer knows him?"

"Yeah," Cramer said. "I asked for anything new to be delivered here."

"Archie, could you admit him?" Wolfe asked me, and I went.

It was just the homicide gopher, whom I had seen around, and he didn't need or want admission. He handed me a packet of stuff, I thanked him, and that was it.

Resisting the temptation to see what it was, I gave the packet to Cramer and returned to my desk. Cramer spent a few minutes looking at some items, then began passing them to Wolfe.

"Nothing much" Cramer explained. "Photos of Skinner, and it looks like the security guys finally figured out their computer. Here's the printout."

As Cramer unfolded the listing to look at it, I went to Wolfe's desk to look over his shoulder at the pictures. Stebbins was right. It wasn't pretty. The photos clearly showed the cord still in place, with one end dangling and the other tied to the leg of the desk, but someone had cut it, probably in an attempt to revive Skinner. The photos were nicely colored, and it was a sure thing that even if Skinner was dead when the cord was tightened, the corpse was still trying to breath. Another photo showed a detail of the back of Skinner's head, with a perfect concave dent in it.

"Hm." Cramer interrupted. "Skinner had the doors open till 5:25. Pretty obvious, since no one ran their cards through the slot until then. Except for Lambert. I wonder why he ran his card through at five?"

Cramer got up and showed the listing to Wolfe. There were two main columns, one for outgoing people, and one for incoming people. The outgoing column was organized into two subcolumns indicating time and cardholder. The region Cramer was showing listed Lambert at 5:00:20 PM, accurate to the second:

4:22:05 PM	Visitor 320
4:24:21 PM	Dunning, Mary
4:26:03 PM	Skinner, Archibald
5:00:20 PM	Lambert, Walter
5:25:42 PM	Security 92
5:27:59 PM	Spinnick, William
5:28:02 PM	Adrian, Tamera
5:32:20 PM	Spinnick, William

5:40:29 PM Ginosar, David

"See here." Cramer explained. "Skinner used his card to open the door at 4:26, and the security guard, who runs his card through every slot as he makes his rounds, closes it at 5:25. Lambert ran his card through the door when it was open. I wonder why?"

"Habit, perhaps." Wolfe said. "Who is Walter Lambert?"

"Skinner's law clerk. A different sort of fellow, but that's okay. It takes all kinds. He is actually an attorney, member of the bar, but couldn't cut it as a DA. Couldn't handle the courtroom stuff, I think. Probably couldn't lie effectively. However, he's a top notch clerk-- Skinner relied on him for practically everything."

"Would Mr. Skinner confide in him?"

"Maybe. But we got him out of bed and down to headquarters tonight. He's there now, and says Skinner didn't tell him anything."

"What are his habits? Is he fastidious enough to follow the direction to run his card through the slot even though the door was open?"

"Maybe. Clerks and librarians. I know that he is single, never married, and leaves each evening at five to spend some hours in the main branch of the library. Lives alone. No social life that I know of. Been a dependable employee. That's about all I have right now."

"What about Mr. Spinnick leaving twice? Is that normal?"

"Sure. If you forget something, you go back, and have to run the card through again. Nothing fishy there. By the way, Bill says that Sue left with him to go to the copying office, so I suppose that's why her card didn't go through. Like I said, pretty worthless."

"Perhaps." Wolfe leaned back and closed his eyes. Cramer gathered up the listing and the photographs and returned to the chair.

After a moment, Wolfe spoke,

"Mr. Lambert says he knows nothing?"

"Uh-huh. What do you think?"

"I think that if anyone could unravel this mess, it would be Mr. Lambert, since he apparently was intimate with Mr. Skinner's activities. It may be wise to keep him for questioning tonight. Perhaps something will reveal itself."

"Have you got something?" Cramer asked hopefully. Although Wolfe scoffs at the notion that he has psychic powers, I think that Cramer sometimes wonders.

"No. I have nothing. It just seems prudent."

"We'll see. Its tough to keep a lawyer under your thumb. There's also a note in the folder that your shooter has a record. They're getting it together now." Cramer paused. "That's it, that's pretty much the whole bag. So are you in?"

Wolfe heaved a sigh, and then said, "Very well. Mr. Goodwin and I will engage to help investigate the death of Mr. Skinner, along with the shooting in this office, provided we receive adequate support from your department. I count on you to assure that. We shall not charge a fee that would be considered exorbitant. The fee will be based on a daily rate, plus expenses. I reserve the right to withdraw if, in my judgment, it is necessary. I have your word that you will not terminate our efforts unreasonably."

"Okay, so you're in." Cramer, said. "I'm your client. I know your aversion to sharing things with the police, but now I'm your employer. So spill everything Skinner told you."

Wolfe leaned back, regarding Cramer. At length, Wolfe sighed and said,

"I have already. Mr. Skinner has told me nothing."

Cramer jumped from his chair, slapped his palm on Wolfe's desk, and yelled,

"Damn you, Wolfe, we know Skinner told you something! We know he hired you to investigate something! Now open up!"

"Sit down!" Wolfe bellowed. "Confound it, this office has seen enough confusion today! Compose yourself, or we have no agreement. How in the devil would you know that Mr. Skinner hired me?"

Cramer stood staring at Wolfe. Maybe he was trying to decide what to do next, or maybe he was trying to stare Wolfe down. If he was, it wasn't working. Wolfe, not liking to look up at people, had simply closed his eyes. At length, Cramer stepped back into his chair. Pulling a paper from his pocket, he said,

"Okay, we were holding this, and still are. You would have got it tomorrow, but I'll give it to you now. This is confidential. We don't think Skinner was at his computer when he was killed, we know it. He was writing his journal entry, which he does every night before he goes home. Only tonight, there was no journal entry on the machine when his body was discovered. That's because the murderer had seen it, and deleted it."

Cramer leaned back, and tapped the folded paper on his fingers.

"But the murderer didn't know that on Skinner's computer, and I guess on most computers, a deleted entry doesn't actually get erased completely right away. Skinner's secretary knew Skinner's habit of typing in his journal every night, and wondered why there wasn't anything. So we got one of

our computer experts in, and he found tonight's entry had been deleted, and got it back. This is it. Take a look."

Cramer handed the folded sheet to Wolfe. As Wolfe unfolded it, I got up and went around to Wolfe's desk to get a look, too. The entry was fairly short, headed by the date:

11 Jan Monday

Spent morning with Brady and Ginosar preparing argument strategy for Davis case. Sat in on deposition from construction worker on the Spiro building fraud case. Lunched with George Spelling at Daihatsu bank, told him we'd do all we could to prosecute wire fraud cases, but that they're hard to track down and get good evidence on. Discussed the murders with him.

Attended 2:30 meeting in homicide department regarding status of Bannock/Hu investigation. Linnings suspects someone in either the Homicide Department or my department of treachery, I don't know why. But if the internal affairs people find him we will prosecute him with a vengeance. No real progress on the investigation since I last checked.

I myself came across something that needed checking. In light of Linning's suspicions, I didn't feel it wise to have the police check, so I hired Nero Wolfe to look into it. It's hopefully nothing; this person has been, generally, a good member of the team. But if something comes of Wolfe's inquiry we will prosecute this person regardless of past service. I hope nothing comes of it.

Spent the evening

The phone rang as Wolfe and I were reading. Wolfe said,

"The hour is late, ignore it."

I replied,

"It could be for Cramer." and picked it up.

"Archie? This is Lon, remember me? I'm the guy who was so charitable to you last Wednesday. You call up, ask about the cop killings, and then Skinner gets choked and you enter the deskathlon. What happened there today? You gotta give me something."

"Sorry, Lon, in conference. Besides, I'm not thinking straight. Call me in the morning."

"C'mon, Archie. Skinner's dead, and you get shot at, and you button up? Have a heart. I gotta have something by two, you know that."

"Sorry, life is full of disappointments and betrayals. Get used to them. I'll talk to you tomorrow. As usual, you'll get whatever we have first, if and when."

I cradled the phone while it was still protesting, and turned back to the paper. Wolfe dropped it to his desk when I began to return to mine.

"Remarkable." Wolfe said to Cramer. "It would certainly appear that Mr. Skinner hired me. But I have no recollection."

"How convenient." Cramer said, disgusted. "You and Reagan."

"We can speed this up, Inspector. I state now, and give you my word, that Mr. Skinner did not hire me, and I know nothing about what he was investigating. He had an appointment with me at 6:00, but did not show up. That is all I, or Mr. Goodwin, know about this matter."

Inspector Cramer stared at Wolfe. He knew, better than anyone, that when Wolfe gives his word, there is no more discussion. Wolfe can lie when convenient, but not when his word is involved.

"Then how come Skinner wrote that?" Cramer asked, "I don't get it."

"Is it possible that Mr. Skinner records his planned evening activities in advance? If things go according to plan, there is nothing to change, and his entry is nicely finished and saved each evening. If changes are necessary, he could still go back and modify. Is Mr. Skinner the type of person who would do that?"

Cramer rubbed his lip, watching Wolfe. "He could be. I never thought of that. Skinner was one for organization, and I wouldn't put it past him to write in advance. But look, the evening entry is unfinished, so he wasn't doing that."

"Perhaps he was in the process of doing that when he was interrupted by his murderer. It would be worth inquiry of those who knew him better."

"We'll do that. So you leave me with a big fat zero."

"I'm afraid so. But you may get more than you bargained for. Although you intended to merely get information, you got my commitment to find the culprit in the bargain. I'm on the chase, whether you like it or not. Can you get them here tomorrow?"

"Who?" Cramer asked.

"The principals, those who are suspects, anyone who might be able to shed light on this."

"Here? Get all the suspects here? You're talking about all the occupants of headquarters, plus a few visitors thrown in for good measure."

"Pfui. You posture, but surely you can limit. Skinner's secretary, his clerk, and any officers and attorneys who have worked primarily on the police killings. Anyone else you deem."

"Get them here, huh?" Cramer leaned back. "We don't even know that this was connected to the cop killings."

"We'll assume a connection as a working hypothesis," Wolfe replied. "Can you have them here at three o'clock tomorrow?"

"So instead of bringing back information, I'm going to return with a request from on high for everyone to interrupt the investigation for a field trip to your place." Cramer said sarcastically.

"Exactly so. I remind you of your commitment of support. You know this is how I work."

"Yeah, I said we'll stick, and we will. I'll see about three o'clock. I'll let Goodwin know, if he can stop throwing things long enough to answer the phone." Which was uncalled for. Cramer got up and threw what was left of his cigar at my wastebasket, missing.

"At least I don't miss." I retorted.

"Goodwin, your clowning will get you killed for real one day. By me."

The script called for Cramer to storm out at that point, and he started to, but then he remembered the gun, went to the shelf and got it, and walked out. My habit is to always see him out, to make sure he actually leaves, and doesn't try anything funny. As I helped him with his coat and opened the door, I thought that since I was now officially part of the police force, maybe I could have a real badge. But it didn't seem like a good time to ask.

"Wolfe." Cramer muttered disgustedly as he went down the stoop to his waiting car.

Returning to the office, I was surprised to find Wolfe leaning back in his chair, with his eyes closed. That wasn't the surprise, but his lips, which had a barely perceptible movement out and in, meant that he was deep in thought with something. The movement of his lips was simply some gear in his thinker that was also connected to his face, but it was an indication that Wolfe had something, and was mulling it over. I went through the stuff Cramer had given us in my mind, and decided there wasn't much. Lambert's running the card through the box might have been it, I suppose.

I went to my desk and started putting things away for the night. When I went to the office safe to make sure it was locked, Wolfe spoke to my back,

"Archie, did you notice the knots used to tie the cord around Mr. Skinner's neck?"

"Yeah," I replied. "Grannys. You'd think the murderer would know better. But hell, they worked."

"True. But isn't proper knot tying part of a policeman's training?"

"Sure. They get it with their fire training. But if you're thinking that rules out a cop, forget it. A cop can forget how to tie a square knot, and maybe he tied a granny to mislead us."

"Nevertheless, an interesting observation. Can you have them here in the morning? And Steven Wyatt?"

The "them" Wolfe was referring to were Saul Panzer, and Fred Durkin, two private ops that we regularly engaged to do footwork for us. Saul is a phenomenon, easily the best private dick on the street, and Fred is no duffer, either, having gained his skills in the school of hard knocks. Steve Wyatt is a new eye that we have hired from the Bascomb agency on occasion. A few months back, we had a delicate tailing job that required one more man, and our normal choice, Orrie Cather, had unfortunately become indisposed by way of an exploding cigar out on our stoop. We needed a good man to help, so I went to Del Bascomb and told him that I only wanted to talk to his best.

What I got, in general, was pretty laughable, and I was about to tell Del to forget it, when he sent Steve in. Steve was a new guy, about twenty four, and looked like, well, Alfred E. Neuman of *Mad Magazine*. I almost gave up right there, but decided it wasn't his fault and began talking. I found out he had brains, knew computers as well, and enough savvy that I decided to give him a try on the tailing job. You'd think that anyone that looked like he did would stick out like a sore thumb on a

tailing job, but Steve would put a Mets cap over his curly red hair, and could blend in pretty well. That alone is quite a feat when you consider how the Mets played last season.

