
The

PAPER ROUTE

Jacqueline Cayer Nelson McDonald



— The —
**PAPER
ROUTE**

by

Jacqueline Cayer Nelson McDonald

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ALONE

“From childhood’s hour I have not been
As others were; I have not seen
As others saw; I could not bring
My passions from a common spring.
From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow; I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone;
And all I loved, I loved alone.
Then- in my childhood, in the dawn
Of a most stormy life- was drawn
From every depth of good and ill
The mystery which binds me still:
From the torrent, or the fountain,
From the red cliff of the mountain,
From the sun that round me rolled
In its autumn tint of gold,
From the lightning in the sky
As it passed me flying by,
From the thunder and the storm,
And the cloud that took the form
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)
Of a demon in my view.”

– Edgar Allan Poe

Chapter 1

**“Childhood is the sleep of reason.”
– Jean-Jacques Rousseau**

I live in a house divided. Daddy, Mama, my big brother and I occupy the first floor, except for some sovereign space by the kitchen window. That belongs to Mon Oncle who lives upstairs with his mother, my grandmother, whom we call Mémère. Like a flag, one of Mon Oncle’s three Boston Rockers claims this patch of downstairs space.

This summer night everyone in the house is asleep but me. I trespass into Mon Oncle’s territory where I silently rock and stare out the open window. The city’s odor is stronger at night and stronger still this night. Besides the street stink, the air is carrying a whistled tune. Intrigued, I slide off the rocker’s generous seat and crouch beneath the window. The whistling is growing louder and more melodious. Peeking above the sill, I see a lumbering figure turn onto my street. His dark-haired, square head bobbles atop his walrus-like body. A braver look causes me to reconsider. He looks more like a giant, parrot-colored penguin.

Who is he? I watch silently as Penguin Man laboriously ascends three steps to the long, weedy path that leads to the house across the street. Old Mr. Soteau’s tiny house is the only one on our street that’s shaded by elm trees. Story is that one of those elms held a tree-

house built for the daughter of the mill founder. I looked but I never saw any evidence of it. Anyway, the daughter in question supposedly found the tree house to be woefully inadequate. So, what is now Mr. Soteau's home was once a magnificent playhouse built by the doting father whose main house is now the multi-family dwelling next door.

I briefly wondered if the playhouse burst with joyful noise or was it plagued by spoiled silence? Seconds later, I see Penguin Man backing off Mr. Soteau's porch. I watch as he deliberately lifts the old screen door to keep it quiet about being opened and closed at this menacing hour.

Mr. Soteau is a frail old pastel man who rarely comes outside. *Has Penguin Man stolen something from him?* Ridiculous, I know. Judging by his look, Penguin Man is incapable of wickedness, but it's more fun to imagine he's a villain.

I sneak outside and watch his departing figure from my porch. I lose sight of him when he turns right toward Mournful Mountain, a gigantic rock resembling a bald head resting on crossed arms. Mournful Mountain looms over the old Hildreth Cemetery, one of the more interesting landmarks on my paper route.

I'll follow Penguin Man all the way to the end of my block the next time I see him. Tonight, I want to see what's on Mr. Soteau's porch. Carrying a kitchen chair to our kitchen screen door, I stand on it to reach the hook and eye lock. I put the chair back in its place at the table before I let myself out. Running barefoot, I hurry across our wooden porch and down our cement steps. Habit forces me to check both ways before crossing the deserted street. Thinking I must look like a ghost in my white nightgown, I practically float up Mr. Soteau's cement stairs and run down his walk to his screened porch. Like a baby, his screen door screams until I pick it up, off its hinges. Wishing I had a flashlight, I look around.

There's a front window whose Venetian blind completely shields the interior from view. On my left is a shovel leaning through the off-season. And, to the right of the old, wooden door is a galvanized

metal milk box, just like ours. I lift the lid. There's one empty glass bottle and a small envelope inside. The envelope is the kind the bank uses. Apart from that, there's nothing on the porch. I pick up the envelope. It's sealed tight. I quickly return it to the box, back off the porch, cross the street and climb the cement steps back up to my porch. *Penguin Man didn't steal the milk money so what was he doing on Mr. Soteau's porch?*

Finally tired, I walk through our kitchen to the butler's pantry where my narrow bed hugs the wall opposite a built-in sideboard whose painted-shut drawer fights me every day for my socks, undershirts and panties. That morning, my big brother Raymond says, "Stop trying to whistle. You sound like our pressure cooker."

* * *

The hip-roofed, asphalt-sided, single family house we share holds vestiges of past grandeur, the dumbwaiter being my favorite. Anachronistic box fans hold up two of its double-hung windows with the ugly arrogance of bank robbers. One of them keeps the air moving in Mama's bedroom and the other in Mémère's make-shift upstairs kitchen. The latter is blowing an aromatic coffee bouquet down the stairs at me.

Upstairs, Mémère's serving corton sandwiches, a French-Canadian specialty consisting of cooked, cold pork scraps bound by white lard. Spread thickly on white, Sunbeam bread, it's best washed down with hot brewed coffee which Mémère is pouring into mismatched mugs for her sisters, my great Aunts Adeline and Blanche. Aunt Adeline, my favorite, has a warm color and a slightly sweet, slightly musty smell. Like Mémère, she speaks halting English and Québécois, French's Canadian, low-brow cousin. She looks like a woman who holds everything in, including her big bosom which always looks flattened against her chest. Her short, dark hair is lacquered in tight waves pressed up against her scalp. She always keeps a handkerchief tucked into her dress sleeve so she

can quickly capture any snot or spittle that might try to escape out of her. My Aunt Adeline doesn't walk, she scurries. Her quick, short steps remind me of a squirrel anxiously trying to get out of the road alive. If Mémère is the standard, her sisters are her polar extremes. Aunt Blanche being the most enlightened.

As instructed, at precisely one o'clock, I go upstairs to put their dirty dishes into a rubber bin and carefully lower it to the first floor where I wash and dry them. My job is complete when I pull the bin of clean dishes back up to Mémère who will remove it from the dumbwaiter and put the dishes away in the 'pantry' Daddy created for her by removing the closet door and installing shelves. But today, the clean dishes will have to wait until Mémère's company leaves. So, as I had done for fun many times before, I pull the dumbwaiter back up empty and walk up the stairs where I'll climb into it and lower myself down.

When I reach the top of the stairs, curiosity causes me to linger and listen to what Mémère's saying....

"...She was supposed to be a 'he' and named after my husband, George, God rest his soul. But, instead she's a 'she' named after Jackie Gleason!"

Is she talking about me? Who's Jackie Gleason?

"He's great but why him?" asks Mémère's youngest sister, my great Aunt Blanche.

Yeah, why him?

"Because Marguerite's water broke just as Jackie Gleason's fat face popped out of the dilating CBS eye."

"So Marguerite and Ray were going for a live re-enactment?" laughs Aunt Blanche.

What? What does that mean?

"You can laugh but I called her George for the first year of her life."

"That's not right, Mina," chides Aunt Blanche while Aunt Adeline apologetically clears her throat.

“What’s not right is that she was ever born at all,” I hear Mémère say. “The doctors told Marguerite she wasn’t strong enough to have kids. And what does she do? She has one, then another one and now, one more!”

Feeling very small, I belly-crawl my way to the top step and sneak down the hall. Making myself even smaller, I climb into the waiting dumbwaiter where, suspended between gravity and tension, I continue to eavesdrop.

“Well, it’s not the first time Marguerite refused to listen to the experts,” Aunt Blanche says. “She was always a firecracker. I think she gets that from me.”

Suddenly, tension breaks the pulley rope and sends me into a gravity powered plunge. Biting a scream, I curl the fingers of my left hand around the thin plywood base. Landing with a butt-clenching thud, I sit at the bottom of that treacherous chute stifling snuffles for hour-long seconds. The darkness of my situation is literal. I slide open the door and shift my weight to pull my fingers out from under me. To my great relief, the tips are still attached to the digits.

From the top of the chute, Mémère yells, “What was that?”

“The dumbwaiter broke.”

“Did the dishes break?”

“No!” *Just the quiet.*

“When you’re done, come back upstairs. Aunt Blanche wants to talk to you.”

I crawl out, run cold water over my thumping fingers and start back up the stairs.

When I join the three women in the make-shift kitchen, Aunt Blanche says, “Stick out your hand and close your eyes.”

My heart drops. Wondering how she could possibly know, I offer my uninjured hand, palm up.

“What happened to your hand?” she shrieks.

Startled, I look at my hand to see what happened to it.

Mémère glances at my hand to see what Blanche is talking about and scoffs, “Oh, she did that when she was just a baby. She

was playing with the empty milk bottles on the porch, taking them in and out of the box. Somehow, she managed to fall down the front steps with a bottle in her hand. I ran out there when I heard little Raymond scream bloody blue murder. There she was sitting on the sidewalk, staring at her bloody right hand. She never even whimpered.”

I look down at the familiar, thick, crescent-shaped crease across my right palm with new-found pride. I thought it was a birthmark if I ever thought of it at all. But it really is a kind of badge of honor for not crying, isn't it? Now I wish it were in a more prominent place.

Aunt Blanche studies my marred palm for a minute, shines her eyes into mine and murmurs, “You changed your destiny.”

“Stop with that blasphemy,” Mémère snaps.

Dismissing her eldest sister with a conspiratorial wink at me, Aunt Blanche places a silver dollar smack in the middle of my badge of courage and says, “Here you go, Honey.”

“Thank you, Aunt Blanche,” I reply, closing my fingers around the treasure.

“Would you like to come and stay with me and Pappy for a while?”

“I guess so.”

Aunt Adeline nods encouragingly but I look at Mémère for my cue.

Mémère says, “Blanche, promise me you and Pappy will do what we talked about.”

Shifting in her chair, Aunt Adeline clears her throat.

“I said I'd sleep on the couch, didn't I? I already told Pappy. I'll be sleeping on the couch in the den and Jackie will sleep on the loveseat in the parlor. Still, I don't know why you're making a big deal out of it. She wouldn't think anything of it, anyway. She's just a child.”

“Yes, she's a child and it's up to us to give her the right example,” says Mémère. She shifts her gaze to me and says, “Go tell Mama,

then pack some clothes. You'll need pajamas and your toothbrush too. I'll call you when Aunt Blanche is ready to go."

Dismissed, I go downstairs, drop my new coin in my Blessed Virgin Mary bank then head to Mama's bedroom which, in its day, had been a formal dining room. It's separated from the living room by matching pillars that sit atop three-by-three foot built-in cabinets on either side of the room. Next to the bed is a built-in hutch where the original owner's real china and silver must have been on proud display. Daddy had papered over the glass doors and installed a pole across the top from which hangers hang, fully-clothed.

Mama's lying on her side of the mahogany four poster bed she shares with Daddy. The Venetian blinds are shut tight but her figure is outlined in soft tones. The second box fan is slicing the only natural light in the room. Its drone covers the sound of my footsteps on the hard-wood floor. Mama hears me anyway.

"Hi Pumpkin, what are you doing?"

"Aunt Blanche wants to take me to her house."

"Do you want to go?"

"She gave me a silver dollar."

"That was nice of her. Would you like to stay with her at her house for a while?"

"Raymond says she lives in a funeral parlor."

"She lives in a beautiful apartment above Pappy's funeral parlor. They are completely separate places. Daddy brought you, your brother, Uncle Vic, and Mémère there once around Christmastime. Don't you remember?"

"Not really. If I go, Raymond will have to deliver my newspapers."

"He will," Mama promises.

And, I won't be able to follow Penguin Man tonight.

"Oh! Put your hand on my belly, quick. You'll feel the baby moving."

I reach out, and Mama grabs my hand, pressing it to the right spot on her warm body. After a few quiet moments, I say, "I feel her!"

Mama smiles at me, and rubs her hand over mine. “It could be a ‘him’.”

“Nah, it’s a girl. I already told Jesus I want a baby sister.”

“The baby can hear you, you know. Put your head close to my belly and say something.”

“Don’t you dare be a boy,” I say with my face pressed against Mama.

Laughing, Mama says, “How about singing a song. I bet our baby would love that.”

“The baby can’t hear me,” I say, looking up at her.

“Of course he can. I bet he even recognizes your voice.”

“Really?”

“Yup, really. I always talked and sang to you and your brother before you guys were born.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“Of course not and neither will this baby but it doesn’t mean it didn’t happen, does it?”

“No.”

“I think we’re the same way when God talks to us. Don’t you? I think God talks to us but, like our baby here, we just don’t realize it.”

I stay silent, not really sure what I think about that. Shifting gears, Mama says, “Do you want to bring Christine to Aunt Blanche’s house?”

I nod but not because I like Christine. When I unwrapped her Christmas morning, I was thankful that my disappointment was swallowed by Mama’s excitement. We believe in Jesus and Good Will but not Santa Claus. If he were real, he’d never have picked Christine for me. Boxed in broken plastic and crushed cardboard, Christine has dark wavy hair, bright red lips and blue, sparkly eyes that close when you lay her down. She wears a red satin gown with a toile shawl and black high heels. Now she just lies on my bed with her eyes closed....all day, every day and I secretly hate her for it.

After I gather my things, I go back to Mama’s bedroom and lie down beside her. I’m eventually enveloped by a fragile sleep.

* * *

When tears threaten to breach Marguerite's eyelids, she turns away from her little girl. Fearing the baby inside her might drown in sorrow, her thoughts turn to her doctor. When Repuccini told her that having this baby will take years off her life, she said, "That's the most hopeful thing you've ever said to me."

When she was a teenager, she knew more about death than life. The people she loved always seemed angry, not with her, exactly but toward her. She was their terminally ill or, more accurately, interminably ill daughter, sister, niece.

But not Ray; he never seemed angry. He was responsible, patient and kind. Not exactly the words she'd use to describe the man of her dreams but definitely the description of the man she'd married. She'd made a good choice. He pushed her and her doctors to the bleeding edge of new protocols and treatments all the while being a good and reliable provider and, most importantly, a happy warrior in the fight for their lives. Ray was the reason she could abandon it.

"Life is fun," he always said. "Let's have fun with it."

Because of her remarkable husband, the milestones of her life became unremarkable and, as the years go by, her death will become less and less so. A kick inside her belly brings her thoughts back to what her older brother, Moe said about this third pregnancy.

"Jesus, Marge, why don't you make like a bird and swallow?"

Chapter 2

**“Life is hard. After all, it kills you.”
– Katherine Hepburn**

Raised Catholic like the rest of her family, glamorous baby sister Blanche never divorced Hector but that didn't stop her from having several suitors I'd only heard about in whispered Québécois. Aunt Blanche doesn't speak any kind of French at all and chides her sisters when they do. Childless and aging, Blanche finally settled down with an older, well-to-do undertaker she met at her estranged husband's funeral. Now, she lives with Pappy above the funeral home he owns in an upscale, flat-iron style building on Broadway in Lowell's sister city, Lawrence.

Pappy is a tall, bald, elegant-looking man. I think he looks like Mr. Peanut in a derby. He does the embalming in the basement of his building. The first floor has a large, ornate viewing room that can be divided into smaller rooms by joining together the well-spaced accordion doors. On the other side of a grand center staircase are several small, stinky smoking rooms and two bathrooms. And, behind the staircase, is a door that opens to a long, dark hallway that morphs into a ramp leading into the basement.

His and Blanche's apartment is on the second floor and Pappy rents the apartment on the third floor to Blanche's friends. The odd thing about the old building is that to get to Aunt Blanche's bathroom, you have to go out the back door of her apartment, into

a communal, dimly lit hallway, cross the landing of the staircase that starts on the ground floor of the side street and climbs up to the third floor apartment. To me, her home is just part of Aunt Blanche's weird charm.

I roll out of Mama's bed when I hear the solid sound of Pappy's limo door close. I run to the kitchen door to let him in before he wakes Mama.

"Hi little girl," Pappy says.

"Hi. Aunt Blanche is upstairs."

Pappy follows me to Mémère's kitchen where he says hello and kisses Mémère's offered cheek. Thwarting his advance, Aunt Adeline abruptly stands and says, "It's time for me to go."

Pappy says, "It's raining, Adeline. Let me give you a ride home."

"Oh, no, no, no! No need to go to any trouble. I've got my umbrella downstairs. Besides, John will be watching for me. Hermina, do you think I could go in and say good-bye to Marguerite before I leave?"

"I think she's sleeping," says Mémère.

"Okay, then," she says, heading for the stairs. Sliding her grasp down the rail to the landing, she turns, looks back up at her sisters at the top of the stairs and says, "Nice seeing you, Blanche. Hermina, please tell Marguerite I'll see her next time."

When she reaches the first floor, Adeline heads toward the kitchen where she picks up her rain boots from the boot tray by the door. Looking around furtively to assure herself that no one will know, she sits in Uncle Vic's rocking chair to put her galoshes on. Letting herself out, she scurries out the door, down the steps and sidewalk, and only looks up when she gets to the end of the block. There, at the corner of Cumberland Road and Aiken Avenue, is the tenement apartment building where she and John live. And, although she can't see him, she feels sure that, like a gargoyle sentry, he sees her. So she looks up, smiles and waves.

After coffee and stilted conversation, Pappy says, "Are you about ready, Blanche?"

“Ready, Freddie.”

“Ready, Jackie?” Pappy asks.

“Ready, Mr. Freddie.”

Chuckling, he says, “Call me Pappy.”

Appreciating his warm color and happy to be told what to call him, I smile. “Okay, Pappy.”

Aunt Blanche says, “Bye Mina; let’s go Jackie.”

Once outside, Pappy opens the back door of his black, 1955 Cadillac limo and makes a grand sweeping gesture to usher me in. I climb inside the large compartment where there’s a forward-facing bench seat and two rear-facing jump seats.

“Sit wherever you like, Miss Jackie.”

Leap-frogging from one to the other jump seat, I look out the middle windows on each side hoping to be seen by kids others call friends but no one’s out on this rainy day. Noticing that I’m trying to find the handle to roll down one of the rear windows, Pappy presses a button and presto! It rolls effortlessly down just a bit. Then he shuts my door and opens the front passenger door for Aunt Blanche who’s waiting on the porch wearing a rain hat. Aunt Blanche hurries down the steps and gets into the car. After shutting her door, Pappy walks around the front of the car to the driver’s side where he notices that my head’s out the window, face-up, tongue-out.

“Tongue, hands and feet must remain inside the car with the windows up at all times, Miss Jackie. Pick a seat and stay in it until we reach our destination.”

Then he lets me close the window myself. “Magic,” I say.

“FM,” he agrees.

“FM?”

“FM,” he confirms.

I figure the M must stand for magic but while I’m puzzling through what the F might mean, Pappy winks at Aunt Blanche who smiles at him and whispers, “What are you going to say when she asks you what the “F” stands for?”

“Fuck if I know,” he whispers back and they both giggle a little.

Settled in for the ride to Lawrence, I realize I'm alone in a compartment surrounded by glass, like a fish in a mobile bowl. That thought makes me think of Raymond and Uncle Vic who are fishing for Crappie. They almost always catch some. Uncle Vic cleans them and Mémère fries them in her cast iron frying pan making the whole house stink. Raymond says it tastes like crappie. Thinking that's his polite way of saying it tastes like shit, I leave it to the three of them.

I can't hear what they're saying through the glass that separates my fishbowl from the front seat, but I study Aunt Blanche as she talks to Pappy. Surprised, I can't help but notice that only Aunt Blanche's clothes are more vibrant than Pappy.

".....so I say, good for her that she never let doctors put limits on her. She was only around fifteen when they told my sister that Marguerite only has a couple of more years, tops. Three years later, she marries Ray; three years after that, they have little Raymond; and, three years after that, Jackie."

"How old is Jackie?" Pappy asks.

"I don't know, six, seven; no older than eight."

Pappy muses aloud, "This pregnancy must have been a surprise."

Aunt Blanche says, "I swear, though, it's Marguerite's attitude that keeps her going. It's her life, after all and Ray's a good man. No one should tell them how many children they can have, right?"

Before Pappy can answer, Aunt Blanche continues, "But when I said that to my sister, she said, 'Easy for you to say, but I'm practically raising little Raymond and Jackie by myself and I'll be the one to raise number three, too. I'm not getting any younger and she's not getting any better.'"

"Well," says Pappy, "you can see her point, can't you? If it were us, at our age, would we have the energy to help Ray raise three kids?"

"I guess I get it. It's just that it makes me mad that Hermina's actually mad at Ray for getting Marguerite pregnant again. Ray doesn't deserve that. He's so good to Marguerite and to my sister and Vic, too."

“He’s a good man,” agrees Pappy. “But their arrangement is co-dependent. What would Ray do without your sister being home all day to look after Marguerite and the kids?”