He did okay on the tailing, even turning a neat little trick when the subject tried to shake us. Later on, on the con job, he showed his brains by phoning Wolfe according to instructions, instead of trying to sew the thing up himself. Phoning in probably saved his skin. His looks have turned into an asset in some cases, where for some reason people are more willing to open up to a guy who looks like that. He can put on the innocent look when he needs to. I wouldn't say that he is a regular yet, but I have talked to him about shaking Bascomb and becoming his own man.

I told Wolfe, "I'll try. You want them at eleven?" Eleven is usually the earliest Wolfe is available, after his session with the plants.

"Yes. Fred and Mr. Wyatt at eleven, but have Saul come as early as reasonable, and see me in the plant rooms."

So something was up. For Wolfe to deliberately interrupt his plant sessions with business is not unprecedented, but very unusual. I sat down and turned to Wolfe.

"What have you got? I must not have caught it."

"I have nothing really, just some things that need checking. But one of them requires dispatch."

"Okay, have it your way. I wouldn't want to be burdened with your insights."

"Archie, what is the arrangement for the employee and visitor badges at police headquarters?"

"Well, there are different kinds of badges. They are all about the size of business cards, and they have little clips attached, so you can pin them to your lapel or something. Normal employee's badges have some sort of magnetic stripe, or wire, or something in them, so that when they are run through the boxes, the computer can read the badge number. Cramer hates the system, but one advantage of it is that the computer can block a given badge from some areas. For example, a DA's badge might have access to all areas of the building, while a secretary may only be able to enter her own department. If someone tried to get into an unauthorized area, the door won't open, and the security office gets notified that it's happening."

"Hmph. Orwellian. What about visitors?"

"There are two kinds of visitor's badges. A visitor like the Mayor or a cop from a precinct can get a card with a magnetic stripe that gives them access to the necessary departments. A visitor like me, who they don't trust, gets a card that is blue instead of white, like the others, and says 'Escort Required' on it. There is either no magnetic stuff in the card, or it has been turned off. You can't get anywhere without being with someone that has a better card. You get the visitor cards at the security office when you sign in. If you need an escort, one has to sign you in."

"How hard would it be," Wolfe asked, "to steal one of the visitor badges that gives access to the building?"

"Not too hard. The badges that haven't been checked out are all clipped to a board just inside the security booth, and the guards don't always pay attention. You could distract a guard and get a badge easy enough. Of course, in most cases, you wouldn't need to do that, just go the department you want, wait till someone goes through the security door, and follow them, acting like you know what you're doing. Everyone is supposed to wear their badge, but it's better than even money that you wouldn't get noticed if you didn't have one. "

"Technology makes a poor substitute for gray cells. I can see why Mr. Cramer was frustrated."

"Yes sir. Is that all? My neck is killing me, so I'm going to take some more aspirin and go to bed."

"Good night Archie. Your work today was most satisfactory."

That was the most lavish praise Wolfe ever gave, and he spoke like he meant it, so I replied, sincerely,

"Thank you, sir. Good night."

As I was getting ready for bed, I realized that in spite of the neck and the late hour, I was feeling good. Nothing like a good shooting to pull you out of a funk.

Seven

I normally resent my alarm clock in the mornings. But on Tuesday morning it went way beyond resentment, to open hostility. I had set it for 8:00 so I would have time to get the brethren before they departed for the day. I hit the switch and buried my head in the pillow for a few. I need my eight hours, and any less leaves me surly. There has got to be a way to wake someone without fire bells ringing in your head.

I eventually wretched the body out of bed and went through the motions of descumming and dressing without any enthusiasm. On getting up I realized, when I tried to see what time it was, that my neck was stiff, which didn't help any. Entering the kitchen I didn't reply to Fritz as he wished me good morning and did I sleep well? He was patiently silent as he served me coffee, orange juice, bacon ham and raspberry griddle cakes.

Somewhere into the second cup of coffee, the fog began to clear a little, and I spoke to Fritz.

"Sorry, Fritz. Good Morning. I slept like a rock, which is what my head feels like."

"Ah. . . paying for your heroism still?"

"Yes. If I look at you funny, it's because of my neck."

"I have a poultice that will sooth it, but it is unsavory. Are we still in danger?"

"No poultice, thanks. About us being in danger, I don't know. Maybe not. By now the person responsible should realize we don't know anything."

"Nevertheless, you will, of course, be careful Archie."

"Always. I like me too much. Is Mr. Wolfe up?"

"Yes. But not dressed. He gave me instructions for you when I brought his breakfast to him. He wishes to see you, if not in his room, then in the greenhouse."

It would be the plant rooms, at the rate I was going. I finished breakfast at a leisurely pace, and went to the office. The mail had arrived, put on Wolfe's desk by Fritz, so I sorted it, and opened those pieces that required Wolfe's attention. Then I sat down in Wolfe's chair, and started on the phone; mine was broken. Saul was home, and congratulated me on still being alive. He had been waiting for my call, and had made arrangements to be free today. I didn't ask how he found out about the shooting, and he has a sixth sense that tells him when he's needed. Fred was free, and would come at eleven. Since Del Bascombe was still Wyatt's boss, I called him first, and was told

Steve didn't have anything pressing, and could be made available, anything to help a colleague. So I told Del eleven and hung up. Then I mounted the steps to the roof.

The plant rooms are always a show, but on a bleak January morning the colors of the blossoms in the warm room are quite a contrast to the sky outside. Many species of orchids, having evolved in tropical climates, don't really know about seasons so they have their own ideas about when to bloom. Wolfe and Theodore have spent countless hours trying to figure out what triggers them, with only limited success. Now they were in the far corner of the warm room trimming a dozen or so sprays of the genus *Cypripedium* that had finally blossomed after four years, and which were so beautiful that not giving them a few minutes would have been an insult.

"Good morning and congratulations," I finally told Wolfe. "How did you do it?"

"I don't know. It might have been the Boric acid, but we treated four weeks before they started. Did you sleep well?"

"As always. Stiff neck, but as long as I don't move it too much, not much pain."

"Satisfactory. Are they coming?"

"Yes. As requested. Saul ASAP and the others at eleven."

"ASAP? Please communicate in English."

"Sorry. As soon as possible."

"Very well. Would you be willing to venture? Perhaps the danger has passed, but there is no guarantee."

"Sure. I've got cabin fever. Need something from the store?"

"Yes. Information. Although probably futile, see if you can gain access to Mr. Raker, and somehow learn if he had someone besides us on his list. Then go to the homicide department and see what you can learn. I would be especially interested in knowing if the bullets from Mr. Raker's gun match those taken from the Bannock crime scene, and if Mr. Lambert has revealed anything at all. Beyond that, use your intelligence guided by experience."

"A tall order. I may not get anything."

"I realize that. Do what you can. Any morsel will have to do."

"What about repairs, and the metal detector?"

"Can we postpone a day?"

"Certainly. We can wait as long as necessary. The desk and chairs still work, but I'll have to use your phone. Lon Cohen wants the scoop. Probably pictures, too. What can we give him?"

"Give him details of the shooting, but nothing more. No pictures. Tell him for security reasons. Perhaps later. Use the telephone. I don't want him here."

"Okay. Anything for the boys?"

"Have five hundred dollars of expense money ready for Saul, and three hundred each for the others. And the telephones. Take one yourself, of course."

Over the years, technology has produced various dubious gadgets touted to help detectives with their jobs. Most are junk-- they either don't work well, or try to replace street smarts with computers, which never works. But the cell phone is different. It's worth its weight in Rangers tickets. Tailing someone, even with three people, is a joke in New York, but cell phones even things up a lot. It's no longer necessary to leave the subject to report, you are in constant touch with the others, and you'd be amazed where people allow you to go to supposedly "get better reception". I once collected evidence in an embezzling case outside a woman's restroom that. . . but that's another story. I told Wolfe,

"Okay. I'll tell Fritz I won't be here for lunch."

"Unfortunate. We're trying the mortress with more lamb and a little tarragon--very little. Fritz's suggestion. We shall miss you."

"Likewise." Wolfe and Fritz's mortress was one of my favorite dishes.

I went downstairs, got the expense money out of the safe, and checked on the phones, taking mine and placing it in my suitcoat pocket opposite my holster, which I had put on in my room.

After calling Lon and giving a him few of our morsels, and getting a thanks but no thanks from the bum, I went to the kitchen to give Fritz instructions.

"I'm off on the hunt, no lunch. No reporters, phone or otherwise. Saul to the plant rooms, Fred and Steve in the office."

"Too bad, Archie. We are having the mortress. I can save some. It keeps fairly well."

"That sounds good. Give my regards to the boys."

I had thought about leaving via our rear entrance, which goes through a gate in Fritz's herb garden through an alleyway onto 34th Street, but decided to chance the front door. After checking the scene through the one-way glass for a couple of minutes, Saul Panzer came up to the stoop and mounted it with a glance up and down the street that likely took in everything. I opened the door and asked,

"Greetings. Any thugs laying in wait for me?"

"Yeah, four down at the corner, but I got them. Two with the gat, and two with bare knuckles. How's the neck?"

Saul didn't miss a trick, and he would have been looking for someone, so I knew the coast was clear. Only five foot five, whose face is dominated by nose, Saul could go anywhere and be anyone, with no questions asked. I've seen him do it. With his crumpled suit and hack's cap he's just another

New Yorker on the street, but if he sees you, you're filed for life in his head. I ushered him into the office, where he responded appropriately, after seeing the chair and desk, with a low whistle.

"Archie, I'm not playing poker with you any more. I'd lose my shirt. You're charmed."

I gave him the expense money and phone, put similar items on Wolfe's desk for Fred and Steve, and bid Saul good luck as he took the stairs to the roof. One extra glance out the door and I was off.

My first stop, St. Mary's General, was only six blocks away, on 37th street, so I hoofed it. Later, I would have to take a taxi to City Hall, which is near the financial district. It felt good to be out and walking, even though it was cold and windy. I checked a few times, and couldn't find any signs that I had a tail.

The receptionist downstairs had no record of a Raker-- routine when security is tight--so I thanked her and headed to where I thought he would be, the sixth floor West wing. When I was waiting for the elevator, along came some faces that didn't seem too happy to see me, belonging to Cramer and Stebbins. With them was the woman of my dreams. With her head coming to my chin, she was almost too petite for my specifications, but not quite. I learned from Cramer's introduction that this was Tamera Adrian. I was surprised, because the two seemed quite civil to each other. Tamera smiled and asked me to call her Tammy, which was my pleasure. She had dark, shoulder length hair, and dark eyes that complemented, with just a hint of dimples in her cheeks. I enjoy good ankles, temples, and good dressers and she passed on all accounts, with a nice brown woolen suit that complemented her hair, and helped her other refinements. Cramer and Stebbins looked like they had been up all night, and my nose told me they had, too, but Tammy looked fairly fresh, although around her eyes was some fatigue, and the bow on her blouse was a little crooked.

The elevator came, and even though the door opened automatically, I found I had the urge to open it for Tammy, which got under my skin a little. Some girls, mostly Southern ones, just naturally make you want to do things for them-- its in their blood, and I enjoy it as long as I'm in control and am aware it's happening. But Tammy wasn't Southern, and I didn't seem to be in control, so I decided to backpedal a bit.

The elevator was full, with Cramer, Stebbins and me at the back. Somehow Tammy was separated, at the front. Cramer turned to me and whispered,

"Nice girl, really. Apologized for her part in my retirement. Even apologized for Dunning. Wants to make things up. She's here to make sure we don't rough Raker up too much. We're going by the book on this one. We have to. Not for publication, but bullets from Raker's gun matched Bannock and Hu's. There's your connection. We're going to transfer Raker downtown."

Out of the elevator, on the way to Raker's room, Cramer raised his voice a notch.

"Raker's a pro, all right. Pretty high priced, exclusively New York. Almost had him two years ago. Doesn't seem to be connected with the mob or anything; seems to be freelance."

Cramer continued,

"And something's funny with Lambert. He acts guilty, or maybe just strange- not talking at all. We've had him all night. We haven't got anything on him, though. He has buddies at the DA office that can't decide whether to file a writ or not. They're prosecutors, and filing a defense motion seems to be against their nature. But they will either file a writ for him, have a public defender do it, or he will get it done himself, so we're not going to be able to keep him much longer. Any reason Wolfe is interested in him?"

"Yeah, Wolfe likes guys that act strange. Look at you and me. Raker's still got two good arms left. Let me have a few minutes alone with him."

"Its tempting. Sometimes I yearn for the good old days before Miranda. You could be a little more...direct."

"Really, you men. Tammy chided. You've got to be more careful than ever on this one."

"Yeah, she's right." Cramer said.

We were met at the door by Cramer's men Petty and Davis, who must have relieved the beat cops.

"His defense lawyer, a guy named Curtis, is in there with him," Petty said.

"I said no visitors, and I meant it," Cramer growled.

"Yeah, but this guy was threatening suits and all sorts of crap."

"Just great. He's not going to be any good now. Probably wouldn't have been, anyway."

We went in. Raker, upon seeing me, uttered a vulgar word. In the presence of the woman of my dreams. I would have cracked him one, but I like to think I have a little more discipline than Cramer, or maybe a little more smarts with lawyers present. Curtis, a slight, graying man with gold rimmed cheaters, got up, and introductions went around.

Curtis started by saying,

"My client, Mr. Raker, has nothing to say."

Ms. Adrain responded with,

"Counselor, we are entitled to a statement directly from Mr. Raker. If he has nothing to say, he can so state."

"Of course, counselor. You may question him now."