At that, Aunt Blanche looks straight out the windshield at the road ahead. It seems to me that they’re done talking so I stop trying to gauge their mood and subject, although the sealed privacy glass hints strongly that they were talking about me.

I concentrate on the view. We’re on the river side of a two-lane road traveling in the same direction as the river. Looking out the opposite window, I see sheer rock precipices dotted with green moss. Pretending to be dropped off here alone, I imagine myself airborne. I soar south along the river all the way to the Humming Bridge where I wave at Uncle Vic and Raymond who are looking at me with the mouths hanging wide open. I yell to them, *‘Are you trying to catch fish or flies?’* Then, I ascend over the highest ridgeline to get my bearings and fly back home.

“Here we are,” says Pappy after lowering the privacy glass.

“Get us each a chicken barbeque,” says Aunt Blanche.

Then, turning to me, she says, “This is the famous White Horse restaurant. They make the best chicken sandwiches, ever. Let’s eat at a picnic table so we don’t get any mayo on Pappy’s seats. Do you want to bring your doll?”

“No thank you. She doesn’t eat, drink or poop. She doesn’t do anything, really.”

I follow Aunt Blanche to an empty picnic table on the shore of the Merrimack River. As is my way, I look at the other customers whom I see as color and light or lack thereof. There’s a man sitting at the end of a second picnic table. He’s talking to and sharing his French fries with a black and white dog. On the only other table are two men in Marchand Oil company uniforms eating sandwiches and drinking coffee. Unthreatened, I relax and enjoy the river view. Soon, Pappy comes back with three sandwiches and three Coca Colas. I never had a Coca Cola before, and I didn’t know I should

be surprised that my barbeque sandwich doesn't have any barbeque sauce.

My first sip of that delicious drink makes me think Pappy might have given me one of their grown-up drinks by mistake. *This must be booze and now I understand why Uncle Moe likes it so much.*

"Try the sandwich, Jackie." Pappy says encouragingly.

Reluctant to put my cup down, I take another sip before I unwrap my sandwich. One bite and another revelation! It's the best thing I ever ate. If Pappy takes me home now, I'd say I had the best day ever.

Pappy and Aunt Blanche are talking to each other while I savor every bite and sip. I think I hear Pappy say something about a midnight visitor which makes my aunt laugh. I might have worried a bit about the prospect of a midnight visitor since we are going to be sleeping upstairs from dead people, but this sandwich is just too delicious.

When I had eaten every bite and sucked up every sip, Pappy says, "Time to go."

Several minutes later, we arrive at Aunt Blanche's house and Pappy gets out of the limo to pull a wide wooden door up from the ground, one retracting panel at a time, revealing a long, dark and narrow space. Then he gets back behind the wheel of the idling limo and drives us into the black until it swallows us and the limo whole. The space is so narrow, there's no escaping the limo except on the passenger's side. Aunt Blanche gets out, Pappy slides over and gets out then he opens the back door for me.

Aunt Blanche says, "Just take your dolly and Pappy will bring your things up."

My things are in a large Bon Marché shopping bag with rope handles. Not wanting to carry Christine, I shove her into the bag too. I suspect that was the first time Christine or my second-hand clothes ever saw the inside of a Bon Marché shopping bag. Bon Marché is a six-story, downtown Lowell department store that had replaced Pollard's as Lowell's premiere shopping spot. The only floor

Mémère and I had ever visited, despite my desire to ride the elevator, was the basement where their “rock bottom” prices were displayed around a gigantic rock called a glacial erratic that was just too big to excavate. I always wonder where that gigantic, alien rock’s slow-moving journey began and how it came to be deposited precisely in a rock-bottom basement.

“I’ll be up in a while, I have a body,” says Pappy as he walks out of the garage and turns left to the old building’s grand front entrance. The elaborately carved front door is adorned by a long black awning with the words, “Bancroft-Libby Funeral Home” beautifully scripted in black on its valance.

“Why does it say Bancroft-Libby on Pappy’s funeral home?” I ask.

“Because Pappy and Mr. Libby were partners before Mr. Libby died.”

“Were he and Mr. Libby friends?”

“No, not friends, business partners. Mr. Libby didn’t have many friends.”

“Why not? Was he colorless?”

Aunt Blanche looks at me with an expression I can’t name. “That’s a pretty good description of him,” she says finally. . “Mr. Libby didn’t like people and he certainly didn’t like me.”

“But you’re easy to like.”

“Mr. Libby didn’t think so. He thought I was a distraction.”

“Did he live here too?”

“No, he lived across the alley.”

“Do you and Pappy know Mr. Dickens?”

“I don’t think so, who’s that?”

“Charles Dickens.”

“The author?”

“Yes. He wrote *A Christmas Carol*. I watched the movie with Mama last year and I liked it a lot. Mama told me that it was a book first and that Charles Dickens wrote it.”

“Well, that’s all true but why would you think that we know Mr. Dickens?”

“Because I think he got the idea for the story from you, Pappy and Mr. Libby.”

Again, Aunt Blanche looks into my eyes for a few long seconds and I wonder if I said something wrong until she says, “I think that’s the best and worst thing that anyone has ever said to me.”

Before I can figure out if I should apologize, she takes my hand and leads me to a locked windowless door that stands inconspicuously on the sidewalk right next to the raised garage door. She unlocks it then turns back to me.

“Wait here while I go up to open the door for Duchess.”

In the several minutes before Aunt Blanche mounts all the steps, I can hear Duchess barking and scratching at the door above.

“Mommy’s coming, Duchess,” Aunt Blanche calls while I wait on the sidewalk below.

She’s not Duchess’s mommy.

I look over at the heavy traffic that flows from three of the four points of the intersection. There are no cars on the side street where I’m waiting and the only pedestrian who passes me is a drab looking man who doesn’t even notice me as he looks up the stairs at Aunt Blanche’s slow moving, red-dressed derriere.

When she finally reaches the top of the staircase, Aunt Blanche unlocks the door and out flies a white, twirling puff. Duchess’s shorn little body is adorned by six fluffy pompoms that top her head, her tail, and all four of her dainty ankles. To me, Duchess is like Christine, beautiful but boring.

“Go do pee-pees, go downstairs, go ahead, Duchess.” Then to me, she says, “She’ll do her business and come right back upstairs. When she does, follow her up and shut the door tightly behind you.”

To my amazement, Duchess runs down the stairs, pees in the gutter and runs back up paying no attention to me at all. I can’t tell an animal by its color but, if I had to guess, I’d bet Duchess is a little dull.

“Good girl, Duchess. Give the door a good, hard slam, Jackie.”

Liberated from the perpetual quiet of my own home, I slam the door like a rebel then charge up the stairs. When I reach the top, I follow Aunt Blanche into her little kitchen. It looks and smells like Spring. Her kitchen table has a white porcelain top with a pretty red floral border. It also has a little secret storage drawer attached under it. The little table is framed by two chrome and red vinyl upholstered chairs. On the opposite wall, in a scallop-bordered, built-in hutch, I count eight red and clear glass goblets with matching small plates. They're the most beautiful dishes I've ever seen. The stove and refrigerator are small, like Mémère's but they're yellow! Not yellowed, like old cigarette smoke-sifting curtains, but real yellow. And the sink, almost big enough to bathe in, is aqua!

I can't resist sliding open the secret table-drawer just a bit. Inside is gold silverware! *Wait, is it still called silverware?*

“Come here, Jackie,” Aunt Blanche calls.

I follow her voice into the living room. Pappy's red leather recliner is by the window on the right side of the room and, across from it is Aunt Blanche's grey suede couch. Directly in front of the couch is a glass and brass coffee table, on top of which are a large red glass ashtray, a gold lighter and a pack of Salem cigarettes. Through the glass, I see a beautiful brass cat curled up on the Oriental rug layered atop a hardwood floor.

In Pappy's direct line of sight, at the end of the spacious room, sits a brand new Olympic Hi-Fi TV. That too, has a secret. Inside its polished oak side door, are a turntable and a radio! Aunt Blanche turns on the radio to *Purple People Eater*. It's the first time I hear that funny song but I don't get to hear it all the way through because Aunt Blanche changes it to a song she seems to like better. She soon joins in singing, “.....*I love it when you give me things and you ought to give me wedding rings.....*”.

“Do you have a wedding ring?” I ask.

Looking over her shoulder at me, she asks, “Did Mémère tell you to ask me that?”

“I don’t think Mémère even ever heard that song.”

Smiling, Aunt Blanche says, “HmMMM, sometimes I think you put people on....do you?”

“On what?”

“Oh, little girl, you are a cute one, aren’t you?”

“Thank you.”

Aunt Blanche turns off the radio and walks into the front room. A wide, floor to ceiling window stands smack in the middle of the tapering room like the mast of a proud sailing ship navigating above the choppy intersection below. I run to it and put my toes and forehead up against the glass. Looking straight out into the ether thrills me. *It’s almost like flying.*

My fantasy is interrupted when Aunt Blanche begins to play and sing *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*” on the upright Wurlitzer I had barely noticed on my way to the window. “.....*Life is but a dream.*” When she finishes, she scoots over to the left and pats the empty space on her right, “Come sit with me and play.”

“I don’t know how to play.”

“It seems so,” she says. “Come.”

So I sit next to her and watch as she deliberately depresses keys and sings, “D, D, D, E, F#.....” to the simple song.

I’m mesmerized, not by the piano, but by her fingers. They look like the thickly knotted, tapering branches of the Baobab tree poster in Sister Paul Marie’s classroom. She seems to move her fists rather than her fingers across the keys.

Seeing me stare at her hands, she says, “Arthritis.”

“Mama’s look like Baobab trees too. Sometimes I rub them for her. Sometimes she asks me to do her elephant feet instead.”

My instant blush shows Aunt Blanche I didn’t mean to say that. Aunt Blanche ignores my color and the fresh remark.

Holding up her hands to inspect them herself, she says, “You know, now that you point it out to me, they do look like Baobab trees.”

Smiling, Aunt Blanche leaves me to continue practicing while she makes up my “bed”, the purple loveseat that sits across from the piano.

“There, you’ll be nice and comfy here.”

After a while, I get bored with *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* and start running my fingers over the keys without rhythm or talent. By lucky accident, I slide off the bench and notice that, like almost everything in Aunt Blanche’s apartment, it too has a secret compartment.

Looking around, I see that Aunt Blanche, having finished making up my ‘bed’, is walking away from me toward the kitchen. I quietly lift the top of the piano bench seat to find old, worn sheet music whose covers can barely hold onto its pages. Carefully sifting and lifting, I find a cover with the American Flag on it; another that reads “Easter Parade”, and a third with a picture of a couple dancing under the title, “Jazz Babies’ Ball”. And then, under all the old sheet music, I see a newspaper clipping. When Duchess jumps up at me, I nearly scream. I turn to check on Aunt Blanche. She’s not paying any attention to me. I slip the cut-out article under my bed. Then quickly go back to the treasure trove that is the piano bench.

There’s a picture of young Uncle Vic who looks like a movie star with thick, wavy hair. There’s a picture of Uncle Moe in a sailor uniform and a beautiful old picture of Mama, with full red lips, sparkly blue eyes and dark wavy hair. She reminds me of someone but I’m not sure who. Even though she doesn’t much look like the picture now, I know it’s Mama because of the gold pin on her left shoulder. It’s a pair of doves connected by a thin gold chain. That very pin is still in her jewelry box on her bedroom dresser. I quickly slide that photograph under my bed with the newspaper article.

From the kitchen, I hear Pappy’s voice, “Where do you want this?” I slam the piano bench shut.

“Put it on her bed. She’ll need her toothbrush and pajamas soon.”

Pappy enters the front room and places my Bon Marché bag on my ‘bed’.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, young lady. Perry Mason tonight, Blanche,” he calls out to my aunt in the kitchen.

Then, like Penguin Man, he whistles his way out and across the front hallway to ‘his side’ of the large apartment where his office, big bedroom and on-suite bathroom are situated. A grand oak staircase that I was never, ever to descend, separates his and my aunt’s sleeping spaces by a distance respectful enough for Mémère.

Turning to look at my bag, I notice Christine’s bare feet sticking up through the rope handles. Somehow, it bothers me to see her like that. I pull her out feet first and dump my stuff on the loveseat looking for her high heels. When I find both, I gently put them on her and bring her to the breathtaking window. For some reason, I want to share my fanciful flight with her.

What’s Perry Mason? I ask Christine.

Seeing my things in a jumble on the loveseat, Aunt Blanche says, “Let’s put your things on this side table. Hand me your clothes.”

So, I hand her two jerseys, two pair of panties, a pair of socks, my white nightgown and my toothbrush.

“Is that it?”

I shrug, “How long am I staying?”

“We’ll see. What do you say we put our nighties on and then I’ll pop some corn and we’ll all watch TV?”

“Ok.”

So, I grab my nightgown and toothbrush and follow Aunt Blanche out the kitchen door and across the second-floor landing of the dark, quarter-turn staircase I had earlier climbed behind Duchess. While Aunt Blanche pokes and jiggles a skeleton key in her bathroom door lock, I run down the hall to look up the staircase that leads to the third floor.

“Don’t go up there, Jackie. That’s our renters’ private staircase. Come back here....door’s open.”

The inside of Aunt Blanche's bathroom looks like a palace; everything is gold-flecked even the high, wall-mounted toilet tank. A prism-shaped crystal dangles from its gold, pull chain and the toilet seat is pink and gold-flecked too; the sink wears a pink skirt, and the tub's pink claw feet have gold toenails.

The vanity is topped with beautiful crystal perfume bottles with balloon pumps, gold and silver lipsticks, a gilded hand mirror, gleaming make-up compacts, silver Bobbie-pins, pretty hat pins and bright nail polishes in pretty bottles. Mama, Mémère and Aunt Adeline don't have stuff like that.

Seeing my interest, Aunt Blanche says, "Did you know your mother was a professional cosmetician? She could make a plain woman look like Elizabeth Taylor."

I shake my head.

"One time, I took her shopping and she came home with a job at **Pollard's** as a 'cosmetician'. She was only 15 years old! She wasn't even finished high school! Oh, maybe I wasn't supposed to tell you that. Oh, well. Anyway, your mother could talk a turtle out of its shell." She picks up a hair brush and stands behind me.

"What did she say?" I ask, as Aunt Blanche starts to brush my hair. I watch her in the mirror as she draws the brush through my hair over and over again, gently teasing out knots that I don't usually bother with.

Aunt Blanche smiles and continues, "Well, she and I were browsing the cosmetic counter, sniffing perfumes, comparing lipsticks, stuff like that when she started gathering up samples of every kind, foundation, blush, eye shadow, the works!"

She pauses and I stay quiet. I don't want to miss a word. Even though she's talking about Mama, it feels like she's talking about someone I've never met.

"Next," Blanche continues. "She dragged a bar stool over from the **Furniture Department**. I thought we'd get kicked out of the store when she did that. But I sat down and let her work her magic on me. Every time she applied something, she told me what it was

and why she was using it. I try but I've never been able to do my own make-up as good as she did it. Anyway, Mr. LaMarche, the General Manager walked over, saw and heard what she was doing and offered her a job on the spot. She took it. Mémère wasn't too happy about it but your mother enjoyed her time there and that's where she met your Daddy. There," she says, putting the brush down. "I'll leave you to finish getting ready."

Aunt Blanche leaves the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

I don't have to go to the bathroom so I just stand in the middle of the glamorous room and look around. I rub a little bit of flowery-smelling lotion on my cheeks and forehead before I notice the label says Hand Lotion. *It doesn't know the difference.* Next, I squeeze a perfume bottle balloon. Nothing comes out so I squeeze again..... still nothing. I pick it up, spy the tiny opening and squeeze the pump again squirting myself in the face. Coughing and blinking back tears I wonder why something smells so good and tastes so bad?

"How are you doing in there?" asks Aunt Blanche through the closed door.

"I'm almost done."

"Then, let me in. I've got to pee."

I quickly return the bottle to the crowded vanity, grab my clothes and unlock the door.

"Smells like a bordello in here," says Aunt Blanche.

Thinking it to be a lovely word, I reply, "Looks like a bordello in here, too".

Laughing, she says, "Be sure to tell Mémère that."

* * *

Aunt Blanche and I sit on her sofa while Pappy and Duchess sit in the big, red recliner. Aunt Blanche gives us each a bowl of buttered popcorn and a napkin. Pappy seems to give Duchess a kernel for every few he eats.

“Wipe your greasy fingers on the napkin, not on my couch, okay, Jackie?” Aunt Blanche says. “And Pappy, stop pretending your petting Duchess when you’re really just wiping your hands on her.”

Pappy says, “Duchess doesn’t mind.”

I giggle.

“Pappy, how did Mr. Libby die?”

“He was murdered.”

“Pappy! That’s not the way to talk to a little girl,” Aunt Blanche says.

“What? She asked.”

“Okay, it’s starting,” says Aunt Blanche, “time to be quiet.”

I watch quietly for a while. At the commercial, I get up and take Pappy’s, mine and Aunt Blanche’s empty bowls into the kitchen. It’s the excuse I need to sneak another look at the shiny gold knives, forks and spoons in the secret table drawer. Figuring Pappy won’t even look at me and Aunt Blanche won’t be able to see, I slide a knife up under the right sleeve of my nightgown, walk right through the TV room, with Pappy on my right, and put the secreted knife under my pillow, unnoticed.

I return to the couch in time to see Mr. Drake whisper something in Mr. Mason’s ear that makes Mr. Mason’s eyebrows leap up his forehead.

Aunt Blanche says, “I bet he found him. I bet he only pretended to be dead.”

Pappy nods. *He knows a lot about the dead. Earlier, he said he had a body. That means there’s at least one dead person downstairs.*

* * *

Meanwhile upstairs, where I was never to go, Pappy’s tenants are having a party.

“My turn.....who is most likely to go to a Halloween party as Jayne Mansfield?”

Six fingers point to Larry, and three to Richard; no one points at Dennis, Paul, Robert, Richie D., Mike, Tom or Bill.

“What do you mean, Halloween? That’s how I dress to go food shopping,” laughs Larry who takes six sips of his sixth beer, draining the bottle. “Wait while I get a fresh one.”

“What a great place you guys have!” says Bill. “How on earth did you get it?”

“Over Mr. Libby’s dead body,” says Larry.

“What does that mean?” asks Bill.

“He was Mr. Bancroft’s homophobic partner. He told Blanche he’d never rent to queers. When he died, Blanche called me to see if we were still interested in it.”

“Lucky you,” says Bill.

“I don’t believe in luck.” Larry states. “Anyway, who’s next?”

“I am,” says Richard. “Who is most likely to be mistaken for Groucho Marx?”

With nine fingers pointing at him, plus his own thumb, Paul says, “Good question, Captain Obvious,” as he chugs his nearly full beer wetting the corners of his signature dark and full mustache.

“I’ve got a good one,” says Mike. “Who is most likely to sneak downstairs with me to pay our last respects to Norvell Hardy?”

“Who’s Norvell Hardy?” asks Bill.

“No one,” interjects Tom.

“Don’t make me sorry I told you, Mike,” warns Larry.

“Told him what?” asks Dennis.

“That Norvell Hardy, A.K.A. Oliver Hardy, *the* Oliver Hardy is dead downstairs,” gushes Mike.

“So is Dennis,” jokes Paul.

“How exciting,” exclaims Richard. “I’ve always wanted to be on top of a celebrity!”

“How did a big-time celebrity end up dead in Lawrence?” questions Ritchie D.

“All Blanche would tell me is that Mr. Bancroft was contracted to prepare his body for shipment to Hollywood,” says Larry. “I, for one, would love to see him in the flesh before he goes.”

“He’s already gone,” says Robert.

“I’m pretty sure ‘dead as a doornail’ doesn’t count as ‘in the flesh,’” agrees Bill.

“Forget about it,” says Tom, Larry’s roomie. “I’ll deal with you later,” he adds with arched eyebrow.

“Promises, promises,” laughs Larry. “Lighten up, I was only joking.”

Richard pipes in, “What harm could there be in taking a peek at the old stiffy?”

“You saw no harm in it last night,” jokes Larry.

Tom says, “Have a little respect, huh? Besides, what do you think Mr. Bancroft would do if he caught us? Did you ever think of that? Blanche would let him throw us out on the street and we’d be lucky if that’s all he did. I heard he killed a man for much less.”

“He didn’t,” Larry replies.

“Who made you judge and jury?” challenges Tom. “I’m opening early tomorrow, color and perm. I’m gonna’ call it a night. Try to keep it down to a college roar, would you?”

“We’ll be quiet as a boa,” says Larry, wrapping a feathered one around his neck.

“Goodnight, Irene, goodnight,” sing Richard and Ritchie D.

“We’re gonna say goodnight, too”, says Paul taking Robert’s hand.

Mike says, “I guess the party’s over. Need a ride, Bill?”

One after another, the friends head home leaving Larry and Richard to clean up while Tom snores in the bedroom.

“Wanna night cap?” asks Larry.

“Sure, I’ll take a matching gown too, if you have one,” Richard says.

With a brandy in each hand, Larry joins Richard in the den.

“Were you serious?” he asks Richard.

“When am I not serious about gowns?”

“No, silly, I mean about sneaking downstairs,” Larry says.

“I will if you will,” Richard replies. “But first, let’s savor this sexy brandy.”

Good sense slowly sipping away, Richard asks, “How would we get in?”

“Easy,” says Larry. “We go in through Blanche’s apartment.”

* * *

After Aunt Blanche and I wash and dry our empty popcorn bowls, she leads me to the front room and tucks me into the made up purple loveseat.

“Sleep tight,” she says. “I’ll be sleeping right over there on my couch.”

“Where does Pappy sleep?” I ask.

“In his bedroom, on his side of the apartment, but don’t you ever go looking for him. There’s an open staircase on that side and I don’t want you falling down the stairs in the middle of the night. Promise me you’ll stay in your bed until morning.”

“What’s at the bottom of that staircase?”

“That’s Pappy’s funeral parlor. We must never, ever go down there. Got it?”

“Got it,” I promise. “Are there really dead people downstairs?”

“Maybe,” Aunt Blanche teases. “It’s hard to know for sure because the dead are so darn quiet. Come on, Duchess,” she adds, “time for bed.”

Duchess runs past the couch in the den and turns toward Pappy’s side of the apartment.

“Stay here with me, Duchess,” Aunt Blanche calls.

Duchess comes back to Aunt Blanche who scoops her up in her arms. The only light in the apartment comes from the streetlights below.

“Aunt Blanche, was Mr. Libby dead downstairs?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Just curious.”

“Well it’s time to go to sleep, now, so let’s save our questions for tomorrow. Goodnight, Jackie.”

“Goodnight, Aunt Blanche.”

I turn onto my tummy so I can see her pull an afghan over herself and Duchess. Hoping they would soon fall asleep, I rest my chin on the pillow and feel for the knife. There it is, smooth and sleek except for the ridges at the tip. I’m tempted to take it out from under the pillow but I’m afraid its golden sparkle could be seen in the dark. So, I keep it there and count to one-hundred. Then I think about that Coca-Cola and the barbeque sandwich for a while, remembering their deliciousness and then I think about Mama and how sorry I am that she didn’t get to taste them. Then, to my surprise, as I’m counting my way back to one hundred again, I see Aunt Blanche’s silhouette slowly rise from the couch.

Duchess jumps off and scurries toward Pappy’s side, her nails *click-click-clicking* across the floor, but Aunt Blanche creeps over toward me. Quickly turning my head to face the wall, I close my eyes and pretend to be fast asleep. My heart throbs as loudly as the golden knife gleams under my pillow. Aunt Blanche feels close, very close. I imagine her cheek to be about to touch mine but instead I feel her presence slowly recede. I wait a few more seconds then I rest my head on my chin and slit my eyes open just wide enough to see her turn toward Pappy’s side of the apartment. I hold my breath and tune my ears to the slightest sound. I swear I hear a door knob turn and a door swing open. My heightened sense is rewarded by the sound of a closing door and the click of a lock.

A few more seconds of silence pass until I permit myself to do what I’d thought about since I arrived. I sneak out of my bed and race across the room to the floor to ceiling window. There, I stand, spread-eagled against it. Forehead, palms, shoulders, tummy, thighs, knees and toes pressed up against the dark glass. I’m wake-walking above the streetlights like Wendy in Never Land.

I ascend to a river-view height to locate and follow the mighty Merrimack to the most wondrous restaurant in the world. Salivating until satisfied, I set my sights south toward the humming bridge under which Uncle Vic and Raymond fish and over which Daddy's car strums a sorrowful song over its grates to take us to visit Mama at St. Joseph's Hospital where she lives when she doesn't live with us. Little do I know that, a few minutes earlier, Daddy rushed over that melancholy bridge to take Mama to the hospital where she will stay until the birth of my baby sister.

Before I succumb to sleep, I retrieve the newspaper clipping from under my bed. Taking it to the window, I read by the light of the streetlamp.

LAWRENCE, MA — A man who was arrested this past weekend on suspicion of killing his business partner was released from jail Monday night while detectives continue to investigate and piece together what happened at the property outside the Bancroft-Libby Funeral Home on June 20.

The beating death of Francis Libby reportedly occurred in the alley behind the funeral parlor jointly owned by the victim and the suspect, William Bancroft. For reasons that remain unclear, witnesses reported that the victim threatened and verbally abused the suspect's girlfriend, Blanche Goyette earlier that day, officials said.

When the suspect learned of what happened, he reportedly confronted Mr. Libby and the two men began arguing. Witnesses corroborated Mr. Bancroft's statement that Mr. Libby walked away from the confrontation seemingly unharmed. Early the next morning, Mr. Libby's body was found in the same location. Mr. Bancroft was subsequently arrested on suspicion of murder.

Held throughout the weekend, but reportedly refusing to provide any information about what transpired, the suspect was released Monday night with no charges filed. Without testimony from anyone involved and no new witnesses coming

forward, investigators are facing a challenge in bringing charges. The suspect is not thought to be a danger to the general public, however, and the incident is considered isolated domestic violence, officials said. Investigators are still working the case.”

I wonder who killed Mr. Libby. It wasn't Pappy, that I know for sure.

I put the clipping back in the piano bench and settle in for the night. The click of a skeleton key in the kitchen door snaps me back into full wakefulness.

* * *

“Sshhhh! I’ve done this a million times to let Duchess out to pee for Blanche. Just follow me and be quiet!”

“What if Duchess hears us and starts barking?”

“She won’t hear us. She snores louder than Blanche. Besides, she sleeps in their bedroom, tucked away on the other side of the apartment. Blanche told me the first time she slept with Pappy, he had a jealous cat that knocked an ashtray off his desk when they were sound asleep. She about had a heart attack thinking one of Pappy’s dead clients was walking about. Since then, she insists on closing and locking their bedroom door. Now, no more talking.”

Larry pushes open the kitchen door, motions to Richard to follow him, then silently shuts the door behind them. Stealthily goose-stepping through the kitchen as if they were walking through a marsh, the intruders turn into the hallway on Pappy’s side of the apartment before breaching Aunt Blanche’s den.

They never see the wide eyes watching over the top of the down pillow.

With his index finger to his lips, Larry nods toward the closed door on their left then points at the grand open staircase on their right. They descend the staircase slowly, cringing at every pulse quickening creak. At the bottom of the stairs, directly facing them,

is the main street entrance. Its heavy oak door is locked and bolted shut. To their right are the unlocked, oak double doors leading to the main viewing room.

Acutely attentive, my ears twitch dog-like in the silence. I wait a few minutes before I dare leave my bed, walk through the den, and cross over onto Pappy's side. There, I crouch behind the carved newel post at the top of the forbidden, open staircase. With my golden butter knife clenched in my hand, I study the closed bedroom door on my left before I start down the forbidden staircase on my right.

Larry and Richard enter Mr. Bancroft's funeral parlor through one of the double doors. When they close it, a lovely floral scent wafts its way to my adrenalin-driven brain seducing me further down the stairs which, to my relief, prove to be silently complicit.

Pressing my ear against the crack between the double doors, I hear the low male murmurings of two tomfools.

"Okay, where is he?" asks Richard.

"He must be in here," replies Larry pointing to a casket.

"Dare we open it?" asks Richard.

"We came this far," says Larry lifting the top half of the hinged casket.

A few moments of silence, then, "It doesn't look like him," Richard says.

"Well, we've never seen him in real life before," says Larry.

"And we still haven't," reminds Richard. "I don't think it's him."

"Picture him with a mustache and a bowler."

"Yeah, well I guess it could be him. Do you think I could shake his hand?"

"I doubt it. I think he's pretty much frozen in place."

"I heard that rigor mortis only lasts for a while," counters Richard.

"Let's see," says Larry.

I slip into the room, silently shut the door behind me, just as Larry reaches in the coffin to clasp the cold, dead hand. Relieved

that my fast footsteps are silenced by the plush carpeting, I hurry to hide behind a spray of flowers.

Looking as lifeless as the guy in the coffin, Larry lifts the corpse's hand and gives it a vaudeville shake. Dumbfounded, I lose my grip on the golden knife which clangs off the metal base of the floral display stand.

Horror-struck, Richard screeches, "You broke his arm! Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!"

Larry retracts his hand and twirls on his tip-toes. Then, the two men bump into each other as they race past me toward the double doors. Opening the one they came in through, Richard goes first, followed by Larry who says, "Shut the door! Shut the door!"

Richard is already half-way up the stairs so I assume Larry is talking to me.

"Close the casket," I say.

Larry shrieks but never looks back. He takes the stairs two at a time.

I pick up my knife and come out of my hiding place. Silence has replaced bedlam. I look over at the coffin and decide the right thing to do is to close it.

Standing on the kneeler for leverage, I still can't reach the lid. I walk around to the front of the coffin, look down at the dead man's head and say, "I don't know who you are, Mister, but I'm sorry."

Then I give the lid a push from the back and it closes slowly and silently but comes to a stop before closing completely. It gets stuck on the man's arm which wasn't properly replaced.

This isn't right. I push the dead man's elbow up and forward until his arm rests snugly inside the coffin whose lid now clicks closed.

Meanwhile, Larry and Richard pass Pappy's closed bedroom door and break into a jog through Blanche's kitchen. On the other side of the closed kitchen door, they take a breath before sprinting up the private staircase to Larry's apartment.

After closing the door softly behind me, I ascend the stairs and find my way back to my love-seat bed where I fall asleep sipping a ghostly Coke.

* * *

“Do you believe in guardian angels?” asks Larry.

“Why?”

“Because I think I heard her.”

“Who, Blanche?”

“No; Oliver’s guardian angel.”

“What did she say?”

“She said to shut the coffin.”

The hair on Richard’s arms rises.

“Maybe we should go back down,” Larry says.

“Are you crazy? I’m not going back down there,” says Richard.
“You go down.....”

“Don’t be such a pussy. Wait, what were you saying about going down?”

“You’re crazy. Tom is in the next room. Are you determined to get me killed? I’m going home.”

Immediately regretting it, Richard slams the door behind him interrupting my flight.

Rising once again, I grab my knife and tip-toe to the window. I see a man unlock the car that was parked across the street, under the street lamp. For some reason, he looks up. *He’s not the man who shook the dead man’s hand. Does he see me?* I stay in the window long enough to see him open his mouth real wide. Wondering if he’s trying to tell me something, my golden knife continues to catch and deflect the light of the street lamp onto the sidewalk below. When the man jumps into the car and speeds away, I go back to bed.

* * *

The next day, Aunt Blanche says, "I've got to go to the laundromat. We might as well do your clothes too. Here, put this top on, it still looks clean. Those pants look like they could walk all by themselves."

Suddenly, she picks up my pillow, and the golden knife falls to the floor. My face betrays me. Putting her arm around me, she says, "Now, Honey. There's nothing for you to be afraid of here. Pappy and I wouldn't let anything happen to you. You don't need a knife. You've got us."

Aunt Blanche covers me with the best excuse I couldn't think of. It wasn't fear that put that knife under my pillow.

"Now, go put this back where it belongs."

I do what I'm told while she stuffs my clothes into the pillow case. When I come back she says, "The laundromat is next door to Woolworth's. We'll drop these off first and while they're being washed and dried, we'll get you a couple of new outfits. How does that sound?"

"Great," I say looking forward to this new adventure.

"What size do you wear?" Aunt Blanche asks.

"I don't know. Most of my clothes come from my cousin Debbie."

"That's okay. The sales clerk will know."

A plaid jumper with an attached white blouse, a sailor-type dress, two jersey tops, two pairs of shorts, several pairs of underwear, socks and a pair of sneakers later, Aunt Blanche and I are sitting on round red stools at Woolworth's soda fountain.

"Two cheeseburgers and two chocolate frappes, please," Aunt Blanche says to the pretty, bright waitress.

"Do you like your new clothes?" she asks.

"Yes, thank you. But I think Mémère might not like the short shorts."

"Well, she doesn't have to wear them," Aunt Blanche says.

In my mind's eye, that preposterous image unleashes laughter so strong it nearly upends me from the stool to the floor. Aunt Blanche

catches my arm, propelling me into a half spin that brings us face to face. As if my eyes projected the hilarious image, Aunt Blanche begins to laugh heartily too. Above our laughter rises a loud fart.

Another wave of unbridled laughter assaults the colorless woman seated next to me.

Talking loudly Aunt Blanche points at me and says, “Pull it again.”

That gets us howling like happy hyenas. We’re still laughing when our waitress brings us our food. “So cute to see you and your granddaughter enjoying each other,” she says.

“Thank you,” we both say.

The cheesy cheeseburgers and the creamy cold drinks soothe our laughter-wracked bellies.

“Who killed Mr. Libby?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Just curious;”

“Well, I don’t know. No one does. How’s your cheeseburger?”

“Delicious; thank you for lunch. Thank you the clothes, thank you for everything.”

“Be sure to thank Pappy, too. If he didn’t want you to have all this, you wouldn’t.”

“I will,” I reply with a pang of guilt for not telling him about those two trespassers. But how could I tell without admitting that I too had trespassed? Well, right or wrong, it was too late now.

Making our way out of Woolworth’s, I follow Aunt Blanche around an island display of clearance jewelry. I quickly pocket a pair of beaded earrings like the ones she wears. On both sides of the top of the art supply aisle are baskets of plush puppies. The Mr. Peabody puppy catches my eye. He’s wearing plastic glasses that end up in my other pocket.

Aunt Blanche keeps walking down the aisle toward the door but I linger behind her, admiring the water and oil-based paints, the brushes, canvasses, sketch pads and colored pencils. Suspecting she was talking to herself, she turns, confirms it and walks back to me.

“People are staring at me like I’m a crazy woman, talking to myself.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“What’s got your eye?”

“Water colors.”

Aunt Blanche grabs a couple of small thick-paper drawing pads, winks at me and says, “Pick some.”

I happily choose them. “I can’t wait to get home, not my home, but your home and paint.”

“Well, let’s pay for these, pick up your laundry and go,” Aunt Blanche says.

The laundromat is steamy and doesn’t smell as nice as you’d think. It smells like a wet dog on a hot summer day. Looking down a row of washers and dryers, I see a range of color tones in the people loading and unloading their clothing. A gray Chinese man gives Aunt Blanche a brown paper-wrapped package and Aunt Blanche gives him some money.

“Are all my clothes in there?”

“Yes, they’re all washed, dried and folded, like magic.”

“FM,” I say.

“Yes,” she laughs, “FM.”

When we get home, I dig into the pockets of the same pair of pants I’d been wearing all week, pull out a pair of clip-on earrings and a pair of wire-rimmed, costume glasses.

Next, I lift the cover of a large, beautiful brass jar that stands on the floor next to my flight line window, put my pilfered prizes inside it and quickly return the cover.

Behind me, I hear Aunt Blanche say, “I hung your dresses in my armoire but I need your help with the rest of your clothes.”

When I skip over to the kitchen, Aunt Blanche says, “I don’t use the bottom drawer of this hutch because it’s too hard for me to bend down so this can be yours.”

Handed the folded tops, shorts and underwear, I lay them down in the once empty draw.

“Is there anything else you’d like to put in this drawer?” she asks.

Thinking of my pirated booty, I may have blushed a little but I answer, “No thank you.”

Then I sit at the kitchen table and try out my beautiful water colors. I hold a lightly watered brush upright for sharp lines, angle it for blunt ones and water it more for shading. Having tried every different color, I admire the colorful horizontal pattern of deepening hues. It’s what a crowd of people looks like to me.

That night, like every night since my first night there, I wait until Aunt Blanche tip-toes and Duchess runs to Pappy’s side of the apartment. But this time, my fantasy flight is postponed. I bring my drawing pad and paints over to the Neverland window where, lying on my tummy on the floor, I start working on the first of my two planned masterpieces by the light of the corner streetlamp.

After several nights, I finally finish my *travail d’amour*. By punching pilfered earrings into place on Aunt Blanche’s ear lobes and threading the temples of plastic eye-glasses through slits in the canvass just above Pappy’s ears, I achieve the 3D effect for which I had shoplifted. I hope Pappy and Aunt Blanche are more charmed than curious.

After signing them, I slide the portraits under my love-seat bed and fall asleep. Aunt Blanche wakes me early the next morning.

* * *

Chapter 3

**“Life is what happens when you
can’t get to sleep.”
—Fran Lebowitz**

“**W**ake up, Jackie. You’re going home, today. There’s a wonderful surprise waiting for you there.”

My mind tries to include Aunt Blanche’s voice seamlessly into my dream. Instead, her gentle touch dissolves my sleep and I sit up to blink reality into vision.

“Is my baby sister born?”

As if to pull me into happiness, she takes my hands in both hers, smiles and says, “Yes, and she’s a boy!”

“A boy? But I wanted a sister.” Ashamed but unrepentant, I add “Do I have to meet him today?”

“Oh, stop! You’re going to love your baby brother, Moe.”

“Moe?” I repeat despairingly.

“Yes, your Uncle Moe begged your parents to name him Maurice. But Mémère said it would hurt Uncle Vic’s feelings, so they decided to name him Maurice Victor.”

I couldn’t believe it. Not long ago, Uncle Moe’s wife, my Aunt Ruby, came over to tell Mémère that he was in jail. Apparently, he gave the arresting cop my aunt’s license because he didn’t have one. The next evening, Aunt Ruby brought her copy of the Lowell Sun to

our house and showed Mémère where it said that Ruby was arrested for drunken driving, public nuisance and resisting arrest.

Most of the time, it's not right to laugh even though he's so funny. Last year, we went to his house for Thanksgiving. He stuck his beer up inside the turkey and danced it to the table singing a song about losing his head. Screaming behind him was Aunt Ruby who slipped on the turkey drippings and fell on the floor breaking a Pyrex dish full of French stuffing.

Taking a page from Mémère, I say, "I'm going to call him Maureen."

"You will not," Aunt Blanche says. "Don't worry; you'll soon fall in love with him. Mémère is counting on you to help with him."

"What about Mama?"

"She's still in the hospital but I'm sure she'll come home in a few days."

Prophetically, she adds, "You're a big sister now and your baby brother's going to need you. Don't bother making your bed. I'm going to strip it when we get back, anyway."

"Am I coming back here with you?"

"No, Jackie; it's time for you to go home. Pappy and I loved having you but you're needed at home now, more than ever."

Handing me a duffle bag, Aunt Blanche says, "Here, stash your things in this bag. It's yours to keep. I'll put the rest of your clothes on hangers that Pappy'll bring down for us."

Sighing an anemic, "Thank you," I take the duffel bag from her and stuff my Lawrence life in it.

On the way home, I think about the paintings of Aunt Blanche and Pappy. I'm sad that I'll never have a chance to find out who killed Mr. Libby. Teary-eyed, I think about baby Moe as we drive toward Lowell along the paved banks of the Merrimack. Only the prospect of prowling around at night and seeing Penguin Man again cheers me.

We arrive to the same quiet we had left. Surprisingly, Mémère and Aunt Adeline are downstairs. When I go to my alcove bedroom,

I understand why. There, at the foot of my twin bed, is the crib that had held my unloved baby doll in the cellar. In it now is a bright marvel. All wrapped up, he looks like a glow-worm with a fuzzy blue, knit tuque. My instinct is to unwrap him; count his fingers and toes; give him a belly raspberry. Hold him. Hug him. Kiss him. Instead, I look at Mémère who is standing in silent watch like a wrinkly pachyderm matriarch. I spend the rest of the day learning how to sterilize bottles, how to safely use safety pins, how to flush and bleach dirty cloth diapers and most importantly, how to hold and bottle-feed him. I love him. He is mine.

When Aunt Blanche and Pappy kiss us all good-bye, I thank them for everything and say, “I left a thank you present for you and Pappy under my bed. I hope you like it.”

Later that day, when Uncle Vic gets home, he says the most amazing thing to me, “You can use my rocking chair to rock him.”

Moe turns out to be an easy-going baby with an inappropriate name. He sweetly sleeps between feedings and only when he burps does he reflect his namesake. I enjoy sitting in Uncle Vic’s rocking chair, feeding him warmed-up formula while the rest of the world sleeps. When his eyes let go of mine, my mind wanders. I think about all the grays I’d seen in Lawrence and wonder which one of them killed Mr. Libby. I resolve that when I grow up, I’m going to move to Lawrence and solve Mr. Libby’s murder. In the meantime, my thoughts turn to Penguin Man. I imagine he walks by unseen because I sit too low in Uncle Vic’s chair to have a street view. I wonder if I’ll ever see him again.