The tips of Curtis' ears were getting a little red, and Raker had opened his eyes and was looking at Tammy. I could see both were feeling to urge to do something for Tammy, just as I had.

"You should also know, counselor," Tammy continued, "That upon evidence gathered by our office, we are preparing a charge of first degree murder against your client for the killing of officers James Bannock and Michael Hu on November twentieth of last year. It should be served within the hour."

"Thank you, Ms. Adrian. My client is innocent, and we will fight the charges vigorously."

Curtis turned to me.

"Are you the man who assaulted my client?"

I rolled my eyes. "Oh for Pete's sake. I can't believe it. You can see my attorney, Nat Parker. He will present you with a bill for medical services rendered, repairs to office furniture, and if you put up a fuss, he will present you with a civil suit, my man. Beyond that I've got nothing to say."

Curtis opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't find anything to say right away. It was a good time for an exit, so I took it. I turned and left. There was nothing here for Wolfe. As I glanced back, Tammy winked at me.

Cell phones can't be used in a hospital, so I took the elevator out to the sidewalk, dialed the number I knew best, and asked Fritz for Wolfe, who would just be settling in his chair, down from the roof.

"Yes?"

Wolfe never answered a phone right.

"Its me. Outside St. Mary's General. Met Cramer and Stebbins on the way up, along with counselor Tamera Adrian, who has mended fences with Cramer. How would you like a lawyer for an in-law, Dad?"

"Pfui. I'm not your father, and would deny it if I were. Any lawyer, especially a beautiful one, is treacherous and not to be trusted. Don't let yourself be ensnared. Come home. I need you here. There is a bereaved woman here."

Wolfe used the same tone he would use if the house were being overrun by South American army ants.

"Okay, but I have some information. The bullets match. Lambert is acting funny but not talking. Cramer can't keep him much longer. Adrian has a magnet in her psyche that makes men want to do things for her. I tried to open the elevator. Curtis, Raker's attorney, had red ears, and Raker watched her like a hawk when she spoke. Do you want a full report?"

"No. Come home. Now."

Eight

I caught a taxi home, but with the traffic it almost would have been better to walk. When I arrived, the chain was on the door, so I had to ring for Fritz to let me in.

"He's in the kitchen with Fred and Mr. Wyatt. The woman in black is in the office waiting. She is very beautiful; Mr. Wolfe is afraid."

What Wolfe was afraid of was that she would have a breakdown in his presence, so he had kept her waiting until I could come and determine whether she was stable or not. The scene in the kitchen was comical. Although I knew otherwise, it looked like four grown men cowering from the most dangerous creature of all.

"She would not have been admitted, but she is the daughter of Mr. Skinner, and people in be-reavement are owed some consideration." Wolfe explained. "I will see her as long as you think she will control herself."

Wolfe's opinion of my ability to judge women is probably overrated, but I'm by far the best he's got. I told Wolfe I'd assess the situation and went to the office. I knew a little about Skinner's family, mainly from small talk with Sue. I knew that his wife had died about six years ago, that he had never remarried, that he had a son who had also gone into law, and that his daughter, Amy, had been serious with a guy from Hoboken a couple years ago, but had been let down hard, and was still living at home.

Fritz' idea of beauty does not match mine, his taste running a little more to the Victorian, but I had to admit, when I greeted her, and she rose to acknowledge, that she wasn't hard to look at. She had Skinner's penetrating eyes, but I was glad to see that she didn't have his lips or jowls. Any woman with Skinner's lips would have a permanent frown by age forty. Looking at Amy Skinner, I decided that time would probably be kind to her face, especially with a little more filling of the cheeks. But currently her face showed fatigue, and signs of recent crying.

"I'm truly sorry about your father." I said with sincerity. "Although Mr. Wolfe and I clashed with him at times, it was obvious that he was an excellent District Attorney and servant of the people."

"Thank you," she replied. "His work meant a lot to him, especially since Mother died."

"I'm sorry you had to wait. How can we be of help?"

"Actually, now that I'm here, I'm not sure. Mr. Cramer told me this morning that you are investigating Dad's. . . death." The last words were hard to get out. "I just came by to see if I could do

something, maybe help. . . pay or something. I'm confused--I don't really think I want revenge, but I want whoever did this to be caught. Does that make any sense?"

"It makes perfect sense." I said as tenderly as I could. "You have your father's sense of justice. It's what your father would want done."

"I think you're right. I'm doing what Dad would want. Can I help?"

"I don't know. Not with money, we're okay there. Do you know anything about what your Father was working on?"

"No. He's a lawyer--was a lawyer--so he didn't talk about his cases at all."

"Of course. Did you know he wanted to hire Mr. Wolfe to do something for him? That surprised us when we learned it. We thought he didn't like us."

"He didn't." Her eyes were lowered, but a small smile played across her lips. "Mr. Wolfe and you would frustrate him terribly. He wouldn't talk about cases, but he could sure get mad at you, Archie. . . can I call you Archie?"

"Sure. If I can call you Amy. So why would he hire us?"

"Oh, he didn't like you, but that doesn't mean he wouldn't consult you if he needed to. Once he. . . once. . . "

Her handkerchief came up and her shoulders shook. If Wolfe had been in the room, he would have left and not returned, but I decided to let the emotion play out. It had only been a few hours. After a little while, she wiped her eyes, sniffed, and regained her composure.

"I'm sorry. I'm a boob. Once he came home with a big welt on his face." The smile replayed. "I asked him how he got it, and he said Nero Wolfe gave it to him. He said Mr. Wolfe had slapped him. He was madder than I've ever seen him."

"Sorry about that. . . "

"Oh, don't be sorry! He needed someone to stand up to him. At the time, I was doing a little rebelling of my own, and I. . . admired anyone who could stand up to him. I came to your defense. I asked if you and Mr. Wolfe were really that bad. His answer was interesting."

I let her continue, which she did after a moment.

"He said, 'Of course they're that bad!' But then he stopped, and thought for a long time, and finally said, 'but if I needed an investigator who was good, I mean really good, and who could keep his mouth shut, Wolfe would be who I'd go to.'"

She gave me her full face and smiled. A nice smile.

"So you see, Archie, he didn't hate you as much as you think."

"Thanks. Much obliged."

The phone rang, but Fritz would get it in the kitchen. When it stopped ringing, Amy heaved a sigh and said,

"I'm sorry Archie, for taking your time. I don't need to talk to Mr. Wolfe, I don't know anything, really. I just felt like I had to do something. I feel better now."

"Are you going to be all right? You've been knocked against the ropes."

"Yes. I'll be okay. I've got the Skinner backbone."

"I promise you we'll do our best to see justice done. Where to from here? Can I help you get there?"

"Well, I guess I'll go home. I have some arrangements to make. I don't live far from here, just off 32nd street, up two blocks. I can walk."

"Tell you what. Let me walk with you, at least part way. If you want to be alone, I'll understand, no hard feelings. You can talk or not, depending on how you feel."

"Thank you, Archie, I think I'd like that."

As I went to the kitchen to let Wolfe know I'd be gone, and that he wouldn't have to face the terror, Fred and Steve were exiting.

"We're going to a party," Fred said, "wish you could come."

"What's up?" I asked Wolfe as I entered the kitchen.

"That was Saul on the telephone. He has made some progress. Fred and Mr. Wyatt have gone to help Saul find a man named Ray Naylor. It may be nothing. It depends on where they find him. I may need you to join them later. Must I speak with that woman?"

"No. She doesn't have anything, just wanted to help. I've saved you again. But I'm walking her home, 32nd street. Be back in about forty minutes, give or take. Fritz, it looks like I'll be here for lunch after all."

"Excellent," Fritz replied. "But be careful, Archie. You know your weakness towards women in distress."

First Wolfe warns me about Adrian, and now Fritz warns me about Amy. I can watch out for myself, dammit.

The walk with Amy was pleasant. It was nice to walk with a girl who knew how to walk with a man. Amy didn't talk at all on the way to her house, which turned out to be a brownstone, same floor plan as Wolfe's, but with more ornate facade and furnishings. I found out about the furnishings when she asked me in for something warm to drink and I accepted. I sat at her kitchen table as she pattered, and asked her what the plan was, and if she had someone to help.

"I haven't thought much about it, really. My brother David and his family are flying in from Minnesota and will be here any time, and I kind of think he will want to arrange the funeral details. Sue helped me this morning, and wanted to stay the day with me, but I told her I was okay and wanted to see Mr. Wolfe. If it gets too bad I can call her."

We passed the time a little. I learned that she was a working girl, an elementary school teacher with a degree from Columbia, no less.

She produced some hot cocoa with marshmallows, something I hadn't had in years. Fritz would occasionally make some cocoa, but it was different from the common kind. This cocoa reminded me of the times when I was a kid in Ohio, when we'd drink it after sleighing.

When the cocoa was gone, I thanked her and rose to go. She replied,
"Thanks, Archie, it felt good to walk with you."

Once, an old lady who I tried to help get a taxi for called me a lecher. On the very same day a voluptuous young blonde who lives on Park Avenue called me a prude. So your guess is as good as mine as to what I really am. But one hard and fast rule I have is that I won't take advantage of a girl when she's vulnerable.

So when I enfolded Amy in my arms, and kissed her full on the lips, it was as much a surprise to me as it was to her. It must have been the cocoa. She was surprised, but she didn't resist, and after a second or two began developing some enthusiasm. We pulled away after an appropriate interval and I said,

"Sorry. "

"Don't be. It was nice. Thanks."

I left thinking, so I broke a rule. Big deal.

I arrived home barely in time for lunch, and found Wolfe in an effusive mood at the table. The mortress, complemented with Fritz' endive salad, was the best yet. Wolfe passed the time by explaining that, of course, everyone knew the world was round in Columbus' day, it just hadn't been accepted officially by the Church. The world was found to be round, and its circumference measured accurately centuries before. Columbus erred in his estimate of the Earth's size because of a clerical error in Ptolemy's *Geography*, which was the authority at the time. The error was not easy to discover because accurate timepieces were not available yet.

After lunch, with Wolfe settled in his chair sipping coffee, I reported verbatim my outing to the hospital and my conversation with Amy, less the more intimate details. I can report, word for word, conversations that lasted hours and took place weeks ago, so the morning's activities were no trick. I finished the conversation with a request for some orchid sprays, not for the funeral, but for Miss Skinner personally.

"Certainly, Archie. So Mr. Skinner had some begrudged respect for us? I suppose we reciprocate. Use some of the new blossoms, if you don't think them too showy.

Wolfe continued,

"Last I heard, Mr. Naylor has not been found, but there are more places to look. He called in sick to his work, yet does not seem to be at his apartment. I've instructed them to call our office phone to report. If they do, please switch the call to the plant rooms."

"Thanks for the update. Is our session with Cramer's people still on for three?"

Wolfe made a face.

"Pah. I suppose so. Confound it, they are jaded by now. I'm not sure I will get anything from that mob, but we'd just as soon get it over with. Mr. Cramer hasn't called, so I don't know how many are coming. Prepare for the worst."

We discussed some other items, such as the paper's play of Skinner's death, which Wolfe had read but I had only skimmed at breakfast, and repairs to the furniture.

"The papers have nothing for us," Wolfe said. "They called Mr. Skinner a man of integrity. I suppose he was."

"A politician like Skinner? A stretch, I think."

"A man is responsible only to himself for setting the fences his integrity must not cross. A politician like Mr. Skinner merely prefers an expanse."

Wolfe said to go ahead and begin repair arrangements for the morning. Whether that meant I was to do without a desk for the rest of the case, or whether he expected to have it wrapped up by tomorrow, I don't know. I had no inkling of who did it, or who Ray Naylor was, but Wolfe was apparently on the trail of something. I pulled Wolfe's phone to the corner of his desk and began the calling, as Wolfe opened his book and read.

The first calls were to Carter and Sons to get the desk and chairs, then to James security for the metal detector. Both could come in the morning. The phone company would take longer, but I didn't need my phone until I had a desk, anyway. I made a call to the messenger service, and a quick trip up to the plant rooms, where Theodore helped me put together a nice arrangement in time for the messenger's arrival. Cramer's call came at about two thirty, and I gave the phone to Wolfe, while I went to the phone in the front room to listen in, which I'm supposed to do unless Wolfe tells me to ring off. Cramer said expect about twenty, give or take. Cramer wasn't liking the timing. Couldn't we postpone? Wolfe said nothing doing, so obviously he really did want to see those people. Lambert was still acting funny, but had a writ filed. Cramer said he wouldn't be able to keep him any longer.

Wolfe replied,

"Since you are requiring involved personnel's attendance here, you can require his as well, without violating his writ. He will be here, I presume."

"Yeah, we'll get him there, but he's a free man after that."

"I suppose that is all we can hope for. Make sure he has an escort."

"What have you got, Wolfe? It would really help to know."

"I have very little at this point, but things could happen quickly. I will see you at three o'clock."

A call from Saul came shortly after, and Wolfe told me no record was necessary, which meant I wasn't to horn in. When Wolfe was finished, he turned to me.

"Archie, can you have a taxi waiting during the meeting? You may need to follow someone on short notice."

"Sure. I'll call the White company and tell them to get Herb over."

Herb Aronson was my preferred driver when tailing someone. He could wait for hours without complaining, and could step on it when necessary.

I got Wolfe's phone, dialed the number, and the girl said that Herb was on the East side, but she could get him by radio, and could have him waiting on the corner up from our place in a half hour, which seemed too optimistic. Wolfe said that would be satisfactory and it was arranged.