When Mama comes home several days later, she has me bring Moe to her bed for daytime feedings and diaper changes. She calls me whenever she puts a dirty diaper in the pail by her bed. I know the routine and always make sure to have a fresh supply of diapers drying outside on the clothesline.

If Moe falls asleep on Mama’s bed, she tells me to go outside and play with my friends. I do go outside, but I carefully avoid other kids.

Instead, I run as fast as I can until I come upon a new and unfamiliar street. Then I walk on it for as long as I dare before doubling back.

One day, I turn onto a street that runs along the river just before the humming bridge. A neon sign reads, *Cameo Diner*. In the window are handwritten signs about Rochette's beans being available every Saturday. "First come, first serve" the sign says.

So that's where the beans in the white cardboard containers come from! We have them once in a while for Saturday dinner with hot dogs. Daddy calls the meal bats and balls. That's the only thing I like about the beans. Well, that and the dogs.

Short explorations like this one punctuate my summer. My older brother, Raymond continues to deliver newspapers to his and my customers. On week-ends, Raymond goes fishing with Uncle Vic in a 16-foot dory he bought from one of his co-workers at the mill. Daddy drives them to the public dock on the river and returns hours later to pick them up. It never even occurs to me to ask to go with them. My job is to take care of Moe.

Those long summer months go by pretty much uneventfully. Daddy comes home from work at noon Monday through Friday, without fail. Every day, he fills a syringe with medicine from a vial he keeps in the refrigerator. Mama winces when he quick-jabs the needle through the least broken patch of skin the two can find.

Then, he rushes over to take 'Chou-Chou' from me. That's what he calls Moe. I don't know why. But I know that he loves his 'Chou-Chou'. He brings him to Mama's bed and the three of them lie there for a few minutes. Then, he kisses Mama and Chou-Chou good-bye, grabs the sandwich I make for him, and jumps back into his truck to return exactly at 5:30 and repeat the same routine.

If the papers are delivered after Daddy gets home from work, I get to do my route. I like delivering the paper. I find it strange that sometimes, it's the grays who tip me better. But it doesn't matter, they can't fool me. I can tell the good from the bad people. When I see a gray, I think about Mr. Libby again and who might have killed him. The police were right about Pappy. He definitely didn't do it.

With the first day of the school year fast approaching, I ask Mama if I can just stay home and take care of Moe. She laughs and says, “Now that the summer’s over, your main job is to be first in your class again. How are you going to do that if you don’t go?”

“Who will take care of Moe while I’m in school?”

“Don’t worry. Aunt Adeline is going to come over every day so between her, Mémère and me, we’ll take good care of your baby brother while you’re in school. Also, Moe will be sleeping in my room at night from now on. You need your sleep to stay sharp in school.”

* * *

With reclaimed night freedom and childish courage, I venture off the porch to roam the less than silent night. Accompanied by the whir of an occasional window fan, screeching katydids and the distant humming of the bridge over the Merrimack, I anxiously prepare for bats, rats and raccoons. I see none but nothing looks the same in the dark.

I’m half-way down my street when Penguin Man turns the corner from Aiken Avenue and comes into view. My pulse quickens and I have to fight the urge to yell hello to him. Instead, I take cover between neighboring tenement buildings and watch as Penguin Man makes his lumbering way past me to the corner of my street where I know he’ll turn.

Only when he’s out of sight, do I dare double back to follow him. Rounding my corner I get a clear view of my street. And, he isn’t there! Surely, he hasn’t yet made it to the next corner! Where did he go? I’ll have to follow more closely tomorrow night.

At school later that day, seated at my usual, earned spot at the last desk in the first row, I take out my black and white composition book to record last night’s day, date, time and a brief description of the PM (Penguin Man) incident. Instructed by Sister Agnes to review our homework, my classmates also retrieve their notebooks

from their book bags. And, in response to Sister Agnes' pointed finger, individual pointees read the answer he or she had written in his or her respective notebook the previous night.

To my left, in the second most coveted spot, sits my scholastic rival, Denise Guillette. When called upon to reveal her answer to number six, Denise gives a surprising, incorrect answer that prompts a rare rebuke from Sister Agnes. Stunned, Denise tattles that I haven't done my homework at all. Under the dreaded, raised eyebrow, Sister Agnes' thin lips voice the next question and call on me for the answer.

If I'm wrong, Joseph Rochelieu, seated to Denise's left will leapfrog over Denise to claim my seat in Sister Agnes' live version of the board game, "*Go to the Head of the Class.*" But I'm not wrong and Joseph, given the next question, answers it correctly and gets to swap seats with Denise. Not that it matters to me.

* * *

Tonight, while walking down the path to Mr. Soteau's porch, Penguin Man pulls something white from his pocket. *A handkerchief? Would he use it to wipe off his fingerprints or wear it as a mask to rob old Mr. Soteau? Again, ridiculous; no one with that warm color could ever be a thief.*

But it was more fun to make believe that I was spying on a bad guy. Earlier tonight, I snuck onto Mr. Soteau's porch to look around. Everything was the same as it was before. I peeked into Mr. Soteau's milk box and the only thing in it was an empty milk bottle, nothing else.

After PM turns the corner at the end of the street, I go back to Mr. Soteau's porch. The only incriminating thing I find is a bank envelope next to the empty milk bottle. I should have guessed that he pays for Mr. Soteau's milk. *What else would a guy like him be doing?*

Weeks later, after venturing farther and farther away from home on my secret surveillance missions, I discover that on Tuesdays, PM

detours to the fourth house on Ennell Street. I watch as he hauls out my customer's garbage can from her back porch to the side of her cobblestone street. On a hunch, as I hide in waiting, I confirm that on Wednesday, he returns Miss Gertrude's empty garbage can to her back porch.

I had long before followed him to his home beyond the old Hildreth Cemetery. My excitement peaked just before I realized that he doesn't sink back into an empty grave but rather, most likely works the graveyard shift and lives in the tenement building on the dead-end street, the farthest north on my route. Most likely, he lives on the first floor with his mother, the kindly old woman who, each week, pays me with cash in a bank envelope.

My feigned fear and loathing of PM becomes less and less sustainable. However, some unidentified force, perhaps habit, compels me to keep him under surveillance. I fill my notebook documenting his nightly chores and start a new one.

Now there are three Composition notebooks under my bed. One is half-filled with original drawings, songs and poetry and the other two are devoted to nightly recordings of PM's strange activities. Reviewing my notes, I can see that he never shows up on Sundays or Thursdays. I figure he must be walking home from or to work five days a week. Given his nocturnal schedule, I guess he's a baker, a burglar or a grave digger. Since he definitely isn't a gray, I figure he's most probably a baker or a nice grave digger.

* * *

Several non-eventful weeks later, the sameness is shattered by a front-page mug shot. The headline reads, "Coutu Case Cracked". Before delivering my papers, I sit on the cement steps of my porch to read the lead story which I know can't be true.

"According to our sources, police have identified Ronald Lionel Plouffe as a person of interest in the murder of David Paul Coutu. Mr. Plouffe is employed as a cook at the Cameo Diner. His alleged

victim, Mr. Coutu, was found prone across the front seat of his Richardson Farms' delivery truck at the intersection of Bridge Street and Mammoth Road in Dracut. The death was ruled a homicide but with no eyewitnesses and few clues, there seemed little hope of ever finding the perpetrator. Sources say police got their first break in the case when a citizen came forth with information that led them to the arrest of Ronald Lionel Plouffe, locally known as Plouffie."

I'm outraged; no way could PM kill a person. It's obvious just by looking at him. I have to help him; but how? What proof do I have besides my own eyes? How can I make the police see it? Somehow, strangely, I fancy myself to be PM's invisible guardian, a silent witness to his little acts of kindness along his lonely way home. Then, it comes to me! I scan the newspaper article for the date and time of Mr. Coutu's murder...the best information it offers is "weeks ago". Reading her byline, I think, *less alliteration, more hard facts, please, Miss Cormier.*

When Daddy comes home that evening, he grabs the newspaper off the kitchen table and brings it to his and Mama's bedroom. I listen as he tells Mama that he knows both the murdered man and the accused murderer, 'Plouffie'.

"I know you're not supposed to speak ill of the dead but I remember that I wasn't surprised to hear that Coutu was murdered. He was a first class asshole. I only knew him because we both made deliveries to the Cameo Diner; often, we'd arrive at the same time. He always gave Plouffie, the cook, a hard time. I never thought Plouffie had it in him to do anything about it, though."

'Coutu had to have been a gray,' I think to myself.

"What did he do?" Mama asks.

"He was just plain mean to Plouffie. I remember one time, he said, 'Hey Plouffie, does your Mother have to find your dick for you when you have to pee?'

I'll never forget the look on poor Plouffie's face, it was pitiful. Plouffie's morbidly obese.... a bachelor who lives with his mother. Anyway, I told Coutu to knock it off.

Coutu took off and Plouffie thanked me. He's a nice guy. He told me the secret to his world-famous meatloaf is my soda crackers. Poor Plouffie; that prick Dave is still taunting him....even from the grave."

"Do you think it's possible that Plouffie killed him?"

"Anything's possible, but I really doubt Plouffie has it in him." *Wow, Daddy knows PM! And, his real name is Plouffie or rather his real nickname is Plouffie and, most importantly, Daddy doesn't think Plouffie is a murderer either. How can the police think that? I have to prove to them that they've got the wrong man.*

I wait outside for Raymond to come home from delivering his papers.

"Do you know where the police station is?" I ask my big brother.

"Yeah, it's downtown, why?"

"Just wondering," I reply.

"Is it near the hospital?"

"Not really; it's closer to the Lowell Sun building, at the other end of downtown. What's for dinner tonight?"

"Chicken and rice."

"Great. Let's go eat."

* * *

Chapter 4

“No adultery is bloodless.”
—Natalia Ginzburg

Leo Boisvert works at the mill and is a fixture at the Cameo, one of the diners on Ray’s delivery route. Ever since he discovered that his wife, Louise is cheating on him, Leo spends hours, six days a week, on the last stool at the counter.

It was over a year ago when Leo was sent home early from the mill because of a broken ring frame. Even though his pay would be docked, he un forward to some unexpected extra time with Louise. He hoped she’d be in the mood.

He’ll never forget that day. A Richardson’s Farms truck was parked in the alley near his modest home. Paying it no mind, he bounded up the steps and burst in startling Louise and the stranger in his kitchen.

Freshly made up but still in the bathrobe she had on this morning, Louise stammered, “What are you doing here?”

“I’m not the one who needs to explain,” he started; the stranger cut in,

“My name’s Dave Coutu and I was just trying to talk your wife here into signing up for weekly produce deliveries. I was this close to convincing her....”

“Since when does Richardson’s do home deliveries?” Leo asked.

“We don’t, not yet; just trying to drum up interest. I’ll be on my way. Talk it over with your husband, Mrs. Boisvert and give us a call.”

Although he didn’t completely buy it, Leo willed himself to let it go. He loved Louise. He did everything he could to make her happy. He thought a baby would set them right. He tried to give her one every time she’d let him. But it never happened. He’s losing her and now he knows who to blame. While he’s tied to the ring frame at the mill eight to ten hours a day, Coutu’s running around town in his delivery truck.

Louise is probably one of his regular stops, he broods.

He once asked his neighbor, Mrs. Robitaille, if she’d ever seen a Richardson’s Farms truck in the neighborhood. She said she hadn’t. She lied to Leo because once, while outside sweeping her steps, she had waved at the Richardson’s Farms guy who looked at her, spit on the ground and said, “I don’t see you and you don’t see me.”

Shaken, she heeded his warning and never told anyone. She knew that, if her husband suspected the rude man had scared her, he’d spend his wheelchair bound days staring out the front window hoping for an opportunity to call him out. She didn’t want to risk that. So, to keep from having to continue to lie to her neighbor, her husband and herself, she drew down the front shade and kept it down until the lucky bamboo plant her grandson had given her wasn’t looking lucky anymore.

* * *

Louise keeps cheating and Leo keeps spending time on the last barstool at the Cameo directly opposite its saloon style kitchen doors.

“Coffee, black,” he barks at the waitress who starts pouring it as soon as he walks in.

After a while, she learns to pull her pour so as to leave room for the more potent fluid in his flask. Customers looking for a seat at the counter often leave the one next to him empty. Repellent-smelling

bitterness lingers in the air around him and often keeps the stool next to him empty. One late Thursday afternoon, his dark reverie is broken by a commotion in the kitchen. Above the saloon doors, he sees the back of a man's head, black hair with a Brylcreem slick, and hears the bullying tone of a voice he detests.

He leans in to hear. . . . Brylcreem is saying something about the cook's dick. Thinking he ought to jump the bar and knock Brylcreem out, Leo remains glued to his barstool. Seconds later, the Bradt's Crackers' guy puts himself between Plouffie and Coutu diffusing the situation. *Lucky for you*, thinks Leo.

Life for Leo is a joyless drudgery. He hates his job and his wife hates him. Yet he's trapped by both. The only thing he looks forward to are visits to the Cameo diner. Listening to Coutu (Brylcreem) berate Plouffie the cook is like scratching an itch until it bleeds.

Turning to the customer closest to him, Boisvert asks, "Do you hear the way that guy talks to the cook?"

"Yeah, he's a real jerk," his counter buddy replies. "If I were Plouffie, I'd show him the back of my frying pan."

"Yeah," agrees Leo. "If he's not careful, some day, when he least expects it, Plouffie might let him have it."

Leo finds comfort in alcohol. It helps him rationalize that it's the booze, not him that turns Louise off. And, he isn't about to give up booze for that whore. Thus, Louise's rejection becomes somewhat less painful. Eventually, his anger distills down into indifference and his indifference shakes Louise's confidence.

Insecurity causes Louise to lean harder and harder on Dave Coutu whose malevolence grows as his passion for her wanes. Illicit sex no longer satisfies him unless it climaxes in cruelty. Felled by infidelity, Louise is a woman unloved by two men. She fears both.

* * *

"Can you get me a gun?" Louise asks her kid brother, a Private on leave from Fort Devens.

“Why do you need a gun? Is Leo...”

“No,” she cuts him off. “Of course not. I’d just feel better if I had one in my purse when I’m out and about. So will you get me one or not?”

“Yeah, I’ll get you one; I’ll call you in a couple of weeks.”

Two weeks later, Louise meets her brother at Bar 25 in Ayer where Pete makes good on his promise. At first, Louise gives that pocket pistol the attention a mother gives her first-born, keeping it clean, close, and safe. Eventually, like glasses of wine, she loses track of it.

Months later, Louise’s elderly neighbor, in an act of defiance, raises her window shade to put her grandson’s gift on the sill in the sun where it belongs. Shocked, she’s mesmerized by the scene across the street. Framed by her front door, Louise is pointing a gun at the Richardson’s guy who is pleading and retreating to his truck in the alley.

It’s about time you came to your senses, Louise.

Drawn by drama, Mrs. Robitaille is frozen in place. Like Louise’s gun, her eyes follow that vile man to his truck. After the truck speeds away, she and her unhinged neighbor lock eyes. Unnerved, Mrs. Robitaille shrinks back from the window, grabs the lucky bamboo off the sill and, once again, pulls down the shade which remains closed.

* * *

Chapter 5

**“A great pleasure in life is doing what people
say you cannot do.”
– Walter Bagehot**

Mon Oncle, a.k.a. Uncle Vic, is a simple, strong man who loves art, fishing, opera and beer. He loves his family too but the real loves of his life are his three Boston rockers. Besides the one in the window in the downstairs kitchen, there’s one in Mémère’s upstairs mini-kitchen and another in Uncle Vic’s bedroom. In any other room, Uncle Vic stands rather than sit on a chair without rocker rails.

When I’m in the mood, I gallop up and down the narrow corridor between his bed and his RCA console TV when Rossini’s *William Tell Overture* is on his turntable. I dance to Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries*. I sit on his bed and marvel at the power and depth of his voice as he drowns out Caruso and Mario Lanza, his chair rocking to the song’s tempo. Mama told me that he sang *Begin the Beguine* at her wedding but it’s hard to imagine him giving a public performance with his head down and his hands in his pockets.

A fan of fellow Franco-American Lowellian strong man, Louis Cyr, Uncle Vic often guilelessly plays ringer in strength competitions at the mill. Standing only 5’2” and passed the mid-point in mill life expectancy, Uncle Vic delivers big pay-offs to old timers who learned to bet against the odds.

Mill work is muscle building work and Uncle Vic has done it since he was fifteen. Flat sheets of cotton, called laps, are rolled into bales weighing several hundred pounds each. Uncle Vic loads the bales onto wagons, one per wagon. Strong, young men called wheelers transport them into carding rooms. Voracious carding machines have powerful metal teeth that comb the unruly cotton fibers into long, thick strands called sliver. Once in a while, a careless carder catches a finger, hand or an entire arm in their crushing, cotton-smoothing grip.

Yiannis used to be a two-armed carder. Now he's a one-armed day shift supervisor. He likes Vic because Vic is a hard worker who never misses a day's work.

Today, One-arm says, "Hey Vic, did you eat your Wheaties this morning?"

"I eat a bowl every morning while I wait for my breakfast," says Vic.

"What do you have for breakfast?" asks One-arm.

"Six eggs, package of bacon, six toasts, orange juice and coffee."

"Bunch of new marks started today. Feel like loading slivers?" asks One-arm, also known as Yiannis the Greek.

"Sure."

When Vic loads three slivers onto the wagon, One-arm calls all comers to a strength competition.

"Who can move this wagon farther than Vic here, can?"

Leo Boisvert pushes his apprentice forward. The tall, hard-looking rookie wheeler has Popeye arms. Wary of Leo's dark enthusiasm but unintimidated by the looks of Vic, Lucien agrees.

"I'm game."

Bets placed, One-arm chalks a straight line behind the wagon's back wheels and theatrically invites Lucien to grab the wagon's handle. Lucien, thinking to outsmart the game, rests the handle backward onto the front sliver and walks around to the back of the

cart. With Sisyphus-like effort, Lucien succeeds in pushing the wagon forward a few feet.

Red-faced and proud, Lucien says, "And that's how you do it."

"Impressive," says One-arm chalking another straight line across the back wheels.

"Have you ever done it that way, Vic?" One-arm asks.

"No, I pull with one arm."

Lucien steps aside and says, "Well, let's see it, old man."

Vic grabs the handle with his right hand and pulls the wagon forward in long, crowd-parting strides until he more than doubles Lucien's distance.

"Anyone need me to measure the chalk marks?" asks One-arm rhetorically.

"That's not fair," says Lucien. "This was my first try. I bet he's done it a million times. Let me try it the way he did it."

"Double or nothin'?" offers One-arm.

"Sure."

Lucien pulls until his arm threatens to pop out of its socket. Then he grabs the handle with both hands and inches it forward, far short of Vic's distance, before giving up.

Saying, "I'm done," Lucien goes back to work a little lighter in the pocket.

"Thanks for playing," says One-arm counting bills. "How about we change it up, a bit? Anyone up for a vertical lift?"

Lucien's friend and fellow rookie wheeler steps up. "I'll give it a try," says Arthur.

Third-round betting completed, Arthur says, "Age before beauty."

Vic steps up to the back of the wagon, bends his knees, wraps his hands around the bottom and straightens up. He holds it until everyone's satisfied that it's a perfect deadlift.

Copying Vic's hold and stance, Arthur gives it a go.

Releasing loud and intense energy but no measurable lift, Arthur finally gives up and graciously bows to Vic. “That’s got to be what, 700-750 lbs.? How do you do that?”

Vic just shrugs, “I did more but only once because the wagon broke.”

One-arm gives Vic the biggest cut of the take even though he knows he doesn’t have to. Vic doesn’t have it in him to hurt anyone. Besides, One-arm knows Vic likes the competitions and would do them for nothing. But the extra cash is Uncle Vic’s happy secret. He saves it in his safety deposit pocket, the inside pocket of the only suit he owns. For about 360 days of every year of his adult life, it hangs in the corner of his bedroom closet, under a Ouellette’s Cleaners plastic garment bag.

* * *

Sundays at my house smell like Old Spice and stinky boiled meat. Daddy gets ready for the day with a shower and a shave, then comes down to the kitchen to prepare the Sunday dinner. He dumps chunks of chuck into a pot of water where the cheap beef angrily stews in thin broth with potatoes, onions and carrots.

Once in a while, after dinner, Daddy takes us to visit his sister Margie. Her husband, Jim is Portuguese and, as if to prove it, his house always smells like smoky, slightly spicy *linguiça*. My cousins, Jimmy and Debbie are each three years older than Raymond and me. The only thing we have in common is resentment at having to spend an occasional Sunday afternoon under the same roof. Their little mutt, Sandy doesn’t seem happy to see us either. She barks in crescendo at each of us as we enter their little house through a narrow front door. Aside from those occasional visits, our interaction with our cousins is limited to Aunt Margie’s seasonal delivery of trash bags of outgrown clothing.

Daddy has three more sisters and is older than all of them. His dad died from a heart attack when he was only fifteen and,

six months later, his heartbroken, pipe-smoking Iroquois mom orphaned the family. Forced to quit high school in his sophomore year, Ray took a job at a munitions manufacturing plant where most undrafted Lowellians worked. On the day after Christmas, the year his youngest sister finally turned eighteen, he enlisted in the army.

The following February, Americans suffered a bitter defeat at the hands of Rommel in North Africa. Noting that it took one or two able-bodied soldiers to remove one wounded or dead soldier off the field of combat, General Eisenhower ordered the conscription and training of more field medical personnel, some called body snatchers. Their job was to run out to the field, often under fire, and carry the dead and injured away on stretchers. Body snatchers had to be brave and smart. Being both, they trained Daddy in combat triage. He never talked about his deployments and two years after the war ended, he was honorably discharged.

He had wanted to use the GI bill to go to medical school but, despite their mill jobs, his unmarried sisters were struggling to keep the family roof over their heads. So, to help support them, Daddy took a job as a route salesman for Bradt's Soda Crackers.

I know all this about Daddy from Mama who told me these things while we were looking at her wedding album. Daddy's four sisters were bridesmaids and Mama's two brothers were groomsmen. Mama, the brightest of the wedding party, looked stunning in a satin gown that hugged her beautiful body but it was Uncle Vic who was the revelation. He looked like the leading man Hollywood would cast in a movie about Uncle Vic.

"He's so handsome," I said to Mama.

"Yes, he was; still is," she agreed. He was also a fantastic tennis player and singer. He could have been pro at either. He sang at my wedding, you know."

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. He was always very shy but, he was never the same after your Pèpère died."

Then, as though Mama had fallen into that dark memory, she whispered, “When your grandfather died, Uncle Vic bolted out the door and ran around our neighborhood screaming, “Mon papa est mort! Mon papa est mort!” Only after a few days did he find his way back home. He was never the same, though.

* * *

Chapter 6

“The truth is rarely pure and never simple.”
– Oscar Wilde

I have to know the exact date and time that man, Mr. Coutu was murdered. But, I have to wait until tomorrow to go to the police station. I swap out for my history book for my composition books. *I won't be needing this.* The following day, thinking of nothing but freeing PM, the school day drags on even slower than usual. Finally, at lunchtime, I skip out of the cafeteria, pick up my book bag from my hall cubby and sneak out the back door unnoticed.

Bunker Hill to Hildreth to Bridge Streets, I have customers on all these streets now because my paper route keeps growing. I know the Lowell Sun Building, called the Sun Scrapper, is at the top of the Bridge Street Bridge and I figure I'll ask a bright person where the police station is when I get there.

Judging from old Page's Clock in Kearney Square, it took me about twenty minutes to walk here. There are plenty of people around. My eyes search out the brightest color in the mix. It turns out to be a man just old enough looking to be called one.

“Excuse me, can you please tell me where the police station is?”

Pointing, he says, “It's about a fifteen minute walk down that way. Is everything okay?”

“Yes, well, it will be. Thank you.”

He pointed down Merrimack Street in the direction of the humming bridge. *I'd have been there by now if Raymond knew what he was talking about. On second thought, I guess I should be glad he doesn't know where the police station is. I bet Uncle Moe does.*

About to cross a side street, I quickly turn on it instead to avoid being seen by Daddy who is stopped at a red light at the intersection, facing me. I dart into a frying-oil smelling doorway. Looking up, I see that I'm at Lowell's Oldest Worthen House, "favorite haunt of Edgar Allan Poe". Intrigued, I look inside. It has a fancy tin ceiling and a long, carved wooden bar with a big, black stuffed raven perched above it.

'Some day, I'm going to eat there,' I promise myself.

Peeking out of the alcove back toward the main street, I nearly yelp when I see Daddy's DeKalb turn right heading toward my hiding place. Thankfully, he turns again into the narrow alley just before my hiding spot, alongside the old building. When I see the back lights of his delivery truck, I run the rest of the way to the police station.

When I get there, I take a minute to calm myself before I enter. There's a policeman at a big desk on a platform right in front of me. If he hadn't been dressed in a police uniform, I'd have avoided talking to him because, for a policeman, he was surprisingly dim.

"What can I do for you, young lady?" he asks.

I glance over at the people sitting on a bench to my left wondering if I was cutting the line.

The policeman steps down and comes around the desk to see me.

"How can I help?" he asks, brightening a little though his teeth and breath are grim.

"Well, I need to know the exact date and time of the murder."

"What murder?"

"The murder in the paper yesterday."

"And why do you need to know that?"

“Because I don’t think the man you think did it is guilty and, depending on where and when it happened, maybe I can prove it.”

Then I take my notebook out of my book bag, open it and hand it to him. “See, if the man was murdered when Mr. Plouffe, see right there, that PM stands for Penguin Man because he kinda’ walks like a penguin, don’t you think? Well, anyway, I didn’t know his name was Mr. Plouffe at the time so I called him PM for short. Anyway, if the murder happened when Pen...Mr. Plouffe was nowhere near wherever it happened, it’ll prove he didn’t do it, right?”

“How do you know Mr. Plouffe?” he asks.

“I don’t, at least not in real life. But he walks by my house in the middle of the night almost every night. He stops at my old neighbor, Mr. Soteau’s house. He lives across the street. I pretend Pen...Mr. Plouffe is a monster or at least, a bad guy even though it’s obvious that he’s not. I make a game of watching and writing down everything he does. And here it is, the dates and times I see him and what I see him do. It’s all there. When I saw his picture in the paper, I just knew that he didn’t do it. I know he didn’t kill that Mr. Coutu and I hope this journal proves it.”

Sergeant Moody looks over the journals. He quickly finds the week the murder was committed.

“Okay if I keep this?” he asks.

“Sure,” I say proudly. “Does it prove he’s innocent?”

“I don’t know, Miss. I’ll give it to the detective in charge of the case. He’ll take a look.”

“Okay,” I say, a bit of disappointment in my voice. *This is not the dramatic Perry Mason moment I hoped it would be. But, I have to get home.* So I say good-bye, then turn back to him and ask, “What’s the detective’s name?”

Sergeant Moody hesitates a bit but answers, “Detective Dahm.”

“Hey,” he adds, “did you come here by yourself?”

“My Dad’s downtown.”

He looks at me for half a second when a call comes in and overtakes his attention.

I let myself out. Now that I know the right way, I know it won't take me long to walk home. Feeling pretty good about myself, I see a colorful ribbon of people streaming out of the mill yard toward the Humming bridge. It's the end of first shift so Uncle Vic should be among them. He's easy to spot.

"Uncle Vic, Uncle Vic!"

Uncle Vic turns and waits for me to catch up with him.

"Why are you here?" he asks.

"Oh, I had to take something downtown for someone."

Walking together across the bridge, Uncle Vic says, "This is where me and Raymond go fishing. There's good fishing here."

"Uncle Vic, please don't tell anyone I went downtown today and that we walked home together, okay?"

"Okay," says Uncle Vic.

We walk the rest of the way home in silence until Leo Boisvert, who'd just punched out too, drives by us on his way to the Cameo.

Seeing him, Uncle Vic mutters, "Bâtard".

I'm not allowed to say bastard so I nod and say, "He's as dull as an X-ray."

* * *

Meanwhile, Sergeant Moody unlocks his bottom desk drawer, puts Jackie's notebook in it, then closes and re-locks the drawer. But, before he leaves work for the day, he takes a look at the Coutu file. He goes straight for the M.E. report. Estimated TOD: 13 June 1961 Tuesday 0300 – 0400. 'Damn', he thinks. *Of all the cockamamie things....what's she doing spying on people in the middle of the night? Where are her parents?*

After work, he meets his sometime lover at Major's, a cop bar. She had just filed the story but her editor is pressing her for a detailed follow-up. Moody isn't interested in sharing any more information. As far as he's concerned, tipping her off is foreplay.

“Give me a break, will ‘ya, Sweetheart. I don’t wanna talk shop, I wanna have a few beers, go back to your place, maybe examine the body of evidence...”

Sue replies, “I need details, Moody, details; anyway, not tonight.” Slinging her bag over her shoulder she adds, “Gotta’go.”

Moody watches her walk out the door, orders a double shot, slams it, then heads home. After a fitful night, he finally falls asleep. When he gets to work the next morning, Dahm angrily confronts him over the story in yesterday’s paper.

“What the fuck are you doing telling your little crime desk honey about our ‘person of interest?’” He asks angrily.

“Don’t talk to me like that,” answers Moody. “If you did your job better, you’d have Plouffe in custody by now.”

That settles it, thinks Moody and, as soon as Dahm leaves, he throws the girl’s notebook in the trash.

* * *

The Coutu case robs sleep from Dahm. Maybe that’s why he gets so angry at Moody. Dahm has spent every waking hour since they found Coutu’s body, interviewing his family, his neighbors, his bosses and co-workers at Richardson’s Farms, the owners of all the diners, markets and restaurants on Coutu’s route. The dead man hadn’t endeared himself to too many people.

Even his wife didn’t have a lot of good things to say about him. She did, however, ask about his ring.

“It’s worth thousands of dollars,” she says. “It was a full carat diamond on a wide, 14K gold band with a dragon on each side of the diamond. It’s one-of-a-kind; my grandfather had it custom-made in Germany during WWI. I’m an only child; my dad gave it to me to keep for Davey when he grows up. He never wanted Dave to have it. He wanted me to save it for Davey. But Dave took it and wore it every day. I think just to spite my dead father and piss me off. He never took it off. Not because he loved it, mind you, but because

he didn't appreciate its value. And, now it's gone. It was Davey's birthright and now it's gone. If you ask me," she adds, "find that ring and you'll find his killer."

Dahm had checked. Coutu wasn't wearing any ring when he was found. Coutu's widow was right. The killer must have stolen it. But, was it a robbery gone bad or had it been an opportunistic theft committed after the murder?

Dahm also agrees with the widow Coutu when she says it was strange that the killer would take the time to pull off his ring but leave his wallet. She says he always took his wallet out of his back pocket and put it on the dashboard. He said sitting on his wallet made his back hurt. Dahm checked the file again. The wallet had indeed been found on the dashboard. That was why Dahm had framed the investigation as a murder not a robbery/murder. *Am I wrong?*

"How many people know how much this ring's worth?" he asked.

"I don't know, not many, I think."

Coutu's widow gave him a picture of Coutu wearing the ring on his left ring finger. "Did he always wear it on his left?"

"He took this ring out of my jewelry box to replace his wedding band. He's been wearing it ever since. He said it was because he was a leftie; as if that had anything to do with it. It's more likely he didn't want to advertise that he was married."

Dahm had the photo blown up and circulated around the pawn shops...so far, no help there.

He got his first break in the case from a diner at the Cameo. He had gone there just to tick off one more of Coutu's stops. He talked to a waitress and the cook. Neither seemed unhappy about Coutu's demise but, other than adding two more to the list of people who hated Coutu, it was an unproductive visit.

He was walking out when a man named Leo Boisvert, who was seated at the counter, follows him outside. Boisvert tells Dahm that he heard the cook, Plouffie say that one day, he was gonna' kill

Coutu. According to Boisvert, Coutu tormented Plouffe about his weight, his single status, his food, anything and everything, every time he saw him. Leo Boisvert's statement in no small way helps Dahm narrow the pool of suspects. Dahm goes back inside to talk to the cook again.

Plouffe admits he may have said that. But, with nothing else to tie him to the murder, Dahm takes his leave again. When he gets back to the station, he puts Plouffe's name up on his board. Dahm fears the case will be tossed in the cooler until, several weeks later, another anonymous call leads him back to the Cameo diner. Tipped off to search the kitchen, Dahm hopes to find a gun or a diamond dragon ring but, fortunately for Plouffe, he leaves empty-handed.

During the search, Plouffe says, "If there's something in my kitchen that would help solve Coutu's murder, I'd like to help you find it. What are you looking for?"

Plouffe even offers to take a polygraph test that he'll pay for himself. Dahm doesn't take him up on it for two reasons: one, Plouffe's morbid obesity could skew the results which aren't admissible in court anyway. Second, no matter what Boisvert, the tipster and Moody say, Dahm doesn't believe Plouffe did it.

He would never even have brought Plouffe in but for another anonymous tip that someone later calls in. This time, the tipster tells Moody that Plouffe offered him \$500 to kill Coutu but that he, the tipster, of course, refused. The caller hangs up before Moody can get his name. But, with no other viable suspects, it's case closed for Moody.

Maybe Moody is right after all. Dahm brings Plouffe in again, but not in cuffs though, as Moody would have liked. Thinking to give his side piece, the Sun Reporter a juicy exclusive, Moody tells her to be there when they bring Plouffe in. When she asks what evidence they have, all Moody says is, "Good police work is all; good police work."

At the station, Plouffe denies putting a bounty on Coutu. With nothing else to hold him on, Dahm lets him go. Moody's pissed but

the Sun Reporter is already back at her desk with a picture of Plouffe and a story in her typewriter. Looking forward to a little gratitude later tonight, Moody doesn't lift a finger to quash her story.

* * *

Chapter 7

**“No one would remember the Good Samaritan if he’d only had good intentions; he had money as well.”
– Margaret Thatcher**

Old Mrs. Robitaille, the Boisverts’ neighbor, is suffering from grief and insomnia. Her husband, Robert, has recently passed and she isn’t feeling like herself lately. Wanting to clear her conscience before her time comes, she decides to do the bravest thing she’s ever done. She calls the police.

“I’d like to speak with the policeman in charge of murder.”

“Are you reporting a murder, Ma’am or did you commit one?” asks Sergeant Moody.

“Oh no, no, no! Heavens no, neither! I want to talk about the murder of David Coutu, you know, the murder that was in the paper yesterday.”

“Yes, ma’am, may I ask why?”

“Well, because I have information that I think he should hear.”

Wary that this information might somehow be tied to the little girl’s notebook he dumped, Sergeant Moody asks for her name and number. “....I’ll have the Detective give you a call,” he says.

Detective Dahm walks in just in time to hear him. “I’ll take it now,” he says, pointing in the direction of his desk.

“Hang on, ma’am, he just walked in,” Moody says then directs the call.

After a brief conversation, Dahm hangs up and walks past the Sergeant on his way out.

“Anything?” Sergeant Moody asks.

“Worth a visit,” is all Dahm says.

Driving over the bridge to Grandma’s house, Detective Dahm looks at the address again. 13 Hamel Place. It sounds familiar. After a while, he remembers that a witness, Leo Boisvert lives on that street. His detecting radar, as his wife jokingly calls it, kicks in. He doesn’t believe in coincidences, he believes in connections.

Mrs. Robitaille has the coffee ready to go and her coffee cake plated. Before Detective Dahm gets out of his car, she plugs in the percolator. He’s met at the door by a handsome woman with sparkling eyes and the wonderful aroma of fresh coffee. Coupled with the quaint, old-fashioned décor, he’s fondly reminded of his own grandmother’s house.

The coffee cake alone is worth the visit.

“Tell me, Mrs. Robitaille, what do you want us to know about Mr. Coutu’s murder? Did you know him?”

“Well, I didn’t really know him,” she admits. “But the little I knew about him was enough to make me realize I didn’t want to know more.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, see that lucky bamboo plant on my window sill over there?”

Turning to look at it, the Detective nods.

“Well, it wasn’t always there. I kept it in my back room until I got tired of that awful man scaring me out of letting the sun come through that window. So, one day, I pulled up the shade to put the plant on the window sill and that’s when I saw her.”

“Who?”

“My neighbor directly across the way, there, Louise Boisvert. I saw her outside, on her porch, waving a gun at him. I didn’t know

his name at the time but I knew he worked for Richardson Farms because he always parked his truck in the alley there.”

Detective Dahm immediately gets up and looks out the window. It does indeed provide a direct, unobstructed view of the front door of the house across the narrow lane.

“Leo Boisvert’s wife?” he baits.

“Yes, poor Leo. He used to be such a nice man but that unfaithful witch drove him to drink. Anyway, if Louise did kill that awful, awful man, he most likely deserved it. He was awful and vile, vile, vile. He threatened me and my poor, husband, God rest his soul.”

“Threatened you?”

“Yes, when he first came around, I really don’t remember how long ago, I waved at him and he told me to mind my own business. Another time, I just happened to be outside when he came to see Louise. He shouted at me; saying he didn’t see me and I didn’t see him. It was definitely a threat. My husband would’ve let him have it if I’d have told him. But, I didn’t because he struck me as the kind who wouldn’t hesitate to hurt an elderly, handicapped man. He scared me. That’s why, when Leo asked me if I’d ever seen a Richardson’s truck around, I’m ashamed to say that I lied and said, no.”

“Leo knew his wife was having an affair with Mr. Coutu, the murder victim?” Detective Dahm asks.

“Well, if he didn’t know for sure,” she answers, “he for sure suspected it.”

The Detective thanks the old woman for her hospitality and for bravely doing her civic duty.

“Will it make a difference?” she asks.

“It already did,” he replies.

Not wanting to waste any time, immediately after bidding Mrs. Robitaille goodbye, Detective Dahm crosses the lane to the Boisvert home. The door is opened by a slightly disheveled woman, late 30s, medium height, weight, red hair and lips.....she looks familiar.

He shows her his badge.

“What can I do for you, Officer?” she asks.

“Detective Dennis Dahm, ma’am; may I come in?”

“It depends on what for?” she asks, a bit slyly, he thinks.

“I’d like to talk to you about David Coutu.”

“What’s there to talk about? He’s dead isn’t he?”

“How well did you know him?” Dahm asks.

“Well, I didn’t know him, not really, I mean, I knew he died because I read about it in the paper, that’s all. I’ve got to go. I’ve got a pot on the stove.”

Then she tries to shut the door but comes up against his foot. When he doesn’t move, she leans in close enough for him to detect the odor of cheap booze.

“One more thing, before I go.....do you own a gun, Mrs. Boisvert?”

“Where would I get a gun?” she asks. “Better move your foot.”

He does and Louise slams then locks the door. She slides the chain lock closed, too.

She drags the step stool over to the pantry cupboard above the refrigerator. Knocking over never used spice bottles, Louise sweeps the small cupboard with her hand feeling for the pistol. To her horror, she realizes it’s gone. *Did I put it somewhere else? Did Leo find it?* She steps down shakily and makes herself another drink.

Back at the station, Dahm goes straight to the Coutu file to look at the pictures he had the police photographer take at the gravesite. There she is looking like a grieving widow while the real widow looks at her with murderous eyes.

How did I miss that? He asks himself.

Looking again at Louise’s mascara-streaked, red-framed face, Dahm muses *you hardly knew Coutu, huh?*

He looks through all the photos but can’t find a single one of Leo Boisvert at the grave site.

Time to bring Louise in for more questioning.

* * *

Chapter 8

“Until one looks back on one’s own past one fails to realise what an extraordinary view of the world a child has.”

– Agatha Christie

When I get to the police station the next day, there’s someone new at the desk.

“I’d like to see Detective Dahm, please.”

“Who wants to see him?” the officer asks.

“I do. Oh, well tell him it’s the girl who brought in the notebook about Mr. Coutu’s murderer. He’ll know what I mean.”

When Detective Dahm is told he has a visitor about a notebook and a murderer, he has no idea who it could be or what it’s about.

“I’m on my way out. I’ll stop by the desk to talk to her.”

“Wait there on the bench, Detective Dahm will be right with you,” the officer says.

Taking my place beside a deep blue man, I don’t have to wait long. Detective Dahm comes around from the offices behind the big desk and introduces himself.

He has great color. I trust him. “Did my notebook clear Mr. Plouffe?”

Puzzled, the detective says, “I don’t know what you’re talking about young lady. What notebook?”

“The notebook I gave Sergeant Moody to give to you.”

Remembering that last year's notebook was still in my book bag, I take it out to show it to Detective Dahm. "It looks just like this one, but it covers the time of the murder."

Taking the notebook from her, Dahm reviews it long enough to see that her detailed notes look legit but he has no idea what they mean.

"Let's go over this at my desk," he says.

He escorts her to his desk, points to a chair beside it, and then asks, "Can I get you a Coke?"

"A Coke? Yes, please!"

I knew he was nice.

When he comes back with my Coke I thank him. But, then he starts asking all kinds of questions. Not wanting to lie but not wanting to answer his questions either, I ask, "Why do you need to know all that?"