People began showing up at about ten to three and came in batches, in and out of uniform. I had brought chairs in from the kitchen, and down from the South guest room, but it was going to be a squeeze. I won't mention all their names, or describe them, but just update as I go. By five minutes after we had a roomful, twenty-two not counting me. None of them were in a good mood, a few were resentful, but most just looked tired and rumpled. Cramer was in the red leather chair, and Agent Bradford, from the FBI, was seated next to him. "Just here for observation, and any help I can give," Bradford had explained. I seated Ms. Dunning, who was now the most senior staff member, and next in line for DA, on the front row next to Tammy Adrian, who was closest to me so that I could keep an eye on her. Wolfe had said she was treacherous, so I didn't want to miss any moves, however subtle. I didn't get to help Tammy with her coat; there were at least three men there who tried, and Craig Nicolas from homicide won out. Ms. Dunning looked the part, with a commanding demeanor, a hawk-like nose, and suspicious eyes that didn't move. Instead, her head jerked around whenever she fastened on something new. About fifty years old, she would have been considered good looking in her way about twenty years ago, but now, with gray hair in a short swept trim, and a herringbone suit, she was all business.

I also met David Ginosar for the first time. He was younger than his counterpart, and didn't have the fancy duds. He didn't look much like a lawyer, with a long dark pony tail down the back and a nose that was well-proportioned, at least for a face half again as big. I liked him immediately when he apologized for shooting at me, saying that he has lapses. He would try to control himself next time.

Lambert, Skinner's clerk, came in with Cramer, and I also sat him on the front row, since it seemed he would get some attention during the evening. He looked shell-shocked, and the most rumpled of all, and had a grim look of determination on his face. He didn't say a single word in response to my greeting and questions. He was tall and thin, with straight dark hair that had a habit of getting into his eyes. He would constantly sweep it back up with his right hand, catching the hair between his fingers in a crablike movement. I figured he must have an affinity for the ocean since he had sails for ears.

I also got my first look at Linnings, who took over for Cramer. He was tall and distinguished, with dark curly hair and mahogany skin. I told him I'd looked forward to meeting him, and he said

likewise, and it was good to have Mr. Wolfe and myself on the team, but so unfortunate that circumstances were as they were. He got a front row seat next to the FBI.

When Sue and Bill Spinnick arrived, I helped Sue with her coat, and noticed that, despite her tired eyes and face, her countenance had changed.

"Congratulations, papa." I whispered to Bill as he went by in the hall.

"How did you know? No one knows."

"I'm a detective. I detect." I turned to Sue. "It will be our secret. When's the event?"

"Sometime in May or June," Sue said, looking down at her dress. "I can't believe you could tell. Is it that obvious?"

"No, nothing physical at all. I just know you. Congratulations again."

I put them together on the yellow sofa.

On the officer side, I seated Purley Stebbins, the harness bull, in the middle of the second row, where he could get at most people in a step if he had to. Lieutenant Rowcliff, always proper, always by the book, always a pain in the rear, I seated in the very back, as far away from me as possible, but he got up with a withering look at me and moved to the second row, skipping the first only because it had been filled. I've been in Rowcliff's office several times for questioning, and he has the same kind of window blinds as Skinner, so he'd better not turn his back the next time I'm there.

There were a few more mouthpieces, and a few more cops, but I won't mention them unless they enter the script. Altogether they made the room full, uncomfortably warm, and not particularly pleasant. There was also a lot of hardware there, which made me a little nervous, but in one way I was looking forward to the session. It would be fun to see how the homicide dicks reacted when the tables were turned on them.

Wolfe, who enjoys a good entrance as much as anyone, waited in the kitchen until I had things settled a bit, then entered, having to do some real maneuvering to get around everyone. He did just fine, with no bumping or jostling.

I took my place in my chair and when I swiveled around to my desk to get my notebook, Purley spoke,

"Geez, can you beat that? Three holes right down the middle."

I swung back around and acted as if I hadn't heard Stebbin's comment. One could only look intrepid for so long. I made the rounds, giving the names of each guest for Wolfe, who nodded in response.

Wolfe started.

"Good day. I won't thank you for coming, since most of you were compelled by circumstances, and by order. Before we begin, Mr. Cramer, do you have anything to say?"

"Just that this is official. Mr. Wolfe is working for us, and while you don't have to answer his questions, your refusal to cooperate may be noted in your employment files, and may also lead to something worse."

"Mr. Linnings? I'm pleased to meet you."

"Thank you. I wish circumstances were more pleasant. I have nothing official to say. Mr. Cramer is in charge of the investigation."

"Very well. Before we proceed, does anyone want anything? I'm having beer. Ordinarily I would ask you individually, but it is impractical now. You will have to speak up."

There was silence. Too many supervisors, of course, so there would be no takers.

"I'll have a beer, too. What the hell."

It was Ginosar. I flashed him a smile and a wink when he glanced at me. He had guts. Wolfe rang, and told Fritz, indicating Ginosar. Fritz already had glasses and beer bottles ready, so served Wolfe and Ginosar immediately. Ginosar discreetly raised his glass in my direction with a smile before drinking.

After pouring and drinking about half his glass, Wolfe surveyed the crowd, and leaned forward.

"Lieutenant Rowcliff. What's your involvement in this affair?"

Rowcliff snarled.

"I don't have to tell you anything. I'm not required to. In my opinion it was a mistake to engage you. You cannot possibly contribute where greater minds have failed."

Wolfe muttered, not to anyone in particular,

"Fools mock, but they shall mourn." Then he opened his eyes, shot forward, and bellowed to Rowcliffe, in his nastiest voice,

"Answer my questions when I ask them! Are you a dunce? Did you kill someone?"

Cramer broke in,

"Cut it out, Wolfe. Rowcliff, you'll answer Wolfe's questions and like it. Got that?"

"Y-yes s-sir," Rowcliff snarled-stuttered. "I d-d-didn't k-kill anyone."

Wolfe leaned back, closed his eyes, and laced his fingers over his middle. Talk about a cheap shot. Wolfe wasn't mad at Rowcliff, probably wasn't even interested in him. He just wanted to get Rowcliff to start stuttering, to show me up. Wolfe was aware that I had a running bet with Saul to see how fast we could get Rowcliff to stutter in our sessions with him. The technique would be to get him riled enough that he was on the brink, then stutter first, so we could feign being mocked

when Rowcliff did it. I currently held the record: two minutes, ten seconds, and Wolfe had done it right out of the chute. But it didn't count, in my opinion, because it was Rowcliff that was feeling the heat, not the other way around.

What a great way to set the tone for the meeting. And Wolfe says I'm sometimes puerile.

Wolfe turned to Lambert.

"Mr. Lambert. You've been held for the night. Do you have any information that you can give us regarding Mr. Skinner's death? Anything at all?"

"I have nothing, and I'm not held now." Lambert looked at Wolfe defiantly. "And you can't prove otherwise." Lambert swept his hair back.

"Indeed I can't," Wolfe said, making a face at Lambert's diction. "I understand you are an excellent law clerk. Didn't Mr. Skinner seek your advice on many occasions?"

"I'm not saying anything. I have nothing to say."

"Very well. We shall see if you have nothing to say."

"Ms. Dunning. What is your involvement in this affair?"

Dunning's head jerked from Lambert to Wolfe.

"If you mean the police killings, I have been involved from the beginning, collecting what information we have, preparing subpoenas and supervising the other attorneys."

"Ah...and as supervisor, you are in a position to impede the investigation if you were so inclined."

"I suppose so, but my performance has been impeccable. You have no right to imply otherwise."

"What about the disappearance of the shipping files? What do you know about that?"

"How do you know about the shipping files? Have you received confidential information?" Dunning's head jerked to Cramer and back again.

"Common knowledge. I could have obtained the information from multiple sources."

"Well, its nothing. There wasn't anything in them. Someone was careless, that's all."

"And that someone was you, Miss Adrian?" Wolfe turned to Tammy, but it was Dunning who answered.

"It doesn't matter who. Ms. Adrian is a competent member of our staff, and I will not have you implying she isn't."

"Indeed. Can you answer for yourself, Miss Adrian?"

Tammy opened her mouth to speak, but that's as far as it got.

"She doesn't have to." Dunning again, raising her voice. "I won't have you cross-examining her."

"Pfui. Miss Adrian, do others do everything for you? Have you a voice?"

"Of course she does!" Dunning was furious. "Stop this immediately, or you'll regret it!"

"Remarkable." Wolfe mumbled to himself. He sat back, waiting for something. Then he suddenly came forward and bellowed,

"Miss Adrian, answer me now, or I'll have Mr. Goodwin expel Ms. Dunning and compel you!"

Dunning was out of her chair. Cramer was out of his chair, Lambert and Stebbins were, too. Dunning and Cramer were yelling at Wolfe. The only people not moving were Wolfe, who had settled back into his chair, and Tammy, who had remained calm through it all. Finally Tammy raised her voice.

"Mary! Really! It's all right. Of course I have a voice, Mr. Wolfe."

Tammy waited while things settled a little, then continued.

"I lost the shipping files, and I take responsibility. I was new, and didn't know I couldn't leave them with the stenographers. It wasn't a big thing, we collected the information again, eventually."

Dunning jerked to Tammy,

"You don't have to answer any of his questions! He has made this into a farce!"

"It's all right, Mary. I don't mind answering them. I just did a stupid thing. That's all."

Dunning wasn't satisfied.

"Mr. Wolfe, I'll see that you regret this! You can't treat one of my people this way. Especially a woman! I'll see that you never practice again!"

Wolfe, unruffled, replied,

"You are right, Ms. Dunning, about one thing, at least. This has become a farce." He turned to the group.

"I'm sorry we didn't get to you all. I'm afraid we can accomplish nothing more here. You are free to go, unless Mr. Cramer has something to say."

"What I have to say will have to wait until we're alone." Cramer, redder than I'd ever seen, threatened. "Of all the rawest stunts...to think I arranged this!"

Cramer turned to the group.

"Go home, all of you who have been up all night! Get a good night's sleep, and we'll hit it again in the morning. Make sure we can get you if we need to. The rest of you get back to work. Stebbins, you stay. Lambert, you're free to go."

There was bedlam as they all arose. Lambert, Ginosar and some of the other men clustered around Tammy, to see if she needed anything done, I suppose. Cramer sat in the red leather chair, glaring at Wolfe. When Bradford, from the FBI, started saying something to Cramer, all Cramer did was grunt. Mr. Linnings had a pained look on his face, but simply got up and walked out. Wolfe

was ignoring them all, writing on the notepad on his desk with his fountain pen. He finished, tore the note off, and passed it to me. It said, in his precise handwriting:

A.G.

Follow Mr. Lambert. Telephone in fifteen minutes.

N.W.

I got up and went for the door. Passing Fritz, I said,

"Sorry, Fritz, I'm off. Coat duty is yours. Don't let anyone shoot Mr. Wolfe. Some are mad enough to."

Fritz responded,

"Archie? But what..."

I couldn't hear him. I was out the door, headed to the corner, where I saw Herb's cab waiting.

Ten

People began emerging from the brownstone, but no Lambert yet. I saw Ms. Dunning and Tammy get into a car with some others, and start off. Others started the job of flagging a passing taxi, while some started walking to the subway entrance at Penn station. Eventually Lambert emerged, and I told Herb that was our man, and to take it easy. I started looking around for others. It was likely that Cramer had put a tail on Lambert, too, and it was usually smart to know who else was in on the party.

Lambert didn't try anything fancy, just flagged a taxi on ninth, got into it alone, and started up the avenue heading North. When we started out, I spotted a gray sedan pulling out ahead of us, and although I couldn't tell from the back, it looked like Valdes and Rich, two homicide guys Cramer often uses for tailing.

About two blocks up the avenue my phone tickled me. Our cell phones have the vibrators inside, that shake the phone when it rings, so there is no audible noise. I pulled it and said,

"Hello?"

"Me, Archie. I'm right behind you." It was Saul.

I looked back of me, and saw him in the taxi behind.

"We've got a parade. Valdes and Rich are ahead."

"Yeah, I saw them. A bigger parade than you think. Fred's behind me. Steve's at Lambert's apartment. We can't find Naylor, and were hoping he'd show up there."

"What does he look like? Maybe I saw him."

"Six two, thirty three or so, muscular, good looking, dark short hair with a one inch tassel in back. Clean shaven, but maybe hasn't shaved today. I've got a photo, and will give it to you when I can."

"Thanks. Sorry, I haven't seen anyone like that. I don't have a tassel."

"You forgot that he is handsome, too. I don't like parades. Fred and I will go over two blocks and try to get ahead. It looks like he's headed for his apartment, on 102nd, so we'll head there. Let us know if he detours. Bye now."

"Okay. Bye. A little closer, Herb."

I noticed Saul and Fred turning right as we went through the 42nd street intersection.

My fifteen minutes were up, so I dialed the number I knew best.

When Fritz gave me Wolfe, and I got his Yes, I said,

"Me. Up 9th Avenue on 46th. Lambert is three cars ahead. In front of me are, I think, Valdes and Rich of Homicide, also tailing. Saul and Fred are the next up Avenue over, headed for Lambert's apartment."

"Thank you for calling, Archie. Mr. Cramer was insufferable. Your call gave me a chance to be rid of him."

"You can't blame him. What you did with Rowcliff and Adrian was pretty childish."