"If I'm going to use your notebook as evidence, I've got to properly record where and from whom I got it," Detective Dahm answers.

I agree to give him my full name and my age but when he asks for my address and my mother's name, I refuse to give it to him.

"I don't want my mother to know anything about this. She's sick and dying and this might kill her."

That's the excuse my big brother Raymond told me to use whenever I'm in trouble. When I'm called into Sister Principal's office for something or when an adult catches me somewhere I shouldn't be during school hours or whatever. It's like a free pass.

"Can we go over my notes now?" I ask the detective. Opening to a page, I point and explain, "See, this is a Monday, April 11th at 3:30."

"3:30 AM?"

"Yes, Pen...I mean that's when Mr. Plouffe walks home from work."

"Anyway, PM here stands for Penguin Man. I named him that because he kind of looks and walks like a penguin. I didn't know

his real name when I first saw him on my street. Anyway, see on Mondays, PM puts an envelope in Mr. Soteau's milk box. I'm pretty sure if he didn't, Mr. Soteau wouldn't be able to afford milk. And then, see here, on Tuesdays, he puts Miss Gertrude's trash out and on Wednesdays, he puts her empty trash can back on her porch. So you see, besides proving that he's a good man, maybe my notes prove he didn't kill that guy. Sergeant Moody said you would check the day, time and place of the murder against my notes."

Flipping through the pages, Dahm sees that the pattern stays true. "This is very good detective work, Jackie. But, why are you following him?"

"Oh, it's just for fun, really. And, it was kind of exciting, at first, pretending he was a bad guy and I was some kind of super hero. I don't know why I kept it up though. I guess he's still interesting to me even though I can tell he isn't a monster or even a bad guy. Does this prove he couldn't have done it?"

"Not on its own, but it might help one way or another."

"Well, where and when exactly was the man murdered?" I persist.

"That is the question, isn't it?"

Looking up at his evidence board, Dahm says, "Looks like it happened on June 13th between 3 and 4 AM."

"What day is that?"

"Tuesday," Dahm answers.

"Tuesdays are when he takes out Miss Gertrude's trash! See, between 3:33 and 3:40 every Tuesday. The notebook I gave that other policeman will have the right date."

"Where does Miss Gertrude live?"

"She lives on my paper route, on Ennell Street."

"Mr. Coutu's body was found on Mammoth Road."

"I don't know where that is," I admit.

"It's in Dracut. I'd guess it's about an hour walk from Ennell Street." Thinking of Plouffe's pace, he adds, "Maybe longer."

"See, he couldn't have done it!" I say gleefully.

“Maybe not; thank you for coming in, Jackie. You’ve been a big help. Can I keep this book?”

“Maybe you should ask Sergeant Moody for the notebook I gave him, that one covers the real date and time. It’d be better to use the one that really proves Mr. Plouffe couldn’t have done it, right?”

“Right; I’ll definitely talk to Sarge. But, in the meantime, can I keep this one?”

“Sure; should I come back tomorrow?”

“No, no, no need. I’ll tell you what, I’ll call you when we have more information. What’s your phone number?”

“We don’t have a phone,” I lie. “I don’t mind coming back.”

“Not necessary; I’ll be in touch.”

He escorts me to the front. Sergeant Moody still isn’t there. *No big deal. Detective Dahm believes me. I can feel it.* I turn to wave goodbye to him and leave. On the way home, I think about the good detective. He’s much nicer and his color is much more vibrant than the Sergeant’s. *I’m glad I’ll be working with him. I trust him.*

On the way back to his desk, Dahm decides to call Moody, day off be damned. Sounding like a day drinker, Moody picks up on the sixth ring.

“Where’s the kid’s notebook?” Dahm asks.

“Who’s this?” Moody answers.

“Dahm; where’s the kid’s notebook?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Like hell you don’t. Have it on my desk by the end of the day.”

Just as Dahm was about to slam the receiver down, Moody admits, “I don’t have it.”

“Who does?” Dahm demands.

“I don’t know, the girl must have it,” Moody lies.

“She was just here; told me she gave it to you.”

Sighing deeply, Moody confesses, “I dumped it.”

“Dumped it? What do you mean, dumped it?”

“I threw it in the trash.”

“I’ll have your badge, Moody”

“Cut the crap. She’s just a kid. How reliable could it be?”

“That’s for me to judge,” Dahm says hanging up hard.

Still fuming, Dahm thinks about Jackie. *She doesn’t seem to have much adult supervision. Maybe I should have DCF check her out.* That thought puts a bad taste in his mouth. He himself was a foster kid and it wasn’t a very nurturing experience. A few years after his grandmother died, he became a recidivist runaway until he finally aged out of the system.

Putting his mind back on the case, Dahm wonders what Coutu was really doing there. *I need to bring Louise in for questioning, maybe Leo too. I have a feeling they know a lot more than they’re saying.* He takes a uniform with him to Louise Boisvert’s house. When they get there, Louise is lying on the couch, *Search for Tomorrow* on TV. Their strong knock makes her jump. She gets up, steadies herself and goes to the door. Leaving the chain lock on, she opens it a bit.

“Mrs. Boisvert, remember me? Detective Dahm and this is Officer Vaillancourt. We’d like you to come down to the station with us to continue our chat.”

“No,” she says.

“I’d reconsider if I were you,” Dahm says. “It’ll only take a few minutes. Come with us, please.”

“Wait out here,” she says closing and locking the door before they have a chance to say anything else.

She calls her brother. “What should I do?” she asks after briefing him.

“Are you drunk, Louise? What do you mean, what should you do? Go with them. You don’t have anything to hide, do you? You didn’t do anything wrong, did you?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then go with them,” he says.

“The thing is, I don’t know where the gun you gave me is.”

“What are you talking about; you don’t know where it is? Geeze Louise, it isn’t a toy, you know. Anyway, why would the cops ask you about it? You didn’t use it on anyone, did you? Don’t answer that. Geeze

Louise, don't get me involved, OK? Fuck me. Fuck me. Don't fuck me, Louise."

Feeling confused and alone, she hangs up after he does, turns off the TV, puts high heels on and goes with the detective and the policeman.

At the station, Dahm and Louise play Show 'n Tell with the murder scene and gravesite photos. Louise doesn't disappoint. She breaks down when she looks at the crime scene photo of Dave Coutu, bloodied and slumped toward the passenger side of his truck. She pushes away the photos of herself hysterically crying at the cemetery and she draws in her breath when Dahm shows her a .45 he took from the evidence room.

Is that the gun my brother gave me? It couldn't be. How could the cops have it? She doesn't know up from down. She's so confused... confused and scared and a little drunk.

"I have a witness who says she saw you point a gun at him."

"That's ridiculous," she deflects. "I want to go home, now."

"Fine, I'll take you home. Just don't leave the city. We'll need to talk again," Dahm says.

* * *

After dropping Mrs. Boisvert off at her home, Dahm decides that, since he's in the neighborhood, he'll check out the alibi Jackie gave Plouffe. Referring to his notes, he first drives to Cumberland Road. He lets himself on the porch and knocks at the front door.

After a few minutes of silence, he decides no one's home. He turns to leave but not before he lifts the cover of the tin milk box. It's empty. Just then, Mr. Soteau answers the door.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Soteau, my name is Detective Dahm. May I come in?"

Looking inwards, Mr. Soteau says, "Well, I don't get much company. The house is a bit of a mess."

"No worries, Mr. Soteau. I'll only take a few minutes."

Mr. Soteau swings open the door to let the detective in.

Showing him Plouffe's mug shot, Dahm asks, "Do you know this man?"

"Yes, that's Plouffie. Is he all right? I've been worried about him."

"Yes, he's fine. How do you know him?" the Detective asks.

Mr. Soteau's cataract-filmed eyes glisten. "I've known him since he was a little boy. He's always had a weight problem. This one time, I saw a group of boys surround him taunting him, calling him names. He tried to push through them but they tripped him and he fell down. The kids started kicking him.....taking turns kicking him while he was down," the old man repeats, shaking his head.

"I put a stop to that. I grabbed a baseball bat and ran outside. I yelled at the kids to stop; called them a bunch of cowards. Told them I'd beat the hell out of them if they ever did that again. Then, I took the biggest one of the bunch aside and said, if anything bad happens to this boy, I'm going to come looking for you. Do you hear? Even if you didn't do it, you didn't stop it, either. You'll feel just how hard I can swing this bat."

The old man chuckles. "Of course, I'd never do that," he says, "but he didn't know that.

Anyway, years later, when I retired from the mill, money was tight. I decided to cut my weekly milk delivery. I was sure going to miss my morning cereal, but, when I put the last empty in the box, I included a note to stop future deliveries. The following week, I opened the box to make sure Frank, Frank Dauphin, our milkman," he clarified, "I wanted to make sure Frank saw the note, so I opened the lid and lo and behold! There was a fresh, full bottle of milk in the box. The paper I had written on was also in there but my note was crossed out and written on the other side, were the words, 'Small thanks to a big hero'.

Well, I knew I wasn't Dauphin's hero and I suspected who did this but, of course, I couldn't be sure. So, the following week, after I put my empty in the box, I moved my chair to this window and kept

watch. I didn't let him see me. I hoped he'd want it that way, but the truth is I was too proud to admit I needed help but not too proud to accept it. Anyway, it's been like that for a few years now. Plouffie walks by here most every night and on Mondays, he puts money in my milk box. Don't know for sure how Plouffie found out. I guess Dauphin told him."

After a few silent moments, he asks again, "Is Plouffie all right?"

Assuring him again that Plouffie's fine, Detective Dahm thanks Mr. Soteau for his time and shakes his hand good-bye.

Motioning at the house across the street, Dahm says, "A young girl named Jackie lives there, right?"

"I think that's her name," says Mr. Soteau. "They pretty much keep to themselves. The boy and his sister deliver the Lowell Sun. Don't know how they do it. There must be three hundred houses on their route by the looks of the bundles the truck drops off for them. Hard-working kids, those two."

Dahm thanks him and reminds himself, once again, to give DCF a call. Still, he has mixed feelings about reporting Jackie. *I should have reported her as soon as I learned that she secretly roams the streets at night. Instead, all I did was tell her to stop. I have a feeling I might as well have told a bird not to fly. All I have from her is a pinkie promise.*

Struggling with what to do about her, he promises himself that, at the very least, he'll pay her parents a visit. But, seeing the house and knowing first-hand that she's cared for in every outwardly discernible way, he rationalizes away any thoughts of turning the family into DCF.

Besides, she isn't the only child in the world who doesn't have much supervision. He himself was a feral child before he was plucked from the streets and deposited at the Franco-American orphanage where the Sisters of Charity tried valiantly to tame him.

Despite their sainted efforts, he ran away and was eventually taken in by a family who lived across town in the West Centralville section of Lowell, not far from Jackie's house.

It was there that he met his Beaulieu Street neighbor Jack, whose French-speaking parents called him P'ti Jean. Jack's sister, Caroline would, years later, become Dennis' wife.

Jack's and Dennis' brooding natures made for a lazy friendship that lasted through their years at Lowell High School where Dennis was a wide receiver and Jack was a running back. Football ignited Dennis and Caroline's romance which continued even after Dennis was kicked off the team for truancy. Jack's part-time job as a sports writer for the Lowell Sun coupled with his natural athleticism earned him a football scholarship to Columbia.

Like her brother, Caroline is deeply religious. To this day, she goes to mass at St. Louis-de-France church daily. Although he remains a by-stander, Dennis is curiously drawn to their faith. Wishing he had stayed long enough to adopt the prayerful ways of the Bonne Soeurs at the orphanage, he watches helplessly as Caroline seems to shrink into self-worthlessness. She believes her infertility is punishment for her childish resentment of the attention given to her dying eldest brother, Gerard. On the other hand, his brother-in-law Jack is convinced that their dead brother is his guardian angel. Even though he loves them both, Dahm thinks they're both a bit crazy and sometimes wonders if he's blessed or cursed with no siblings. Although Dennis and Caroline remain childless, Dahm doesn't love Caroline any less and is faithful to her.

Finding himself on Ennell Street, Dahm parks in front of Gertrude Martin's house. It's an old, two-story colonial but, when her elderly mother died, Gertrude, a spinster, closed off the upstairs and lives alone on the first floor. Diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, she suffers from a severe motor tic involving involuntary jerking of the head and shoulders. Tiny in stature, Gertrude's nose is unusually large and her face, unusually small. Large, black-framed glasses make her head look like an animated eye-glass holder. As sweet as she is odd-looking, Gertrude is thrilled by the sound of the doorbell.

She opens the door wide. "Welcome!"

"Miss Martin?" Detective Dahm asks.

“Yes, please come in.”

Displaying his badge, Detective Dahm asks, “Don’t you want to know who I am before you invite me in?”

“I don’t get much company, so if you’re here to kill me, let’s have a cup of tea first.”

Smiling, Detective Dahm asks, “It won’t be my last, will it?”

Laughter makes Gertrude’s tics more pronounced. He follows her to the kitchen at the back of the house, admiring her sunny disposition. The neat, little kitchen is outfitted with a cast iron cook stove, a narrow, folding table and a farmer’s sink.

She puts the kettle on and, in seconds, it’s whistling. “I was just about to have a cup myself,” she says. “Do you speak French?”

“No, my wife does, but me? I’m sorry, I don’t.”

“Oh, that’s okay. Now that my mother’s gone, I don’t get much of a chance to speak it anymore. I just thought I’d ask. It’s your turn to ask me a question.”

“Showing her the same picture of Plouffie that he showed Mr. Soteau, he asks, “Do you know this man?”

“I know him well enough to know he’s not a murderer!” she says, pointing to the newspaper in the wastebasket. “That’s Ronald Plouffe. He’s a very nice man. His mother, my mother and me used to go to Bingo together. My mother told his mother that we were having a hard time getting our garbage cans out to the street for pick-up. Ronald’s been taking it out and putting it back for us ever since. My mother died three years ago so he’s been doing it even longer than that. Every year I give him a Christmas card with a check in it. He hasn’t cashed one of them yet. I feel real sorry for Adele Coutu and I hope you find her husband’s murderer, but I know, in my heart, that Ronald didn’t do it.”

“When’s your garbage pick-up day?”

“They come on Wednesday. Ronald puts it out every Tuesday and returns the empty to the porch every Wednesday. I can always count on him. He even shovels the walk when it needs it.”

“By the way, you mentioned Mrs. Coutu, do you know her?”

“Yes, her son is in the first grade at St. Louis School where I volunteer mornings as a reading helper. Sister Celeste assigns a group to me to read to while she focuses on the little trouble makers. Poor Davey Coutu is one of those. Sister Celeste has Mrs. Coutu come in quite often to talk about Davey’s behavior. She’s nice enough but he’s a cute little handful.”

“Thanks for the tea and for your time, Miss Martin.”

* * *

That night, Mrs. Robitaille is holding court at the Cercle St. Louis social club on West 6th Street where she and her friends gather weekly to play Bingo. They come early to claim a table close to the caller and to chat.

“I called the police on my neighbor,” she says.

“Music too loud?” Alice asks.

“No, I’m pretty sure she killed her lover,” Claire Robitaille answers.

Her friends gasp. “What?” “Who?” “Who killed who?” “Why?” Claire tells them the story.

“Maybe you’ll get a reward,” suggests Maureen.

“Oh, I didn’t do it for a reward, I did it to be a good citizen,” Claire says.

“I read that they arrested a guy named Plouffe,” says doubting Debbie.

“Well, if they did, I expect they’ll be releasing him and arresting her,” conjectures Claire. “They already went to her house twice, and the last time that nice Detective Dahm went, he and a policeman put her in the back of the police car.”

“Is she in jail?” asks Debbie.

“No, not yet, they brought her back a couple of hours later,” Claire admits. “But, we’ll see. These things take time, you know.”

“Well, I’m proud of you, Claire,” says Maureen.

“Shhhh! Bingo’s starting,” Debbie says.

Later that night, Claire's friends tell their husbands, who tell their poker buddies, who tell their grown-up children who tell their friends, one of whom works at the mill with Leo Boisvert.

* * *

Chapter 9

“All farewells should be sudden, when forever.”
– Lord Byron

Back at home, the following morning, Mémère gets into a Yellow Cab to Dr. Repuccini’s office in the Medical Arts Building across the street from St. Joseph’s Hospital.

“C’est juste une visite routine,” she says.

“Since when do you go for routine doctor visits?” asks Mama.

Mémère ignores her English and her impertinent question. When she doesn’t get home by the time Raymond and I do, Mama’s worried.

“I called Dr. Repuccini’s office. They told me the Doctor admitted Mémère. When Daddy comes home from work, he’ll take you and Uncle Vic to visit her. Okay, Pumpkin?”

“Okay,” I agree.

Turning to Raymond, I say, “Will you deliver my papers tonight?”

“Of course,” he says. “I wish I could go visit Mémère with you, though.”

“I’m sure she’ll be home tomorrow,” Mama says. “Jackie can’t do the whole route by herself so you’ll have to do it. If it’s still pouring raining, Daddy will drop Jackie and Uncle Vic off at the hospital and come right back to help you with the papers.”

Then, to me, Mama says, "I'll give you some money. Call a taxi to get home, okay?"

"Okay, Mama."

When Uncle Vic and I get to her hospital room, Mémère's purple. Uncle Vic takes one of her hands in his and I do the same from the other side of her bed.

"Elle a froid," Uncle Vic screams. "Mon Dieu, non! Mon Dieu, non!"

I press the call button and run out into the hallway yelling for help. A nurse runs in, takes one look at Mémère, calls a code, pushes Uncle Vic back while pulling the privacy curtain around the bed. Then she tries to beat Mémère into a pulse while Uncle Vic and I watch in horror. Half-afraid Uncle Vic will send the nurse flying across the room, I run over to hold his hand.

A few minutes later, our family doctor, Repuccini, yanks open the curtain. The nurse steps aside. Repuccini puts a stethoscope to Mémère's chest, shakes his hippo-like head from side to side and says, "I'm sorry. She's gone."

Uncle Vic wails and throws his head on his mother's chest. Propelled by his powerful arms, Mémère's lifeless body sits up and Uncle Vic begs, "Pars pas, Maman! Ne pars pas! Je suis orphin."

The nurse tries to pry Uncle Vic from his mother, but she can't. When I try, he lets go and hugs me.

"I'm sorry for your loss," says Repuccini.

In a strangely disconnected voice, I say, "She was supposed to come home today. What happened to her?"

"Sometimes God has other plans," Repuccini answers.

Uncle Vic runs out of the room and down the hall to the exit where he jumps the stairs one flight at a time. Chasing him as fast as I can, we meet on the first floor.

"Come on, Uncle Vic. Let's go home. We need to tell Mama."

"What do we do?" He asks. "Leave her here?"

Having learned the practicalities of death from Pappy and Aunt Blanche, I say, “Yes, they’ll take care of her until Mama has Ouelette’s make the funeral arrangements.”

“D’accord,” he says sadly.

Thinking about Pappy and Aunt Blanche, I feel pain and regret. Pappy died about a year ago and, according to Mémère, Aunt Blanche didn’t have a proper service for him. She and Aunt Blanche argued about it and as far as I know, they haven’t spoken since. I overheard Mémère tell Aunt Adeline that it served Blanche right to lose her apartment. After all, she never married Pappy so what did she expect? Aunt Blanche’s older brother, Omer flew in from California and took her back there with him. I had hoped that someday Mémère

and Aunt Blanche would be back on speaking terms and I’d get to see her again but now I realize that may never happen.

Uncle Vic and I sit in the back seat while the rain violently lashes at the cab windows making it difficult to see outside. As we drive over the Humming Bridge’s pin-connected metal panels, sorrowful, moaning vibrations fill the cab. When we get home, I pay the driver with the money Mama gave me. Uncle Vic remains in his seat until I walk around the cab and open his door. Once inside the house, he runs to Mama’s bedroom where she and Moe are watching TV, propped up on pillows against her headboard.

Standing awkwardly by her bed, Uncle Vic carefully bows his head to her shoulder and repeats over and over again, “Je suis orphin!”

With one hand on Uncle Vic’s back and the other on Moe, Mama looks over her brother’s shoulder at me and asks, “What happened?”

“I’m sorry, Mama but Mémère’s gone.” Feeling like it’s somehow my fault, I add, “Dr. Repuccini said it was God’s plan.”

Tears and rain drops splashing down on her, Mama quiet words are barely audible over her brother’s pitiful sounds, “I always thought she’d outlive me.”

After Mémère's funeral, things finally settle down into a new normal. Aunt Adeline comes over every morning at eight and stays until lunchtime when Daddy comes home for an hour. That leaves only another hour or so that Mama has to take care of Moe all by herself.

More than once, I heard Mama tell Daddy, "Well, I managed to keep him alive again today."

* * *

Chapter 10

**“Lord, Lord, how subject we old men are to
this vice of lying!”
—William Shakespeare**

In a short time, Detective Dahm went from having no suspects at all to having three too many. *Maybe I should forgive Moody for that Sun story. It seems to have brought out a whole cast of characters.* He pinned three more names next to Plouffie’s on his board; the couple Boisvert and Adele Coutu. He put Adele up there mostly because he hadn’t detected any sadness in her over her husband’s death. *Trouble is I can’t build a solid case against any of them. What am I missing?*

He hadn’t yet figured out what Coutu was doing just north of Mammoth Road at that hour. Police on the scene theorized that he was on his way home but when Dahm visited Adele Coutu, he found their home between Mammoth and Richardson’s Farms. *It doesn’t make sense. More likely, Coutu was heading home from somewhere north of the murder scene.*

He decides to re-visit Adele Coutu to see what she knows. When he gets to her house, the widow Coutu, at first, seems pleased to see him.

“Did you find the ring?” she asks.

Not, did you find my husband’s killer, he thinks.

“No, I’m sorry, Mrs. Coutu but I have a few more questions that might help. May I come in?”

“Sure,” she says, offering him a seat on the floral couch.

Dahm sits and takes out his notebook and pen. “Do you know where your husband was going on the night he died?”

“I didn’t know when it happened. But, later I found out that, every couple of weeks, he joined a late night poker game around there. He told me he worked nights once in a while washing and packaging fruits and vegetables. He said all the drivers did. Like a fool, I believed him. I found out about the poker games from his good for nothing father. I caught the son-of-a-bitch pocketing some envelopes people left at the funeral parlor for me and my son, to help us get through, you know; until the insurance comes through?”

Dahm nods.

“Anyway, when I caught him, he said Dave owed him money from their ‘poker game’. That was the first I’d heard about any poker game. I made him tell me all about it before I kicked him out. I haven’t seen him since.”

“I’m sorry to hear you had that trouble. Any idea if Dave owed money to anyone else?”

“No, and I don’t want to know.”

“Any guesses as to where your father-in-law might be?”

“Last I heard, he’s renting a room at a farm somewhere up there.”

“Up there?” Dahm questions as he looks up from his notebook.

“Yeah, somewhere in Dracut or up in New Hampshire; lots of farms up there.”

“Do you think that’s where the poker games were held?”

“I don’t know, probably.”

Dahm nods, makes a final note then stands. “Thank you, Mrs. Coutu, you’ve been a big help.”

“Find my son’s ring.”

“I’ll try my best,” he promises. “Oh, and one more thing..... you mentioned insurance...”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“I assume it was a substantial amount?”

“Enough to take care of my son and me,” she answers less than warmly. My father took out the policy on Dave when we got married....named me as the beneficiary. He made me promise to keep up the premiums after he died. I’m so glad I did.”

“Thank you again, for your time, Mrs. Coutu.”

* * *

Dahm learns that Old Man Coutu is staying in a shelter for temporary farm workers. It’s just over the Dracut line into New Hampshire near Dunlap Farms between Old Marsh Hill and Mammoth Roads. *If he was at the poker game on the night of his son’s murder, maybe he saw something.*

Dahm pulls up in front of the barn-turned-bunk house. Its rustic red sliding door was open. Calling out Mr. Coutu’s name, Dahm enters the old building. Three sets of bunk beds line two walls. All empty, a dark woolen blanket tucked in on the open side, a pillow at the head of each. Most of the boarders work the farms nearby.

“That’s me, who are you?” the old man says.

Showing his badge, he replies, “Detective Dennis Dahm, LPD.”

“You’re out of your jurisdiction, ain’t ‘ya?”

“Conversations aren’t subject to jurisdictions.” Dahm replies as he puts away his badge.

He looks the older man up and down, taking stock of his posture and his rough appearance.

“Depends on what you want to talk about, don’t it?”

“I want to talk about your son. I’m sorry for your loss,” Dahm says. “Were the two of you playing poker the night he died?”

“You been talkin’ to Adele?”

“You answer every question with a question?”

The old man looks at him with the suggestion of a sneer on his lips. “Yeah, we were playin’ poker,” he admits. “At least, I was. I don’t know what Davey was doing...playing loose at a tight table.”

“Get himself into trouble?” Dahm asks.

“Don’t we all at one time or ‘nother?”

“There you go again, Mr. Coutu. “Anything you want to tell me about that night?”

“Well, there ain’t much to tell. Davey’s credit ran out with his luck, that’s all.”

“Any idea who’d want to kill your son, Mr. Coutu?”

“Not anyone at the table, if that’s what you’re thinking. It wasn’t exactly high-stakes poker, you know. Not enough to get murderous about, that’s for sure.”

“Still, I’d like to talk to the other players,” he says taking out his note pad. “Who did you and your son play with?”

“Fellas as old and older than me. Live down the road in that old folks’ home. Ain’t none of them drive. Davey thought he could rob the old bastards blind, well, they’re half-blind already but they’ve been playin’ poker since before Davey was born. I told Davey they’d take him to school. They ended up takin’ him to the cleaners. Poor boy,” he adds without a trace of sympathy.

“How’d you get home that night, Mr. Coutu?”

“I wouldn’t call this home, but my son drove me here,” he answers. “Didn’t know he was murdered until later.”

Dahm studies the old man. *If his heart’s broken, he hides it well.*

“Are we about done here, Detective?”

“Yes, thank you for your time and again, I’m sorry about your son.”

The old man nods and turns away.

* * *

Well, that explains the ‘where’, Dahm reflects on his way to the nursing home.

It isn't long before he drives by the spot where the murder took place. Even though a couple of uniforms and forensics have already combed the scene, he feels compelled to get out and look around. Expecting nothing, he wasn't disappointed.

He finds the nursing home about two miles down the road. When he enters the baronial, old building, he's affronted by the unexpected and unpleasant smell of spent hens and cigars. He doesn't need to be a detective to find the poker players in question. They're sitting at a round table in the middle of the expansive foyer doing what they're apt to do.

"Gentlemen," says Dahm, showing his badge, "Detective Dahm, LPD, sorry to interrupt your game...."

"Is Lowell crime-free now? You're looking to bust a few old men over a friendly game?" asks one player.

"To the contrary, gentlemen, as a matter of fact, I wouldn't mind a seat at your table sometime."

"This isn't the game you want in on....," says another old-timer.

"Oh?" questions Dahm.

"Gotta wife? Does she let you out at night?" chuckles the first player. "Every two weeks or so, we walk over to Rick's house, across the street there, for a real game. We need new blood, if you're interested."

"Tell me more," says Dahm pulling up an empty chair and joining the men at the table.

"Well, we can't play without at least five guys," says Walt.

"Six is better," interrupts Bill, the oldest looking of the group.

"Yeah, well, we lost a regular a while back and we're lookin' to replace him. Now, if you promise to leave your badge with your wife, you'd be welcome."

"Who'd you lose?" asks Dahm.

"The sorriest son-of-a-bitch you ever met. Poor bastard got himself killed, never found the murderer....about time you get around to us. That's why you're here, ain't it?"

"Yes, sir," Dahm admits.

“Well, I ain’t sayin’ he did it and I ain’t sayin’ he didn’t, but had it gone the other way, I’d look at Junior.”

“Jack!” warns Walt. “Does your brain know your mouth is talkin’?”

Jack answers, “My brain’s engaged, Walt. Why don’t you take your head outta’ your ass.....”

“You couldn’t find your ass with two hands....” says Walt.

“Gentlemen,” Dahm interjects. “All I’m hearing so far is that father and son didn’t get along. That’s not news to me.”

“Well, you don’t know everything, big detective man. You weren’t there that night, were you?”

“No, I wasn’t. Were you?”

“Hell yes, I was and believe me, it weren’t pretty. I warned them that if they didn’t stop, I’d smack the fire out of both of ‘em.”

“Stop what?” encourages Dahm.

“Well, the Coutu boy, if brains were leather, he wouldn’t have enough to saddle a June bug but that don’t make it okay for his old man to talk down to him like that, especially not in front of all of us,” Jack says.

The others nod. Jack continues, “Shamed the poor boy into losing that fancy ring to him.”

“What do you mean?” asks Dahm.

“Well, the boy went bust, as usual, but he had a hot hand, couldn’t bring himself to fold...so he asks his old man to front him. Unbeknownst to anyone but him, the old man’s holding four Queens. But he tells Junior to put up his fancy ring. The boy twists his ring off his finger and throws it in the pot. Laughing at him, the old man shows his cards, rakes in the bills and puts the ring on his own finger.”

“I’ll never forget the pitiful look on Junior’s face,” adds Walt sadly. “Or the horrible sound that came out of him.”

“Like a wounded animal,” Jack agrees. “Well, then the kid bolts from the table, knocks over his chair and storms outside.”

All his old man said was, “There goes my ride.”

“How’d his old man get home?” asks Dahm.

“Had a taxi pick him up,” Walt says.

“Thank you, gentlemen, for your time,” says Dahm.

“Time’s about all we got to give,” says Walt.

* * *

Chapter 11

**“In the case of news, we should always wait for
the sacrament of confirmation.”**

– Voltaire

Leo skipped work today because of what One-Arm Yiannis said to him yesterday in front of everyone in the frame room. “Hey Leo, what’s black and white and red all over? Your wife in a police car! Black and white Plymouth Fury, I think.”

Over laughter, another sharp voice chimes in, “Red all over, you sure about that, Yiannis?”

All eyes are on Leo. “What the fuck are you talkin’ about my wife for? Oh, yeah, I forgot, lucky for her, yours is dead.”

Yiannis comes after him, but he isn’t much of a threat, being old and missing a limb, and all. Leo just side-steps and Yiannis, propelled by his big, spherical head and belly, loses his balance and goes down.

When strong man Vic helps him up, Leo wisely walks out the door followed by the new kid who has been working on the frame with him all morning.

“Punch me out, kid,” says Leo

On his way to the Cameo, Leo promises himself that he’ll keep Louise on a tighter leash.

When he gets home, Louise is asleep on the couch with the TV on. He checks the refrigerator; *it figures, nothing to eat*. Looking

over at Louise, he remembers she'd warned him when they first got married that she'd never be a candidate for the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. *She's no Betty Crocker either. It was the boobs. The boobs and the fiery red hair. That's what got me.*

After a sleepless night alone in bed, he calls in sick hoping another day away will cool things down. The phone rings waking Louise. He hears her say that she'll be ready in an hour or so. He grabs the phone from her and learns that it's Dahm. He tells the Detective not to bother coming to get her. "I'll drive her over." Slamming down the phone he adds, "When I'm good and ready."

* * *

Looking forward to seeing Detective Dahm again, I slip out of school at lunchtime. *As long as I'm back home when school lets out.*

When I get there, Sergeant Moody is at the big desk but he's talking to someone, so I easily walk by unnoticed. I go straight to Detective Dahm's desk where there's a blown-up picture of a dragon ring. *I hope he gets here soon.* I take the picture off his desk to study it.

A big voice behind me asks, "What are you doing here, young lady?"

I turn and smile. "I know a man who has a ring just like this."

Walking briskly toward his desk, Detective Dahm says, "Oh yeah, who?"

When he takes his seat, I take the chair across from him.

"One of my customers, Mr. Boisvert."

Find the ring, you'll find the murderer. Wasn't that what the widow Adele Coutu had said? "How do you know that?"

"Well, like I said, the Boisverts are my customers. Last Christmastime, Mrs. Boisvert, she's starting to lose her color, you know. Anyway, last Christmas she told Mr. Boisvert to give me a nice tip, so he took a \$20 bill out of his wallet and gave it to me! That's when I saw his beautiful diamond ring; this ring." I add, pointing to the photo.

Dahm is confused. *If Boisvert stole it months before Coutu was killed, wouldn't his widow have noticed it gone? How does this new piece of information fit?*

"Very interesting," is all he says to me.

"Did you get my notebook from Officer Moody?"

"Sergeant Moody," he corrects.

"Oh, sorry; anyway, did he give it to you and is Penguin...I mean Mr. Plouffe off the hook?"

Detective Dahm says, "Yes, Mr. Plouffe is off the hook. Now, look you have to get going, I'm expecting, er, I'm having a meeting soon. Let me walk you out."

As we're heading to the door, Louise and a man are walking in. With Detective Dahm on my heels, I say hello to Mrs. Boisvert.

"You look very pretty today."

Louise smiles at me. I don't know the man with her.

That's strange, Dahm thinks.

"Jackie, wait on the front bench for me for just a minute, will 'ya?" I'm just going to show Mr. and Mrs. Boisvert to my desk, then...."

"That's not Mr. Boisvert," I blurt.

The man bears down on me, "What the hell are you saying, kid?"

"Hey, don't talk to her like that!" Dahm shoots back before gently placing his hands on my shoulders and protectively guiding me towards the door.

Out of earshot from them, Dahm asks me, "Is that the man who gave you a \$20 Christmas bonus?"

"No, that's not him. He's really dark too but that's not him. Mrs. Boisvert called another man sweetheart. He paid for her newspaper and gave me that big tip."

"I believe you, Jackie. Go home, now. You helped clear Mr. Plouffe. I believe he is innocent. Your part in this is over now."

"But I can still help you catch the real killer."

“That’s our job, Jackie. Now, listen to me carefully. No more stalking people; no more going out at night all alone. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, I hear you. But I can tell you right now, Mrs. Boisvert didn’t do it. She’s kind of washed out but she’s not a murderer. I’m not sure about that guy though, whoever he is.”

“That’s Mr. Boisvert, Jackie.”

If that’s Mr. Boisvert, who was the man who gave me the tip? Confused, I leave the station a little less sure of myself and a little sad that I probably won’t be seeing much of Detective Dahm anymore. *I will miss him.*

Back in Dahm’s office, Leo Boisvert is hot under the collar. “Who the hell is that girl and what the hell was she talking about?” He whispers.

“Her name is Jackie and she’s our paper girl, stupid. If you had half a brain, you’d know that.”

Dahm joins them, “Mrs. Boisvert, thank you for coming in. Mr. Boisvert, I’d like to speak with your wife, in private, for a few minutes. Mind?”

“Yes, I do mind,” Leo says.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get your turn,” Dahm answers

Leo gives him a long, hard look but says, “Fine, I’ll wait.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t recommend that,” Dahm says. “Why don’t you go on home and I’ll give your wife a ride back when we’re done.”

Fire in his eyes, Leo weighs his options. After a few seconds, he taps the flask in his breast pocket and figures he’ll head over to the Cameo to calm his nerves. *The last couple of days have been a bitch.* Still, he doesn’t feel good about leaving Louise alone with Dahm. God knows what he could get her to say. He hadn’t married her for her brains. And, that little shit, that girl, what the hell was that brat doing there? What did she have to do with this whole thing?

Leo is still fuming as he approaches the Humming Bridge on his way to the Cameo. *Oh great, just in time for end of shift. This whole day keeps getting better and better. Hope no one notices me.* Despite

himself, Leo can't keep his eyes on the road ahead. He keeps side glancing as the workers continue to climb out of the mill yard. Then, he spots her. He jerks the wheel to the right until his car is half on the sidewalk, half on the road just before the bridge. He puts the car in neutral, pulls up the emergency brake and hops out.

He grabs me by the arm. Surprised and a little scared, I look up at his angry face and jerk my arm away. This time he grabs my jaw and pulls my face up to meet his.

"I want you to stay away from me and my wife," he warns. "Don't come around my house with the paper no more, you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you," I say pushing down hard on his hand to get it off my face. He lets go but grabs my arm with his other hand.

Trying to free myself from his grip, I scream, "Let me go!"

Then he violently pushes me away, turning me half-way 'round. I look back at him just in time to see the look on his face when he is suddenly dragged by his collar toward the bridge.

"What the fuck are you doing, you moron! Let me go!" he demands.

Two steps later, he's jerked off his feet and, helpless as a baby, held sideways by one arm and one leg, fifteen feet over the Merrimack River. Traffic stops and drivers get out of their cars. Walkers run toward the scene. I push my way through the gathering crowd screaming, "Don't drop him. Please don't drop him, Mon Oncle!"

With Herculean strength, Vic lifts him back up over the guard rail and throws him on the pedestrian walkway where he lands hard on the metal grate.

"I saw him trying to pull that girl into his car," says someone in the crowd.

"This guy saved her," agrees another.

By the time a cop makes it to the scene, Leo had driven off, me and Uncle Vic had already walked the length of the pedestrian walkway, and the only two remaining witnesses tell an only slightly embellished story about a super human hero who saved a little girl

from a would-be kidnapper. A reporter arrives on the scene moments later and gets the remaining witnesses on tape.

The only words exchanged between me and Uncle Vic on our way home are “Merci, mon oncle” and “De rien, citrouille.”

When Raymond divvies up the papers that evening, I don’t tell him that the Boisverts don’t want home delivery anymore. Instead, I put the extra copy on Mr. Soteau’s porch.

* * *

Meanwhile, back at the station, Dahm shows Louise the photo of the dragon ring, “Ever seen this ring?”

“I don’t think so,” she lies.

“Okay,” he says agreeably, putting the photo away in a folder. “Let’s talk about your gun.”

“What gun?”

“You have more than one?”

“No.”

“So you do have one? Where is it?”

“I don’t know,” she let slip.

“Did you lose it, give it to someone? Your husband, maybe?”

“No! I don’t know!” she cries cradling her head in her hands.

She had given him just enough to ask the judge for a search warrant.

Dahm has a black and white drive her home.

* * *

That evening, Dahm returns to the Boisvert home with two uniforms. The search warrant only turns up empty and partially empty bottles of cheap wine and vodka. Leo’s there to witness the eye-opening, disruptive search.

“Why are you harassing us when you got the cook, Plouffie admitting he wanted Coutu dead? Why aren’t you at Plouffie’s

house, turning it upside down? He hired a guy to have him killed, didn't he?"

To which Dahm says, "Turn around, Mr. Boisvert" and, placing cuffs on him adds, "You're under arrest for the murder of David Coutu."

Momentarily caught off-guard, Leo stutters then blurts, "You can't prove it! You got nothin' on me."

"You were the anonymous caller. You, the Sarge and me are the only ones who know about that call and the cop you talked to will testify that it's your voice he heard on the phone."

"That don't prove nothin'," Leo says.

"If you didn't do it, why would you want to frame Plouffe?" Dahm asks, shaking his head in disgust. "Let's go. You can answer that at the station."

Louise watches as Dahm cuffs her husband and leads him outside. Stepping out onto the porch behind them, she watches as Dahm lowers her husband's head into the back seat of the cop car then drives away. Coming back inside, she collapses on the couch under the weight of guilt, shame and anger. Dave is dead and her husband, Leo is going to jail for his murder. *My life is over.*

Meanwhile, imprisoned by his own thoughts in the back of a cop car, Leo keeps going over the series of events leading to his arrest. *If I hadn't pointed the cops in Plouffie's direction, I wouldn't be here. What else do the cops have....that I hated Coutu for fuckin' Louise? Yea, that much is true but it don't prove I murdered him. I need an alibi besides my drunken wife.*

* * *

The D.A. tells Dahm to find the "Goddamn gun."

God knows, I've tried, Dahm thinks.

"You've got 24 hours and, if you don't have it by then, let Boisvert walk. We don't have enough to hold him."

Leo remains tight-lipped, so Dahm threatens to arrest Louise. “I’ve got an eyewitness that will testify that she saw your wife waving a gun at Coutu. And when I informed Louise of this, she admitted she had a gun. She even told me where she got it. But now, she claims she doesn’t know where it is. Do you know where it is, Leo?”

“I don’t know anything about a gun,” asserts Leo.

Dahm continues, “Look, we know Louise’s brother gave her a Ruger American pistol, a .45. But you figured that out already, didn’t you, Leo?”

Leo glares at Dahm but stays silent.

* * *

Chapter 12

“Unlike grown ups, children have little need to deceive themselves.”

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The next day at school, Sister Elise calls me up to her desk. “Go down to Sister Celeste’s room. She needs you to watch her students for a little while.”

Happy to get a break from boredom, I skip down the hardwood hallway to Sister Celeste’s first grade classroom.

“Just in time,” the nun says to me. “I won’t be too long.” Then, in her teacher voice, she says, “Children, Miss Jackie will watch you while I’m gone. Take out your workbook and color the picture on page fifteen.” Raising the open book over her head, she shows them the black and white drawing of a flower garden. “Behave for her as you would for me. Remember, Jesus is watching.”

I wait for the nun to leave, and then I sit at her desk. Feeling uncomfortable, I get up and start walking up and down the aisles, checking on each child’s progress. I sprinkle encouraging remarks around, naming names when I know them from my paper route and making up cute nicknames when I don’t. Ripples of giggles show the kids are enjoying themselves and so am I.