"*Ypah!* Mr. Cramer, and now you, too? I'll have you know, Archie, that I was irritating for a reason. I had to know the depths of these people's feelings."

"You found that out all right...at least the depth of their feelings against you."

"Nevertheless, that conference, short as it was, was most illuminating. Now we are in a pickle. Did Saul speak with you?"

"Yes. He says they can't find Naylor. Steve is already at Lambert's apartment."

Wolfe uttered another foreign word, unusual for him. The tone indicated it probably wouldn't translate as "shucks".

"It is imperative that we find Mr. Naylor before Mr. Lambert does. It's possible that Mr. Naylor will attempt to visit Mr. Lambert at his apartment, or wherever he is going. He may even be waiting somewhere outside now. I want you all to lay in wait. If Mr. Naylor comes, bring him here. Be careful, Archie. Mr. Naylor may be armed."

The phone clicked and went dead.

I dialed Saul and relayed the information. He said,

"I just talked to Steve. He thinks he's spotted Naylor, parked down the street from Lambert's building. He didn't dare get close enough to make sure. White 90 Porsche 911. We'll try to get there first. I think we can cause you're about to hit construction, we're at 50th."

It was a pretty simple tailing job. If Lambert knew he was being tailed, he must not have cared, because we went straight, all the way to 102nd, then turned right and went four blocks and were there, at a slightly run-down, but still nice apartment building that looked like thousands of its cousins across the burg. Lambert got out, paid, and went in. That was it. There was no sign of Saul or Fred, but knowing Saul, they were likely around somewhere. Valdez and Rich, who I had recognized when one of them glanced back, aced an old man out of a parking place on the curb and stayed put. I told Herb to go around the corner and let me out, because I didn't want the cops to know I was there. As Herb went around the corner, I saw the Porsche across the street. The driver, who was

talking on the phone, matched Naylor's description from what I could see. I told Herb to go halfway down, then let me out and wait.

I dialed Saul, and got his voice. He said,

"It's Naylor in the Porche. I saw him when I came. I'm in back of the building with Fred."

"Okay, who is this guy?"

"Don't know for sure. Could be involved in the Bannock and Hu murders. Wolfe thinks he may be gunning for Lambert."

"Okay, what's the deal? How do you want to run it?"

"Steve's on the first floor, in an apartment overlooking the street. I don't know how he got there, but he unlatched the rear entrance before he went up to the apartment. No doorman, we should be able to go right in. Lambert's apartment is on the fourth floor. I figure we can beat Naylor to the floor and wait for him there."

"Sounds good. I'm right behind you." I had started for the rear as soon as Saul had mentioned it, and was now in the alley looking at him. I hung up, and without a word we all went into the rear entrance. At the mailboxes Saul rang the buzzer to 1A, which was where Steve must have been, and we heard the click of the lock to the door that went to the stairs and elevator. We ascended the stairs as quickly and quietly as we could, to the fourth floor. Saul said Lambert's was 4C, and we found an alcove just down from it where we could wait out of sight. Saul whispered he had told Steve to watch for Naylor, and to buzz him if and when he saw him coming. We decided to move when Naylor had rung the buzzer in the apartment.

One of the toughest things about tailing is waiting it out, not knowing what was going to happen. You have to be on the job constantly while your subject can do anything he pleases. When you manage to get a free minute or two when tailing a guy, rule number one is, find a bathroom. You never know when the next chance might come. I was okay, but would probably be hurting in another hour. We weren't making any sound, but I could tell by looking at faces that we might be in trouble. Saul looked fine, but Fred looked like he was hurting already. The alcove was situated near the end of the hall, and only one apartment was beyond it, but it was getting later, and people were coming home from work. We could already hear the elevator depositing people on other floors. We could be discovered at any time, looking like idiots, standing in the alcove with pained expressions on our faces.

It seemed like a half a day, but was really only a half an hour by my watch, when Saul gave the signal that he had been buzzed by Steve. We didn't know how Naylor was going to get in, but it didn't take long before the elevator sounded, and stopped on our floor. We could hear the elevator door open and the muffled footsteps coming down the carpeted hallway to Lambert's door. When

the sound of the buzzer came through the wall, all three of us raced around the corner toward a surprised Ray Naylor. Naylor tried to resist, but he was too surprised, and we were too many. Fred tackled him, and he went down. I got his arms pinned, and Saul went for the gun. Or, at least, he tried to go for the gun, but there wasn't one. Saul frisked him up and down, and he had nothing. No guns, no knives, nothing.

"What the hell?" Saul said. "He's clean. It doesn't make sense. We thought he was here to off Lambert."

The door opened, and Lambert stared at the scene, then at me.

"You? What are you doing here? What's going on?"

"Saving your life, I think." I replied. "This man was going to kill you."

"I'm going to kill all three of you, that's for sure." Naylor spat. "Let me at you one at a time."

"Mr. Naylor is a friend." Lambert replied. "He just came here to talk to me about something. It has nothing to do with your investigation. Let him go and leave us alone."

A couple had come up to our floor and were watching. The man said,

"Do you need any help, Walter? We can call the police."

"It's okay. These men are leaving."

"We're not letting him go until I've had time to sort things out," I said. "Naylor, we're not letting you up until we get the word it's okay, so stop squirming. Saul, take his arms."

"Let me at you guys, and we'll see who okays who." Naylor yelled.

I ignored him, pulled the phone and dialed Wolfe.

"Quick, Fritz put him on."

"Yes?"

"Me. At Lambert's apartment. We have Naylor pinned to the floor, but he was clean, has no weapons. Lambert's here, says Naylor is a friend. A crowd is gathering, We can't keep him pinned much longer."

"Lambert claims he's a friend?"

"Yes, and that Naylor was expected."

"Confound it, Mr. Lambert is a witling. Let Mr. Naylor up, but pester him. See how adverse he and Mr. Lambert are to calling the police. Tell him if attempts to leave the building, you will summon the officers downstairs and inform them that Mr. Naylor is the killer of Mssrs. Bannock and Hu. I want to see how he reacts to that statement. Then suggest going into Lambert's apartment for a talk. If explanations fit, you will leave. Tell Saul to call for further instructions. If you can get Naylor and Lambert into the apartment, leave them in Saul and Fred's hands, then you and Mr. Wyatt

call. I'm afraid we have to move quickly, and I'm not ready for the next move. We need a lever to pry Mr. Lambert loose."

"Okay, I think I've got it." I hung up.

"Saul, Fred, let Mr. Naylor up. Naylor, you're going to get your chance to okay us. My name is Archie Goodwin. The guy who frisked you is Saul Panzer, and the bear holding your feet is Fred Durkin. We all work for Nero Wolfe, the private detective. You can either have these fine folks watching here call 911 for us, and get the cops here, or you can come into the apartment and talk to Mr. Lambert, with us present, or you can take on one of us. Your choice."

"I don't want cops." Naylor said. "I'll take any one of you. Starting with the squirt."

This was going to be a pleasure to watch. I don't get to see Saul in action very often. Naylor had about six inches and fifty pounds on Saul, so it was a little more even. The main concern was three good-sized diamond rings Naylor was wearing, two on the right hand. They could cut, but Saul had seen them. The couple behind us was horrified that there was going to be a fight, but made no move. They wanted to see it as much as I did. Lambert just stood there with a worried look on his face.

"Okay. Saul, did you remember to register your hands?"

"Sorry, forgot to, Arch. I was going to do it this morning. I'll just have to do my best without it."

Naylor took off his jacket, gave it to Lambert, and came out swinging. Saul dodged the first punch, then the second, then the third. Then he figured it was his turn, and put in three quick jabs to Naylor's torso. The jabs surprised Naylor, and knocked him off balance. He stumbled back, and I'll be darned if he didn't jump into some kind of karate stance. But Saul knew what to do, and was at close quarters, where Naylor couldn't kick effectively, before Naylor was ready. A quick, vicious uppercut to the throat, and Naylor crumpled into a heap, gasping. It was over in fifteen seconds. Damn. I wish the Garden still had prizefights.

I stepped in, grabbed Naylor's collar, and said to his face,

"All right, brother. You've had your fun. Now you're down to two choices. You either go into Lambert's apartment and cooperate with us, or we go downstairs. There are two homicide cops, named Valdes and Rich, who are parked in a gray Lincoln out there. We tell them that you're the guy who killed officers Bannock and Hu a month ago. We also suggest that they oil you up a little bit before they take you in, just to make sure you talk. Which will it be?"

"I didn't kill anybody." Naylor choked out.

"Maybe so, but we're going to say you did. If you cooperate, and answer our questions, we'll let you go when we're done. What will it be?"

"I've got nothing to hide. I don't know a thing." Naylor still had to make an effort to speak. He tried to get up, but couldn't, so I helped him into Lambert's apartment. Once we were all in, I closed the door.

"I didn't say I would cooperate." Lambert said.

"Fine. Call the cops." I muttered. Then to Saul,

"Nice show. Too short, though. Keep them here for now. Call Wolfe, tell him what happened, and get instructions. I'm off to find Steve."

"Okay. I'll go slower next time. Good luck."

As I left, Fred turned to Lambert and said,

"Uh, can I use your bathroom?"

Eleven

I rang the buzzer to apartment 1A and it was answered by a matronly woman, who said,
"Are you looking for Steven?"

Answering the affirmative, she disappeared, and back she came with Wyatt. He thanked her, and said,

"I think you may have helped catch a murderer. Watch the papers."

I asked him how he had obtained such a sweet spot to settle, and he just looked at me and said,

"I asked her. I just told her what I was doing, and what I needed, and she said okay."

It was his looks that did it. I would have had to think up some sort of angle.

We went out the back way, and climbed into Herb's Taxi. I told Herb to go around the block, and checked on our homicide friends. Valdes was still there, but Rich had gone somewhere. I dialed Wolfe and got a busy. Probably Saul talking with him. On a hunch, I told Herb to start heading downtown. Five minutes later I tried again and got Fritz, who transferred me to Wolfe, still in the plant rooms, but just about finished. He said,

"Archie, we're closing, but our prey is elusive. We need a lever for Mr. Lambert, and the only way to get it is to do something risky. We may not get anything at all, but it must be done, and done quickly. Please put Mr. Wyatt on. I'll not have him going into this blindfolded."

I put Steve on. All he did was nod and say yes a few times. He finally handed it back to me.

"Mr. Wyatt has agreed to the proposed undertaking, but I want your agreement as well, Archie. I want you and Mr. Wyatt to go to Mr. Skinner's office to search for evidence. You will search the office, and Mr. Wyatt will search Mr. Skinner's computer."

I gaped at Wolfe, or rather, at the phone.

"You're kidding. Cramer wouldn't let us within a mile of that place after what happened today."

"I'm afraid that Mr. Cramer is *incommunicado* and I can't get his permission. We must move swiftly. You will be acting as agent to Mr. Cramer, so will be doing nothing illegal, but you must find some way in."

"Are you nuts? It's a crime scene. If we were caught, and we would be, they'd throw away the key."

"Nonsense, Archie. Stop being melodramatic. We merely need something in a hurry."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wolfe, but it can't be done. I wouldn't even be able to get in. That office has Hodgekiss locks, and it would take me twenty minutes in the hallway just to unlock the door."

"Perhaps you could persuade Mrs. Spinnick to help with a key. You and she were intimate at one time. Use your inestimable charms."

"Sorry, out of stock. I don't take advantage of married, pregnant women. She would be fired." Steve was poking my leg. I covered the phone.

"We can do it, Archie. You won't be taking advantage. Don't forget that we are on the side of the right."

Damn Boy Scout. But he was right. I told the phone,

"You're sure there is no other way? A murderer goes free if we don't do this?"

"It's possible that we could get the guilty punished some other way, but if we don't move now, someone else will almost certainly be killed."

"Okay, I'm in. I suppose the science boys are finished for the day, and have it sealed. What, specifically, are you looking for?"

"Anything. Use your intelligence, guided by experience. Mr. Wyatt will be spending his time at Mr. Skinner's computer. He has instructions. Call when you are in."

"Sure. Why not? Goodbye."

I hung up. Herb had the Manhattan directories in a pouch hanging over the back seat. "For cellular customer's convenience," he said. I got Spinnicks' phone number and address from the book. The address was on the way to headquarters, if we headed a little East first, so I told Andy to do it.

Dialing the number, I tried to come up with a plausible line.

Sue answered. I said,

"Hi Sue, Archie. How you holding up?"

"Okay, I guess. It was terrible, though."

"I can imagine. I'm with Steve Wyatt, who you haven't met, but he's a new guy we've hired to help. We'd like to drop over and talk to you about something. Bill, too, if he's there."

"Bill's out on an errand, but you can come ahead."

"Thanks. We're in a taxi, about ten blocks away. We'll be there soon."

"So you have the address?"

"Yes. See you in a minute."

I was glad that Bill was out. Not because he was a problem, but just because it's easier to convince one person than two. I consulted with Steve on what tack we should take with Sue.

"Just tell her what we want," Steve said. "We aren't doing anything wrong."

"Okay, that's fine," I said. "But you have to build up to it somehow."

"I guess I don't know how to do that very well."

"Sometimes, neither do I. We'll play it by ear."

I was pleased to see that even though Bill was a lawyer, and Sue a working girl, at least temporarily, that they hadn't overdone it on living accommodations. Have to start the college fund, I suppose. They lived in a modest walk-up flat off 80th street, that Sue had decorated nicely. I introduced Steve, and she smiled and shook hands. Inviting us in, she said,

"I'm glad to see you, Archie. I hope that everything went all right with Mr. Cramer. He was pretty mad. Did Mr. Wolfe deliberately try to make everyone mad?"

"He did. He likes to stir things up. I think he believes that is when the truth is best revealed."

"Well, he sure did it then."

"Yes. Now, we need your help, and there's not much time. I know this sounds funny, but it really is on the up and up. Somehow, we need to get into Mr. Skinner's office to look for some evidence that Mr. Wolfe needs. Mr. Cramer intended to let Mr. Wolfe have access, but apparently forgot in all the hubbub. Now Mr. Wolfe can't reach him. We were hoping to borrow your key. We really need to move quickly."

"Gee, Archie, I don't know. I'm not supposed to lend my key to anyone. Are you sure it's okay?"

"Yep. Sure as shooting. If there were some other way, we would have used it."

"Well, I suppose it would be all right. But I'm going to call the Homicide department, just to make sure. Maybe Mr. Cramer is there now."

I was cursing my luck. Wolfe's referring to Cramer being *incommunicado* probably meant that Cramer was only not available to Wolfe, after what happened. If she called, she would get Cramer, or somebody else, who would tell her we weren't authorized to go anywhere. I couldn't push the issue, or she would know we were trying to pull something sneaky. I was trying to think up something fast, when the door opened and in walked Bill with Chinese food. I didn't know Sue liked Chinese.

I said hello, and Sue introduced Steve. Bill gave a big smile, and shook Steve's hand. Before I could explain things to Bill, Steve said,

"Bill, we need to get some stuff from Mr. Skinner's computer. Can you help us?"

"Sure. Hon, give them your key. You can use my badge. You want me to come give a hand?"

I couldn't believe it. How did Steve do it? Later I learned that Bill was fed up with the way things were going, and felt like someone should be doing something. So he was open to the idea of going through Skinner's office again, but that still didn't explain the touch Steve had on people.

We told Bill to go ahead and enjoy dinner, thanked him, and left with key and badge, and a promise to return them later.

In Herb's cab, I turned to Steve.

"How do you do that? Make people cooperate like that?"

"I dunno. Basically, people have always been pretty nice to me."

"They sure have. I hand it to you."

We discussed how to go about it, and decided to take the back stairs to Skinner's floor, watch through the glass in the stairwell door until the coast was clear, then chance it from there. We stopped at a variety store on the way, and picked up two of the best flashlights they had, with batteries, some rubber gloves, a small screwdriver set, and some black paper and tape. I would miss my assortment of trinkets I usually bring on these jobs, but we decided it would take too long to swing by the brownstone, now that we were on the East side. In the cab again, we called ahead to a deli I knew, about fifteen blocks from the headquarters building, and had corned beef sandwiches waiting for us when we got there. Didn't I say cell phones were great?

We arrived to headquarters at 7:35 and went to the west side entrance, where I knew a card box was, and ran Bill's card through it. The door released at once, and we went in. We passed a cleaning woman on the way to the stairwell, but she took no notice, and we started up.

At Skinner's floor, the main hallway was only partially visible from the stairwell, but what we saw was empty. We exited and went right three doors to Sue's office. I had the key ready, and had no trouble with it. We ducked under the police tape and were in, in the dark in her office, no more than twenty seconds after we had left the stairs. I don't think there was anyone to see us.

We stood in the dark, listening, for a minute or so, then went to the door leading to Skinner's office. It was locked, too, but the key also fit it, and we went to work. We took the paper and tape, and blocked Skinner's frosted window that let light in and out from the hallway, so that the glow from the computer screen, and the flashlights wouldn't show. Then Steve took the screwdrivers, removed the cover from Skinner's machine, and disconnected the fan and speaker, so the computer wouldn't make any noise.

Steve fired up the computer, and I pulled my phone, and dialed Wolfe. Wolfe himself answered, and I whispered,

"We're in. No problems."

And hung up. Then I went to work with the office. One problem that faced us was, how do we make progress on ground that had already been trampled? I couldn't help Steve with the computer, so could just hope that he had enough whiz kid in him to find something that others had missed, if it

was there. I started by panning the light around the room, trying to notice anything that looked out of place. Besides the blind cord, and a dark marble pedestal that had a depression where the carved sphere must have been, everything was immaculate, and I could find nothing unusual.

I began with the desk. Was it possible that Skinner had concealed something? I didn't think it too likely, given the fact that whatever idea he discovered had come on short notice, and hadn't given him time to really do much in the way of documentation. I started with the notepad on the desk, thumbing through it for loose sheets, and of course checking for impressions from previous notes. Then I checked around and under the blotter. Opening the drawers, I saw that the files had been removed by someone. They were probably being examined thoroughly, so there wasn't any help there. I pulled the drawers out and checked under, and in their holes. There didn't seem to be anywhere that a paper or note could have fallen that I could see. The desk looked clean.

So I started with the books. Scanning the titles on the bookshelves behind the desk, I picked ten or so that seemed the most used, and started on them. The phone books, certainly the most likely books to contain something, had apparently been removed as well. To do a thorough job on a book, you have to check every page, one by one, for markings. Hidden messages in the pages or under the covers were out, so I just thumbed carefully through each page, watching for pencil or pen markings. One book was well marked, but it just seemed to be notes. I made a notation of one marking that I didn't understand for Wolfe to look at later.

When I got to my third book, I whispered to Steve,

"How's it going? Not much progress here."

"Same here. Nothing yet."

The book stuff was going slow, about ten minutes to the book. It was on the seventh book that I heard someone coming down the hall, and I stopped, turning off the flashlight. My watch said 9:17. Steve dimmed the computer display, but it didn't help. The steps stopped at Skinner's door, a key sounded in the lock, and we were caught, Steve at the computer, and me at the desk with the books.

"Geez, what Wolfe won't do!" It was Purley Stebbins.

I was chagrined, of course, but didn't have to show it. I gave Stebbins my best smile, and said, "Hi Purley, just catching up on my reading. Needed a quiet place."

At 9:25, I was in Cramer's office with Steve, Stebbins, and Inspector Cramer. I was happy to help in any way I could. I was under the impression we had permission to enter Mr. Skinner's office, and no, I wouldn't care to discuss anything else, such as how we got in. Mr. Wolfe would be happy to enlighten, I'm sure.

Cramer was more tired than mad, his quota of mad probably already spent on Wolfe. He was more interested in whether Wolfe had something, so he called.

Our end of the phone call consisted mainly of grunts, and short questions or comments. Eventually, Cramer handed the phone to me and said,

"He wants to talk to you."

"Archie? I'm sorry you were caught. It was a risky undertaking, of course. Did you get anything?"

"No sir. I don't know about Steve."

"Have you and Mr. Wyatt eaten?"

"Yes, sir." Wolfe can't stand to see his men go hungry.

"Good. Please put Mr. Wyatt on."

I handed the phone to Steve. Steve's side was not much to listen to. Eventually, Steve handed the phone back to Cramer. More grunts, then,

"So you think you have it? What do you need?"

I was thinking, Cramer is being pretty cooperative, I hope Wolfe doesn't let him down.

Cramer finally hung up, and said to Stebbins.

Wolfe says he's got it, all of it, all four murders, and I'm too tired to argue. If he has, I'll pin a medal on him, and good for him. If he hasn't, we'll throw him and his men somewhere where they can think about it some more. He wants Spinnicks, Dunning, Adrian, Linnings, you and me, and some officers at his place. He wants us to let Goodwin and Wyatt go, so they can get ready, I suppose. He says he already has Lambert there, though our people say he's asleep. Have the surveillance officers wake Lambert, and bring him to Wolfe's if Lambert wakes up. If they can't wake him, tell them to come on to Wolfe's anyway. Have the duty officers round up the rest and take them to Wolfe's. "

Cramer turned to me.

"Goodwin, you've pulled some fancy stuff in my time, but this takes the cake. You'd better pray Wolfe has it. You and Wyatt clear out."

We didn't need a second invitation. We grabbed our coats from the chair and were on our way. I blew a kiss to Stebbins on the way out.

Twelve

Herb was still waiting for us in his taxi, so Steve and I made the trip in good time, arriving home about a half-hour before any guests. Saul and Fred were already there; they had brought Lambert and Naylor in tow. Lambert was in the office, and Naylor was upstairs in the South room, guarded by Fred.

Wolfe, in the kitchen, said there wouldn't be time for a complete report, just give the salient things. So as he sat perched on a stool that was too small for him, I related the important stuff we did, skipping anything Saul would have already filled him in on. Then I went into the office, leaving Steve to give his report, and arranged the chairs for the meeting. We would not have to borrow chairs from elsewhere this time. Lambert, on the couch, sat with his head in his hands the whole time I was arranging, not even acknowledging my presence.

Like Cramer, the bunch that gathered in the office was more tired than anything else. Most had bathed and changed, but there were still a couple who looked like they were wearing yesterday's duds.

The Spinnicks came first. To Bill's question "How did it go?" I responded "Very well, thank you so much," and returned the key and badge. Cramer came with Linnings, Stebbins and Commissioner Hombart, who was not invited. But welcome anyway, said Wolfe. Ms. Dunning came with Tammy Adrian, neither saying much, but both looking beat, and Valdes and Rich came in. A quorum.

I put Lambert back in his chair on the front row. The front row was now identical to the afternoon's meeting, except that commissioner Hombart had taken agent Bradford's place. Sue and Bill I put on the second row next to Stebbins, now that there was room. Saul and Steve came in, went to the couch, and sat.

I informed Wolfe that they were all there, and he waited a suitable interval for me to get my notebook ready, then entered.

"Good evening. Thank you for coming again. Although the hour is not late, we are all very tired, so I will not prolong this unnecessarily. However, a foundation must be laid. If I seem to ramble, please have patience."

"I've filed a complaint against you, Mr. Wolfe." It was Dunning.

"Ms. Dunning, this will go better if I am allowed to proceed without interruption."

"I won't let you take advantage of anyone here, Mr. Wolfe. You cannot repeat what you did earlier today."

"I have no intention of duplicating my earlier performance. I need nothing from you or anyone here. But I must work unhindered. I propose a pact. You allow me to speak without interruption. You will certainly encounter an urge to interject, as much of what I will say will be slanderous if it is untrue. Resist that urge. If you allow me to the finish line unhindered, and I am wrong, you will have much ammunition for your war chest against me. Otherwise, I'll have Mr. Cramer eject you, and you will have nothing. Do you agree to the terms?"

Dunning considered. "I won't interrupt unless I have to."

"Very well." Wolfe, satisfied, sat with his arms on the rests and surveyed the crowd. At length he spoke.

"Does anyone know what a *palimpsest* is?"

No takers. Wolfe, assuming the attitude of a lecturer, settled in and began.

"A *palimpsest* is a document. But not an ordinary document by any means. It is a document whose contents were deleted, then overwritten with something else. A parchment, typically. Many times, what was overwritten can still be read.

Wolfe continued, saying the words deliberately, as if he were tasting a fine wine.

"Ah. Palimpsest. A fine, old word. It rolls off the tongue nicely, doesn't it? And conjures up images...of broken treaties, perhaps, or secret messages. Maybe a musty pirate's cave, filled with treasure and the bones of eternal guards. We are fascinated with palimpsests. If the Magna Carta were discovered to be a palimpsest, scientists would stop at nothing, even deleting the historic words of that document, to find what was underneath. And even if all they found was a recipe for chicken soup, they would consider it a triumph!

Cramer shifted and frowned at Wolfe. But he didn't interrupt. The rest watched, with varying reactions, but Wolfe had their attention all right.

"In ancient times, palimpsests might have been common, since parchment was dear. But today, with cheap paper, they are, alas, nearly nonexistent. Yet I have found they still do exist, within the bowels of computers. Mr. Cramer found one."

"We were keeping that," Cramer said.

"The time for revealing it has come. Mr. Cramer found a document. Mr. Skinner's last journal entry that had been deleted, presumably by the person who killed him. It was concealed, but revealed itself: it was a palimpsest. Even though the document had been deleted, a clever man on Mr.

Cramer's staff could read it because it still existed somewhere within the machine." Wolfe turned to me. "Archie, could you read the document, the palimpsest, Mr. Cramer's man found?"

I thumbed to the place where I had recorded it in my notebook, and started reading. Lambert did his hair, Dunning jerked toward me. Everyone else was watching, too.

11 Jan Monday

Spent morning with Brady and Ginosar preparing argument strategy for Davis case. Sat in on deposition from construction worker on the Spiro building fraud case. Lunched with George Spelling at Daihatsu bank, told him we'd do all we could to prosecute wire fraud cases, but that they're hard to track down and get good evidence on.

Attended 2:30 meeting in homicide department regarding status of Bannock/Hu investigation. Linnings suspects someone in either the homicide department or my department of treachery, I don't know why. But if they find him, we will prosecute him with a vengeance. No real progress on the investigation since I last checked.

I myself came across something that needed checking. In light of Linning's suspicions, I didn't feel it wise to have the police check, so I hired Nero Wolfe to look into it. Its hopefully nothing\; this person has been, generally, a good member of the team. But if something comes of Wolfe's inquiry we will prosecute this person regardless of past service. I hope nothing comes of it.

Spent the evening

"That's all," I said. "Mr. Skinner did not finish it."

"Yes. Indeed. He did not finish it. Likely, Mr. Skinner was murdered while in the very act of writing it. It's unfortunate, but Mr. Skinner did not name who he suspected. Presumably he did not wish to place anything libelous in his journal."

Wolfe continued,

"Like the palimpsests of old, this document contains a secret, revealed to the careful reader. The secret furnished a clue to who Mr. Skinner's murderer is. But this document had more, much more. It had a second palimpsest, a palimpsest within a palimpsest that revealed everything. It revealed the

murderer's name. Mr. Wyatt, a man in my employ, and a computer expert, found it this evening within Mr. Skinner's computer."

A growl came from Cramer.

"Yes, Mr. Cramer?"

"You didn't tell me about this."

"There was no time."

"We checked that computer, there was nothing else on it."

"Yes, of course. But this palimpsest was hidden so deeply that even many experts would miss it. Luckily, Mr. Wyatt did not miss it, although he almost did. He will explain how he found it. Mr. Wyatt?"

Steve got up from the couch and walked to the far side of Wolfe's desk. He was a little uneasy, with every eye glued to him.

"Yes sir. Mr. Wolfe asked me to look in places that others might have missed. Mr. Skinner's journal entry was a type of file--made on a word processor--that had been deleted. But the particular word processor Mr. Skinner was using also keeps information elsewhere, in addition to the files.

"This word processor has a thing called a clipboard, which can be used to exchange information with other programs. If a user deletes a passage from a document he's typing, what is deleted is automatically moved to the clipboard. If the deletion is small, the word processor just remembers it in the computer's memory. But if the deletion is large it is stored on the computer's disk because there is not enough space in memory.

"Mr. Skinner had made such a large deletion. It was this deletion that I found." Steve paused.

"It seems to me that we would have found that," Cramer countered.

Steve replied,

"That's true. It would have been in the clipboard. But Mr. Skinner had made another minor deletion in the stuff he typed later, and it was that deletion that was stored in the clipboard. Since the deletion was small, it was not stored to the disk, and the previous, longer deletion was left on the disk unaltered, but with nothing left to indicate it was there. I found it with a detailed scan of the file the word processor keeps for itself."

Cramer stared at Steve. "I'll be darned. I'll have to check into that."

"Do so." Wolfe said. Then to Steve, "Do you have this deletion? This . . . *palimpsest*?" Wolfe was being dramatic.

"I do. I copied it down. I think that Mr. Skinner wrote it, then decided it was libelous, and deleted it. Here's what it said."

Wyatt took a folded paper from his suitcoat pocket, and spent an eternity unfolding it. I hadn't noticed him writing anything in Skinner's office, but I was occupied with the books.

I saw something that disturbed me at lunch. I discussed it with Walter, but he didn't think it meant anything. I saw Tammy Adrian with a man I had seen before, at a meeting of the managers of the Sterling Shipping Company. They seemed quite friendly. I'm quite sure that Tammy had told me she didn't know anyone connected with those companies when the files were lost.

Could it be that Tammy lost the shipping files on purpose? If it is, it makes her a murderer, a malevolent little devil in sheep's...

"That's not true!" Lambert jumped from his chair and faced Wyatt, who gave him a surprised look and backed up a step. Lambert continued,

"These are all lies...huge lies! I don't know what you guys are doing, but Tammy is innocent and you know it! I won't let you demean her like that! She told me what happened! Skinner attacked her! He attacked her right there in his office! She had to hit him, it was self defense! She told me so herself!"

Lambert stopped and looked around slowly. He became aware of people looking at him, and slowly turned his head and looked at Tammy. She was staring at Lambert, with the color draining from her face. Lambert was pathetic. If I had been Tammy, with Lambert spouting that ridiculous story, I would have strangled him on the spot.

Lambert moved unconsciously back to his seat. "It was self defense. She said so. I called her after the last meeting, and she told me so. She had to do it to . . . protect . . . herself."

Lambert was talking more and more slowly and quietly. What he had done was beginning to sink in. He looked at Tammy for a steer, but she had stopped looking at Lambert, and had turned her gaze to Wolfe.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Lambert." It was Wolfe. "You are beginning to realize how untenable the explanation given to you by Miss Adrian is. Defending against Mr. Skinner's attacks, eh? A man of integrity? Where were her screams? Where was the evidence of a struggle? Why did she not stop at hitting him? Why did she strangle him when he was helpless? And why didn't she report it immediately?"

"You are a man of habit and obsessions, Mr. Lambert. You arrive and leave work on a precise schedule. You run your badge through the slot, even if the door is open. You go to the library daily. You are obsessed with the law, and you are obsessed with your love for Miss Adrian."

"I am not!" Lambert was getting some fight back.

"The hell you aren't." It was Bill Spinnick. He spoke to Wolfe. "He's gaga over her. Everyone knows it except Tammy."

"It no longer matters." Wolfe said. "Let Mr. Lambert deny it if he wishes. But his secret is out. Miss Adrian, by giving Mr. Lambert that ridiculous explanation, has sunk herself. Do you have anything to say, Miss Adrian?"

Tammy's face was an ashen gray by now. She opened her mouth to speak, but Dunning, wide-eyed and flushed, jerked to Tammy and sputtered,

"You said Mr. Skinner attacked you? You little witch! How dare you say such a thing about Mr. Skinner! He was the finest man I knew!"

Tammy looked at Dunning, and began to shrink, her eyes filled with fear.

Dunning paused, thought, then her eyes widened further.

"You didn't lose those shipping files! You stole them! Cramer was right! You took them! Cramer..."

Dunning gasped and turned around to look at Inspector Cramer.

"That's right, Ms. Dunning," Wolfe said. "The charges Tammy leveled at Mr. Cramer were all false. Complete lies."

"How do you know about that? Did Cramer violate the stipulation?" Dunning sure couldn't let a fight alone.

"Nonsense. Don't bother with that. You yourself told at least two others about the charges Miss Adrian made against Mr. Cramer. And your triumph at his forced retirement."

That shut Dunning up, but a low rumble came from Stebbins' throat. He got up, picked up his chair, and moved it between Miss Adrian and me, then sat down.

Wolfe continued, "Ms. Dunning, you are only now becoming aware of the damage you have caused this matter. Were it not for you, Mr. Cramer might have been allowed to proceed unhampered with his investigation of the missing shipping files. Likely, Mr. Skinner would still be alive today."

Dunning could only stare at Wolfe. Words didn't fail a woman like that often, but they did then.

Cramer took over. "All right, everyone. Miss Adrian, you'll come with us to headquarters for questioning. You too, Lambert. If you want charges, we can arrange them."

Cramer turned to Wolfe.

"So Adrian killed Skinner, all right, but I don't get how she fits into the other murders. And what about this guy Skinner saw with Tammy Adrian?"

"Pfui. Miss Adrian killed no one. She told Mr. Lambert she did it in self defense because she knew he would believe her, and she knew he had evidence, from Skinner, of her duplicity. She was aware that Mr. Lambert was in love with her, even if Mr. Spinnick thinks she wasn't. It didn't matter that her story would not withstand scrutiny, because when she told it she believed Mr. Lambert would be dead shortly. She arranged for his death, just as she arranged Mr. Skinner's death, and Mr. Goodwin and my deaths. But Mr. Goodwin and I thwarted her. Twice. First by breaking the legs of her hired man, and next by intercepting the man she sent to kill Mr. Lambert. Kill someone? Miss Adrian? Bah! She didn't have to do it herself. A beautiful woman with her charms? She had it done, of course. People are always more than willing to do things for her," Wolfe said sarcastically.

"I still don't get all of it." Cramer said. "Please explain to those of us who are slower."

"I'll explain at your convenience, later. First, we have to dispose of another mountebank. Archie, call Fred."

I used the house phone to ring the South room. Fred answered.

"Okay, Fred, you're on."

As we waited, I took in the scene. Lambert had his head in his hands, same pose as earlier on the couch. He would occasionally look up at Adrian, then back down again. Miss Adrian, conscious of eyes on her, had her head down, looking at the floor. Ms. Dunning was scribbling notes furiously in the notebook she had pulled from her purse. Cramer was waiting warily in the chair.

Fred came in with Naylor. Naylor's throat was turning a nice black and blue. Naylor, expecting to be questioned by only Wolfe, got wide-eyed at the crowd, and said,

"Hey, what the hell?"

Tammy Adrian gasped out loud and spun around. When Naylor saw her, and Stebbins in uniform, he stiffened and clammed up.

"Yes, Miss Adrian, you know each other, don't you? Mr. Cramer, this is Mr. Ray Naylor, a logistics manager at the Sterling Shipping Company, and the man Mr. Skinner saw with Miss Adrian yesterday. Mr. Naylor thought I was merely going to question him, but I have no questions. He killed Mr. Skinner with his own hands, at the request of Miss Adrian. He also arranged the deaths of Mr. Bannock and Mr. Hu. He and Miss Adrian are involved in a business venture, and he is likely enamored with her, as many others are. I'm not sure of the nature of the business, but it could be diamond smuggling, judging by Mr. Naylor's jewelry. Although I doubt Mr. Naylor killed Mr.

Martinez, he certainly knows who did. I want nothing further to do with him, or the others. Please have your men remove him, and Miss Adrian at once."

Cramer said,

"You've given me damn little to go on. How do you know all this? I need more."

"You shall get it, but only after these scoundrels are removed."

Usually, Wolfe liked the audience to stick around for the full show. But I knew why he wanted the room cleared now. There were just too many killers, liars, and unstable women present. The unstable women would certainly include Sue Spinnick, who he now knew was pregnant and therefore unpredictable. But it was unfair because she had behaved herself very well and had done us a big favor with the key.

Cramer turned to Naylor.

"Mr. Naylor and Miss Adrian, you are both under arrest, as of now. Material witnesses. I can give you stronger charges if you want. Stebbins, read them all the other crap, take them to headquarters, and hold them for questioning. Make sure you handcuff them, and frisk Naylor. Take Valdes and Rich. Wolfe, we need one more to go with them. Can I borrow one of yours?"

"Certainly. Take Mr. Durkin."

"Okay. Two cars, Stebbins. Adrian and Lambert in one, Naylor in the other. Durkin and Rich drive. You in with Naylor. Radio a prowler car to go with you and help at the other end. I'll be there as soon as I talk to Wolfe. Wolfe, I'm going to need some stuff. A lot of stuff. Some of us aren't as fast on our feet."

"Very well, but please send the others home."

Thirteen

I helped usher the others out. They were all pretty shell-shocked, so didn't say much. Linnings said, under his breath,

"Amazing...just amazing."

And Bill Spinnick whispered to me as he passed,

"Dunning was gaga over Skinner, too."

When I got back into the office, Saul and Steve were on the couch, and Wolfe and Cramer were in their chairs. All were drinking beer. Fritz had placed a glass of milk on my desk. It was still a little cold, so I put my hands around it.

After a couple of minutes, I drank, and Cramer spoke.

"How did you know Dunning had told others about Adrian and me? That sure shut her up."

"I didn't know any such thing, but knowing Ms. Dunning, I couldn't imagine her forcing your retirement, then not boasting to her comrades of the feat. She would have had to tell a fellow in the cause, or bust."

"Hm. Okay, I need everything you've got. First of all, I don't get how you suspected Adrian. You didn't find that computer palindrome, or whatever it is, until just before we came here, but you obviously knew more before then."

"Yes. I suspected Miss Adrian before you left last night. Because of three things. One was Mr. Skinner's journal entry. Archie, read the last two complete paragraphs."

I read them:

Attended 2:30 meeting in homicide department regarding status of Bannock/Hu investigation. Linnings suspects someone in either the homicide department or my department of treachery, I don't know why. But if they find him, we will prosecute him with a vengeance. No real progress on the investigation since I last checked.

I myself came across something that needed checking. In light of Linning's suspicions, I didn't feel it wise to have the police check, so I hired Nero Wolfe to look into it. Its hopefully nothing\;

this person has been, generally, a good member of the team. But if something comes of Wolfe's inquiry we will prosecute this person regardless of past service. I hope nothing comes of it.

Wolfe went on,

"Notice that in the first paragraph, when Mr. Skinner wrote of prosecuting someone in the homicide department, that he used the common pronoun, "him" to refer to the unknown person. But when writing of a suspect person in his own department, used "this person" instead, even though the rest of the sentence was similar. Mr. Skinner had become, of a sudden, gender conscious, and used our language's best substitute for a gender-neutral pronoun. I inferred that Mr. Skinner was therefore speaking of a woman in his organization. Thinking back to the security system's exit log you showed Mr. Goodwin and me, I remembered that Miss Adrian had run her card through the slot merely three seconds after Mr. Spinnick had. Surely Mr. Spinnick would have seen her coming, and would have held the door for her-- as all people would be wont to do for Miss Adrian. Why had she run her card through? To establish her exit from the building? Ask Mr. Spinnick what happened.

"But these two items may have merely been coincidences. Worthy of checking, but possibly nothing. The third item was far more important. It came to me when I thought about Mr. Bannock, at the bank. There he was, unsupervised with the bank's computer at his disposal. He had found what he needed for the fraud case in a matter of moments. He was participating in a frustrating murder investigation of one of his colleagues. What would he do?"

"Look at the financial records of the shipping companies. We thought of that. We looked them over until they squeaked, but found nothing."

"True, but how did you do it?"

"We subpoenaed the records of Sterling and Adriatic and had our detectives, and accountants examine them. They had some strange stuff, everyone does, but there wasn't anything we could find. We certainly couldn't find anything on Naylor."

"No. You didn't find anything. You will probably find that the Sterling Company knows nothing of Mr. Naylor's outside activities, even though their ships were used for the smuggling. But you didn't look as Mr. Bannock did, sitting at a terminal, browsing this way and that, looking for anything that would stand out. Imagine him examining the alphabetical lists of check payees, for example. He has been scrolling through the checks paid to Adriatic shipping for a clue. He comes to the top of the listing, and there are now names of other payees listed above. Payees whose company name, or

surname if they are individuals, immediately precede the word 'Adriatic' in the alphabet. What name do you suppose..."

"*Adrian! Holy cow, Adrian!* He saw checks to Tammy Adrian on the list!"

"Exactly." Wolfe was triumphant. "I recognized the similarity in the names, really quite remarkable. Mr. Bannock evidently was struck with the same thing, and began investigating Miss Adrian instead. I don't know what he found, but he may have found the same thing we did. A check made to her from Mr. Naylor, whose name Bannock recognized from his investigation. The check was small, likely harmless, perhaps payment for a tank of gasoline, but it established a connection, possibly innocent, between Miss Adrian and Mr. Naylor. Bannock likely called Mr. Naylor, told him he was in the bank, and asked for an interview to explain something. Mr. Naylor became suspicious at this unexplained scrutiny and suspected his peril. He put Bannock and Hu off for a few minutes, long enough to arrange for Mr. Raker, a resource Naylor had at hand for such emergencies, to get to the bank building, and intercept and kill the officers."

Wolfe sipped some from his glass.

"This morning I had Mr. Panzer do some investigating. You know Mr. Panzer and his capabilities. Saul?"

"Yes sir." Saul stood. "Mr. Wolfe told me to see if I could find a connection between Miss Adrian and someone in that building, probably the shipping companies. I started by obtaining a copy of the employee telephone books from the two shipping companies, and becoming familiar with the contents."

For Saul, "becoming familiar with the contents" meant that he will be able to recite, from memory, the names and telephone numbers of every person in those books on his deathbed. I was going to enjoy hearing, Wednesday night at poker, how he got the books.

"Then I went to the bank and established myself as a dockworker who had missed his last paycheck. The girl who helped me was very cooperative and I could see her terminal screen. I managed to get her to scroll into Tammy Adrian's section, and saw a payer name that was also in the Sterling telephone book. It was a check for twenty dollars even, number 4367, dated June 21 of last year, made to Tammy Adrian by Ray Naylor, account number 164897-4. "

In my mind, I could see Saul, there with cap in hand, thanking the girl profusely as she scrolled through, completely unaware that he was reading and filing everything that scrolled past.

Cramer pulled his notebook and asked Saul to repeat the information. Cramer responded,

"Pretty good, Panzer. Wolfe, why didn't you tell us?"

"It happened only a few hours ago, and I wasn't sure it meant anything. Saul?"

"Yes, sir. I called Naylor's number and got his secretary. She said he was out sick for the day. I called his home, but there was no answer. I secured a picture of him, and reported to Mr. Wolfe. "

"Satisfactory, Saul." Wolfe said. "Very satisfactory. After Saul found out about the check, we had a reasonable suspicion. But where was Mr. Naylor? If he was at home, he was not answering his telephone. Also, how did Miss Adrian learn of Mr. Skinner's suspicions, and how did she learn of Mr. Skinner's appointment with me? It seemed manifest from his journal entry that he had not shared anything with her yet. The link seemed to be Mr. Lambert, who Mr. Skinner trusted and confided in. But he was acting funny, and not talking. Acting, indeed, like a man defending a love. I assumed, as a working hypothesis, that Mr. Lambert had told Miss Adrian of Mr. Skinner's suspicions, and of his intent to call or talk to me, but Mr. Lambert was not talking because he loved her. However, the feeling was not mutual. Miss Adrian realized the danger she was in by relying on the silence of Mr. Lambert. And not knowing what Mr. Skinner may have told Mr. Goodwin and me on the phone, she arranged, through Naylor, to have Raker call on and kill Mr. Goodwin and me. Mr. Lambert was to have been next.

Wolfe paused to drain the last of his beer glass.

"Miss Adrian knew of the 6:00 appointment through Lambert, and realized we probably hadn't met Mr. Ginosar. So she suggested Mr. Raker impersonate Mr. Ginosar so he would be admitted to our office.

"But Mr. Naylor and Miss Adrian's plans were stopped by the valorous action of Mr. Goodwin. Likely, Miss Adrian was the first to learn what had happened, but perhaps Naylor missed a call reporting results from Raker. At any rate, Naylor realized he would have to kill Mr. Lambert himself, and went somewhere, probably to headquarters, to lay in wait for Lambert. Eventually, the pair realized, to their great relief, that Mr. Goodwin and I had not been told anything.

"By keeping Mr. Lambert overnight, you probably saved his life. When he finally was released, my men were there to protect him from Naylor, and intercepted Mr. Naylor as he was calling at Mr. Lambert's apartment. Mr. Lambert had no inkling that he was in danger, and told my men that Mr. Naylor was a friend. That Lambert thought Naylor was a friend speaks well for the persuasive powers of Miss Adrian. When Lambert called her after the meeting this afternoon, she gave him that incredible self-defense story, and told him Naylor would come by, for some reason she invented. That Lambert believed her, and did not suspect his life was in peril, shows how far he had sunk into the bog of her charms. Naylor had no weapon with him when my men cornered him at Lambert's apartment, but that was inconsequential-- he could find any number of ways to catch Lambert off guard and kill him, once he was inside the apartment.

Wolfe stopped. Cramer said,

"Okay, I see it. A pretty good piece of work. Damn good. But you had Naylor, so why did you have to get into Skinner's office?"

"It was that confounded Dunning woman," Wolfe frowned. "With her defending Miss Adrian so vehemently, there would be no chance of convicting Adrian of anything, much less murder. Consider. Miss Adrian could still have claimed ignorance on the loss of the shipping files; she probably still will. Likely the files contained some small item that pointed to Mr. Naylor, and she conveniently lost them as a favor to him. She could have claimed no knowledge of Bannock and Hu's deaths, which is likely true. Without a link to her through Mr. Lambert, she could have simply denied knowledge of anything. It's likely that Mr. Naylor, realizing he was sunk, and also susceptible to Miss Adrian's charms, would choose not to implicate her. So what would you be left with? Merely suspicion, and a hellcat standing between Miss Adrian and conviction. I had to have something to get Mr. Lambert to open up, and to turn Ms. Dunning against Miss Adrian. Luckily, we found what we did. Now to Ms. Dunning, Miss Adrian is no longer a Joan of Arc, but a Benedict to the cause. There will be no stopping her."

Cramer clucked.

"That's for sure. Adrian is in bad shape. Thanks for the help with Dunning. Anything else?"

"No, you're out of your pickle now. You know what to do, where to investigate. This is now a case your men can pursue with relish."

"Yeah, they're hungry for it, all right." Cramer pulled a cigar, bit off the end, and clamped down on it.

"Okay. I'll need Panzer, Goodwin and Wyatt to come make a statement. I'll need Wyatt to show us how he got that thingy from the computer."

"You can have Mr. Panzer, but you don't need Mr. Goodwin or Wyatt. Surely you know me better than that by now, Mr. Cramer."

"What do you mean, I don't need them? They got that thing from the computer. That's what clinched it. You always give me everything when the show is over, except for . . ."

Cramer's eyes widened, and he nearly choked on his cigar.

"You made it up! You made up the whole damn thing! That crap about pimpsets and computers and pirates and seeing Adrian at lunch! It was all a big setup to get Lambert to open up!"

"I prefer the term 'manufactured'. I manufactured it. That is the word you used with Miss Adrian's charges. I had to. Mr. Goodwin and Mr. Wyatt found nothing. How could they? They were dealing with a computer! That pinnacle of what's wrong the industrial revolution. Mr. Wyatt

could have planted that statement, and you would have believed it. You believed Mr. Skinner's journal entry, but how do you know it wasn't typed by the murderer to mislead us? No, computers are not to be trusted, Mr. Cramer. They are benign looking boxes that belie the sordid workings of unseen bits: who dance their turgid dance, always to the tune of the capricious daemons within."

I thought, Wolfe is being pretty hard on computers, seeing that everything he got on this case came from them.

"Yeah, right . . . whatever. So I get nothing from you after all."

"Pfui. You have the check. You saw Miss Adrian's face when she heard Mr. Naylor's voice. In this case, evidence will be a mere formality."

"Sure. We can get evidence, all right. Of course, you can't collect any evidence yourself...you'd have to leave your office to testify."

Wolfe didn't reply, but closed his eyes and leaned back with a look that would seem disinterested to the casual observer, but which I knew to be smugness. Cramer had pegged Wolfe, all right.

Cramer finally continued,

"I can't believe you did all that just to do one of your damn stunts. Sending Goodwin and Wyatt . . ." Cramer paused and thought, then burst into a huge laugh. A horse laugh. He spurted out,

"That beats it. I've never seen anything like it. You sent Goodwin to break into the District Attorney's Office, a murder scene, in the middle of police headquarters, no less, just to pull one of your two-bit stunts."

He laughed again, until tears came, and he had to pull a handkerchief.

Wolfe, when things got quiet enough, said,

"Nonsense. I was truly hoping they would find something."

"Right. Of course." Cramer chuckled. "You had to say that, or you'd be dodging flying objects. This is ripe. Wait till the boys hear this." Cramer turned to me, still smiling. "Goodwin, I ought to take you in, but I don't think we could get Stebbins to stop laughing long enough to testify against you."

Cramer Hee-Hawed again, until he was shaking. When he paused to get a breath, Wolfe said,

"Mr. Cramer. You've lost coherency. Go home. Get some rest."

Cramer settled a little, then replied,

"Good idea. Thanks. I haven't had a laugh like that since I don't know when. Come on Panzer." Cramer swaggered out with a grin, and his cigar at a cocky angle. As he left, he said the same thing he did on our first meeting, and was still disgusted, but it came out different.

"Wolfe . . ."

I turned and glowered at Wolfe, who faced me and turned up a palm.

"Archie, I assure you, my intentions were pure."

Another goddam boy scout.

Fourteen

So I was sore when it all started, and sore when it finished. But at least when it was done, I knew why I was sore, and who I was sore at. Of course, Cramer was right. Wolfe never expected Steve and me to get anything from Skinner's office. Not only that, but I suspect Wolfe somehow arranged for Stebbins to discover us, probably so Wolfe could get to bed at a decent hour. I don't know how he did it. The one time I brought up the subject, he refused to discuss it. One time, several days later, when I was discussing the case with Stebbins, I asked him what made him check Skinner's office. He just smiled big enough to show his gold tooth and said,

"None of your beeswax."

I know Wolfe did it, because when he stipulated bonuses for Durkin, Panzer, Wyatt and me, I got the biggest, and Steve the next. You may think that I got the biggest bonus because I saved Wolfe's life, but that's just part of my job. He was trying to buy me off, so I'm looking for an opportunity to show him I can't be bought.

The police, now that they had a direction, wasted no time. They found enough evidence to convict Raker, Naylor and Tammy Adrain before Skinner was in the ground. We never found out what it really was that made Skinner suspect Adrain; Lambert never did talk. But Adrian and Naylor had been in cahoots since college, and had concocted the smuggling scheme together. Adrian had gone after the assistant DA job expressly so she could keep a finger on police activities. The smuggling operation was busted wide open, and once the ship that had smuggled the cargo had been identified, it didn't take long for the police to finger Martinez' killer, a crew member named Escabo who was in on the operation and on duty the night Martinez was killed. Diamonds were only one of the items Naylor was doing. Drugs and money were also involved.

Lon Cohen was happy, having obtained an exclusive from Wolfe and me. A picture of me pointing at the holes in my chair made the front page of the Gazette the next day. I also took the time after Cramer had left the brownstone to walk to Amy Skinner's house and fill her in on what had happened. She was shocked that someone as nice as Tammy could have done such a thing. That had left her a little dazed so I determined to see what I could do to help her out over the next few days.

The best part, though, the part I wouldn't have missed for the world, was Dunning's examination of Adrian at the trial. Dunning, acting DA, took the case personally. In most murder cases a beautiful woman like Adrian would be cut a break by the jury, so the defense put her on the stand. That

was a mistake because it gave Dunning a chance to cross-examine. Her questioning was cunning, precise, and so well delivered that Adrian was a shambles at the end. And her argument to the jury left no doubt in anyone's mind that a not-guilty finding would make the very halls of justice crumble. The jury only took three hours to find Adrian guilty.

Raker and Naylor weren't so lucky. Their juries weren't gone for more than an hour.

The other day Cramer called. He was back in as head of Homicide with Lennings back on the East side. I listened in on my repaired phone. Just routine business, but at the end,

"Wolfe, you'll never guess what happened. Dunning apologized to me! She said that she was sorry for not believing me. She said she hoped we could have a close working relationship. I dunno. What do you think, is that last statement actionable?"

The left corner of Wolfe's mouth went up a full quarter of an inch, and he said,

"Beware of women solicitors, Mr. Cramer. They are treacherous."

Finally, as for what eventually went on between Amy and me, I'm not telling.

While there was plenty of substance, it's none of your beeswax.

THE END.