I’m drawn to Diane whose house is on my paper route. Diane’s cute little face is inches above the page she’s vigorously scrubbing

with a crayon. Some sort of heavy pendant bangs on her desk with every strong stroke.

“Wow, that’s a beautiful necklace, Diane. May I see it?”

Blushing a little, Diane quickly tucks it back under her school blouse and jumper.

“I’m sorry. I’m supposed to keep it hidden.”

“But it’s so pretty,” I encourage.

Smiling shyly, Diane pulls it out. “Wanna see it?”

To Diane’s eyes, my anxious surprise is delight.

“It’s.....it’s beautiful, big and beautiful. Where did you get it?”

With one hand over her mouth and the other surreptitiously pointing to the blushing little boy across the aisle, she says, “Davey gave it to me. He’s my boyfriend,” she whispers.

“It’s way too big so my sister, Claire put it on this chain for me. I’m not supposed to wear it to school so that’s why I hide it under my shirt.”

Distracted, Davey drops some of his crayons. After handing them back to him, I notice he immediately resumes head-down coloring.

“I see you’re a leftie, Davey.”

“Just like my dad,” he nods.

Sister Celeste returns to her classroom. She isn’t surprised to see me at Davey Coutu’s desk. *He’s a live wire, that one.*

“Is there a problem?” she asks.

“No, no problem,” I say. “They’re all bright, colorful artists.”

Dismissed, I don’t return to my class.

* * *

So the old man has the ring, marvels Dahm driving back to the bunkhouse from the old folks home. Find the ring, you’ll find your murderer, the widow told him. When he gets there, the bunkhouse is empty. When Dahm asks about him over at the main cook house, no

one's seen him. Dahm leaves his card with the cook and goes back to the station where Jackie's waiting for him.

"Why aren't you in school?" Dahm asks acting irritated at seeing me. Picking up the phone, he adds, "I'm calling your school."

Jumping in, I quickly say, "I know who has the dragon ring."

Receiver half-way to his ear, he pauses to ask, "Oh, yeah? Who?"

"Diane Poisson."

Dahm frowns. "Who's that?"

"She's a first grader at St. Louis; her parents are my customers and guess who her boyfriend is?"

"Tell me," says Dahm.

"Davey Coutu! She wears the ring on a chain around her neck. I saw it today at school."

"Let's go pay her parents a visit," he says.

Thrilled to be included, I eagerly climb into his unmarked car. Studying the dashboard, I ask, "Don't you have a siren or lights or something?"

"I do," he says.

Expectantly, I ask, "Can we turn them on?"

Throwing cold water on the idea, Dahm looks at me and asks, "You don't want to scare anyone, do you?"

"No, I guess not," I grudgingly concede.

Sitting at a red light just off the Humming Bridge, Dahm looks over at me and asks, "You're not prowling around at night anymore, are you?"

"No."

"Good girl; look, Jackie if what you told me today turns out to be true..."

"It is true!" I assert.

"Okay, what I mean is that's valuable information and I'm grateful for it but you've got to let this go."

"Let what go?"

"Playing detective; you've got to drop it."

"Why?"

At the green light, the detective accelerates and says, “Because I said so. Look, this isn’t healthy. You should be playing with dolls or jump rope or whatever girls your age like to do.”

“This is what I like to do,” I say in a bit of a pout.

“You should be hanging around with your friends; not hanging around the police station.”

Turning onto what Jack Kerouac called ‘sad Beaulieu’, Dahm says, “A hundred years ago, I used to live on this street.”

Looking at him in disbelief, I say, “What, are you a vampire or something?”

Dahm snickers a little and says, “Or something.”

“The Poissons live in that brick house,” I say pointing.

“Okay. I’ll take you home first then I’ll...”

“I can’t believe it,” I say angrily. “You’re not going to let me go in with you?”

“No, Jackie, I’m not.”

“But I can tell you right away who’s good and who’s bad.”

“Oh, you can, how?”

“I can just tell, that’s all. Like, I could tell right away that you’re a good man. That I’m safe with you.”

“Do you ever feel unsafe?”

“No, not really. But if I did, you’d protect me, wouldn’t you?”

“That’s my job. Besides, I don’t think we’re going to find any bad guys at the Poisson house, do you?”

“You never know. I see a lot of people on my paper route who are getting dimmer every day. You never know when one of them might turn really dark. Why won’t you let me go with you?”

“Legal reasons; has to do with chain of custody. Besides like I said, your involvement ends here.”

I sit staring out the window as Dahm drives past the Poisson house. When my house comes into view, my disappointment turns to alarm. Gasping and hitting Dahm’s arm, I say, “Hurry, hurry!”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s my mother; hurry!”

As soon as Dahm pulls in behind the car that's already parked in front of my house, I jump out, run up the steps and fling open my door. Dahm gets out of his car, looks inside the parked car, deduces the reason for Jackie's concern and decides to wait on the porch.

There's no stopping me although Aunt Adeline tries. I run past her and my little brother. I burst into my mother's bedroom to find Father Morrisette by her bedside.

"Are you okay, Mama?"

Shaking her head back and forth, Mama puts her index finger to her lips.

The priest finishes giving Mama his blessing and then they both turn to me.

"You're home from school early," Father Morrisette says.

"Uhh, yes, a little, I got a ride," I explain.

"Father Morrisette came to hear my confession and give me Holy Communion," Mama says.

"But, you're okay, right?"

"Yes, Pumpkin, I'm okay. Is everything all right with you?"

"Yes, Mama. It's just that I recognized Father Morrisette's car in front of our house and I was afraid...." I can't speak my terrible fear.

"I'll be right back," I say running back to the kitchen.

There, Aunt Adeline is picking toys up off the floor, Moe is screaming in protest and Detective Dahm is framed by the open front door. Seconds later, Father Morrisette enters the kitchen. Crossing herself, Aunt Adeline bows.

Moe asks, "Why he wear dress?"

Detective Dahm asks, "Is everything okay, here, Jackie?"

"Yes, everything's fine. Father Morrisette just came over to give my mother Communion."

Then, chiding my little brother, I say, "It's not a dress, Chou Chou. It's a vestment. It's what priests wear."

"Vessment dess?" Moe asks.

“Yup, that’s what it is,” Father Morrisette chuckles. Looking at the Detective, Father Morrisette asks, “And you are?”

“Detective Dahm, LPD; I’m here just as a friend of the family and I’ll be on my way,” he says turning to take the stairs back to his car.

Outside, Dahm stops mid-flight when he sees Lowell Sun reporter, Suzanne Cormier getting out of her car parked directly across the street.

“Are you arresting him?” she asks excitedly, hoping for a scoop.

“Arresting who?” he asks.

“Victor the Strongman,” she answers excitedly.

Wondering who the hell Victor the Strongman is and why Sue thinks she’ll find him here, Dahm says, “What are you talking about?”

“What everyone’s talking about, Detective.” Unable to resist the dig, she adds, “Everyone but you, apparently.”

Still clueless, Dahm says, “Fill me in.”

“Victor the Strongman lives here with his sister and brother-in-law and their family. Witnesses say they saw him dangling a man,” checking her notes, “named Leo Boisvert” over the river.”

The hair on Dahm’s neck stands up straight. “What’s Victor’s beef with Leo?”

“His beef? Leo tried to kidnap his niece, that’s what! That is why you have Leo in custody, isn’t it?”

Dahm’s head reels. He turns around and bounds back up the porch stairs. Before he knocks on the door, he turns to Sue and says, “Come back later.”

“But,” she protests. “I...”

“I said, come back later,” Dahm repeats.

Angry and undeterred, Sue decides to wait him out in her car.

Dahm’s rather forceful knock causes Aunt Adeline to jump. This is just too much for her.

“Je vais maintenant à ma maison. Prendre soin de Mama and Chou-chou.”

"I'll take care of them," I promise my great aunt. After kissing her good-bye, I let Dahm back in.

Outside, Sue pounces on the old woman, "Ma'am, Ma'am," she yells "Can I talk to you?"

Frightened, Aunt Adeline, who had been scurrying down the cement steps, quickly turns around to go back into the house, sees that the door is closed, turns again, trips and lands on her left hip. She cries out but mostly because her dress has risen above her knees.

Sue runs to her while Jackie, with Moe in tow, the Detective and the Priest run out to see what happened. Detective Dahm urges her not to try to get up.

Alarmed, I ask, "Vas bien, Tante?"

Aunt Adeline says, "Je suis désolé, désolé."

Looking at Dahm, I say, "I hope she didn't break anything."

Going back inside, Father Morrisette says, "I'll call an ambulance."

"I think you should leave," Dahm says to the Reporter, unless you want to come to the station with me to discuss reckless endangerment."

Sue starts, "I didn't..." then looks at the poor old woman and says, "I'm going."

The ambulance comes a few moments later. I want to go with my great Aunt but the attendants won't let me bring Moe. Meanwhile, Mama, alarmed by the commotion, makes her way painfully to the porch.

Appearing at the door wearing a house coat, she asks, "What happened to Aunt Adeline?"

I run up to meet her. "She fell. She says she's alright but we just want to make sure she didn't break her hip or something. They won't let me go with her to the hospital."

From the stretcher, Aunt Adeline finds her loudest voice and says to Marguerite, "Je suis désolé, très désolé. Qui va regarder Chou-chou?"

With my help, Mama makes her way down the steps, goes over to Aunt Adeline, kisses her and whispers, “Don’t worry, Aunt Adeline. We’ll be fine. Let’s just make sure you’re fine.”

Sizing up Jackie’s mother, Dahm can see why her daughter wants to protect her. The woman is obviously seriously ill. The ambulance drives away. Father Morissette guides Marguerite back up the stairs when she turns and says,

“Jackie, bring Moe and your friend back inside. I’d like a few words with both of you.”

Father Morissette asks, “Would you like me to stay?”

Mama looks from me to the Detective and we both shake our heads.

“No thank you, Father. But, if you could, would you please go to the hospital to be with my Aunt? I’m sure she’s scared to death.”

The priest replies, “Certainly, Marguerite.”

Father Morissette has a nice, warm color. I know Aunt Adeline will be glad he’s there. Back inside my house, Mama sits at the kitchen table and invites Detective Dahm to join her. I set Moe up on his booster chair; put paper and crayons in front of him and say,

“Draw a picture of Daddy.”

When I take my seat at the table, Mama asks the Detective, “How do you know my daughter?”

While I hold my breath, the Detective says, “Well, Jackie’s paper route gives her insights into her customers, some of whom may be associated with a case of mine. Her sense of civic duty prompted her to reach out. And, truth be told, she really has been a help in our investigation.”

“What investigation?” Mama asks.

I cut in, “Remember when Daddy told you that he didn’t think Mr. Plouffe could ever kill anyone?”

“Yes,” she answers.

“Well, I told Detective Dahm what Daddy said.”

Detective Dahm adds, “Coupled with other information that came to light, we concluded that we need to look elsewhere.”

“Elsewhere, meaning someone on Jackie’s paper route?” Mama asks.”

“Possibly,” answers Detective Dahm.

“Is Jackie in any danger?”

“No, Mama, not at all.”

“I asked Detective Dahm,” Mama says.

My eyes bore into him as he speaks, “I agree with your daughter. The information she just gave me has to do with a first grader at her school. She delivers the newspaper to the child’s family. Your daughter is a smart, resourceful girl and I’ve enjoyed getting to know her but like I said to her today, her part in this is done. There is, however, a separate incident I’ve just learned about and that’s why I came back inside. With your permission, I’d like to ask your daughter a few questions about it.”

Mama asks, “Jackie, do you want to answer his questions?”

“Not really”

“Okay, then, Detective. I think we’re done.”

Just then, Uncle Vic comes through the door. And, like he does every day, he goes directly to the refrigerator, pulls out a bottle of Old Milwaukee, throws himself into his rocking chair by the window and proceeds to rock a hundred miles an hour.

I ask, “How was work today, Uncle Vic?”

“Bien,” he replies throwing the bottle back for another mighty gulp.

Detective Dahm turns to Uncle Vic, introduces himself and asks, “Do you know Leo Boisvert?”

Uncle Vic looks at me. I shrug my shoulders. Uncle Vic shrugs his.

Mama says, “You’ll have to excuse us, Detective. I’m very tired.”

“Of course; thank you for your time. I’ll be on my way.”

Talking to Moe, Dahm asks, “Would you like to be a Junior Policeman?”

Moe says, “Yes!!!”

Dahm nods good-bye to Vic then says to me, "Can you bring your brother out to my car? I have an official LPD badge for him."

I look at Mama who says, "Sure," before turning to go back to bed.

Outside, Dahm reaches into his glove compartment, pulls out a plastic police badge and pins it on Moe who then asks me for permission to run corner to corner, up and down the sidewalk.

"Stay on the sidewalk," I say and, in a burst of gleeful energy, Moe takes off.

"Did Leo Boisvert ever threaten you or your uncle?" Dahm asks.

"He just told me to stop delivering the paper to his house."

"Did he do anything else to you?" Dahm asks with rising fury at the possibility.

"No."

"So why did your Uncle threaten to throw him off the bridge?"

I feel my face burn. "Please, please Detective, my uncle didn't do anything wrong. He saw Mr. Boisvert grab my arm and he was just trying to protect me. Please don't tell my mother or talk to Uncle Vic about it."

Then, mimicking Raymond, I add, "They don't need that kind of aggravation."

"Look, Jackie, a reporter from the Lowell Sun was just here. She wants to write a story about you and your Uncle and what happened at the bridge. I told her to leave but I can't stop her from coming around again."

"What's her name?"

"Suzanne Cormier"

"Can you please tell her that I'll write the story for her tonight and bring it to her tomorrow if she promises to stay away from my family, especially my mother and my Uncle Vic?"

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Dahm asks.

"Because I didn't want to get Uncle Vic in trouble. It's all my fault, not his. He saw me trying to pull away from Mr. Boisvert."

“He’s not in trouble,” Dahm says. “Sounds like he’s a hero. Leo won’t press charges against him, that’s for sure. I’ll call Sue when I get back to the station. I’ll convince her to write the story without publishing your names.”

“That would be good.”

“No more secrets between us, right?”

“Right,” I agree as Moe plows into my legs on his return trip.

On his way back to ‘sad Beaulieu’, Dahm reflects that there’s no doubt that Jackie loves her family and that they love her. After a short ride, he finds himself in front of his wife’s childhood home where two houses over, is the one that he himself lived in for a short time with one of his fosters. Not a happy time.
I’m glad I didn’t sic DCF on Jackie.

* * *

Chapter 13

“I find the family the most mysterious and fascinating institution in the world.”

— Amos Oz

The Poisson door is answered by a little girl with caramel-colored hair and azure eyes. “Good afternoon, is your mother home?”

“Mommy!!!!” calls the girl. “There’s a man at the door.”

Smoothing her hair and her dress, Mrs. Poisson calls from the archway at the top of the narrow hallway, “May I help you, sir?”

“Maybe; I’m Detective Dahm, LPD. May I come in?”

“Is anything wrong?” she asks quickening her pace down the photo adorned hall.

“No Ma’am, nothing like that.”

Her voice softens, she says, “Come on in.”

Taking an offered seat on the velveteen living room couch, Dahm says, “It’s come to my attention that your young daughter here may have innocently come into possession of a piece of evidence in a case I’m working on.”

Bewildered, she says, “I can’t imagine how that could be.”

Turning to the little girl who followed them into the parlor, he quickly adds, “Did someone at school give you a ring that you wear on that chain around your neck?”

With her chin on her chest, the little girl stands silent and blushing. Her mother says, "Diane, come here."

With a heavy heart and lead feet, Diane presents herself to her mother who pulls out the chain from under her daughter's blouse to reveal an astonishing bauble.

"Where did you get this?" Mrs. Poisson asks.

"Claire put it on her chain for me," the child explains.

"Claire is her older sister," Mrs. Poisson explains. "Did Claire give you this ring?"

Little Diane sadly shakes her head no.

"Well, where did you get it?"

Unwilling to give up her boyfriend and the ring, Diane remains silent.

"This is the last time I'm going to ask you, where did you get this?" warns Mrs. Poisson.

"It's mine. Davey gave it to me," she asserts.

"Davey who?" Mrs. Poisson asks crossly.

"Davey Coutu from school."

"Turn around," Mrs. Poisson impatiently instructs Diane. Unclasping the chain from her daughter's neck, Mrs. Poisson slides the ring off, examines it and asks, "Is this real?"

Dahm nods, "I think so."

Mrs. Poisson hands it to him as if it were poisonous. "Sorry, Detective. We didn't know."

"No problem, Ma'am, thank you. And thank you, Diane for taking such good care of it while it was in your custody. You've earned a Junior Detective badge."

Confused, Diane's sniffles are cut short.

Taking one out of his pocket, Dahm asks, "May I?"

Acknowledging nods from both Diane and her mom, the Detective pins the badge on Diane's jumper.

"You're officially a Junior member of the Lowell Police Department. Thank you for your service."

Mrs. Poisson asks, "What do you say?"

In a small voice and less than grateful tone, Diane says, “Thank you.”

Dahm shakes Diane’s hand, thanks her mother and leaves.

Back at the station, Dahm gives Sue a call, springs Boisvert and has the ring bagged and tagged.

* * *

Leo doesn’t stop at the Cameo. He goes straight home to the kind of warm reception he got used to missing.

Louise says, “Oh, thank God. I was afraid you’d never come home again.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” asks Leo looking around disgustingly at his untidy house.

“Well, I don’t know....I was afraid you’d be found guilty and.....”

Leo cuts her off, “The only reason I tried to frame Plouffie was to protect you.”

“Protect me?” she asks incredulously.

“You were the one who was seen pointing a gun at the prick!” Leo says.

“But you found it, didn’t you?” she accuses shrilly.

Taking in her unkempt hair and stained housecoat, Leo shakes his head, turns around and goes back out the door.

* * *

Rejoining Uncle Vic in the kitchen, I pull a pen and paper out of my school bag to write my first story for the Lowell Sun. Moe straddles Uncle Vic’s feet and holds onto his legs. Uncle Vic lifts him up and down, as if Moe were riding a painted pony. To complete the fun, Uncle Vic, on his third Old Milwaukee, belts out **O Sole Mio** in the style of his idol, Enrico Caruso while rocking the rails of his Boston rocker.

When I finish writing, I peel potatoes and set them to boil while sautéing hamburger meat.

“Quoi pour souper?” Uncle Vic asks without breaking rhythm.

“Chinese pie; that’s a funny name for it, isn’t? There’s really nothing Chinese about it.”

“I like it,” Moe calls out over his shoulder.

“Good, it’ll be ready when Raymond and Daddy get home. We’ll eat after papers.”

“I want to come!” Moe screams.

“Okay, but only if you promise to stay in the wagon. If you don’t, I’m bringing you right back home and telling Daddy.”

“Promise,” Moe replies.

* * *

Later that same evening, Dahm gets home and is happy to find his wife in a more cheerful mood.

“Smells delicious,” he says.

“Fish chowdah, tonight,” Caroline says with an emphasis on the ‘dah’. “How was your day?”

“Do we have any oyster crackers?”

“Of course, can’t have chowdah without Bradt’s oysters,” she assures.

“You’re in a good mood,” Dahm says encircling her waist with his arms and kissing her neck.

“I have a good reason. Go get ready and we’ll talk about it at supper,” she teases.

At their maple kitchen table with Dennis in the Captain’s chair, Caroline serves the hot chowder, sits across from him, says grace, then, “Bon appétit!”

“I went downtown today,” she says happily.

“Shopping?” he asks.

“I suppose you could call it that,” she says coyly. “I went to Catholic Charities. I had a long, encouraging interview with Sister Collette.”

Pushing some literature that was on the table toward him, she says, “She gave me this brochure and some forms for both us to fill out. Then, we both have to go to parenting classes, then...”

Reading the brochure’s title, he cuts her off. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes, very sure; you always say you’re open to it, so, are you?”

“Yes; I am if you are, Caroline. And if you are, I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Filled with happy anticipation, Caroline skips over to her husband and hugs him around the neck. He playfully pulls her onto his lap, kisses her deeply, then gently pushes her off his lap and says, “More chowdah please!”

* * *

Daddy’s a little late tonight. But, he has good news, “Doctor Repuccini says Aunt Adeline is fine. They’re just going to keep her overnight to make sure her blood pressure stays stable. He says he expects to discharge her tomorrow. I told him to call me when he does and I’ll go pick her up.”

“Stay home from school tomorrow, Jackie to take care of Moe, okay?”

I happily agree but wonder how I’m going to get my story to that reporter.

Mama’s too weak to join us at the supper table. So me, Moe, and Uncle Vic, eat our Chinese pie at the kitchen table while Mama, Daddy and Raymond eat in Mama’s bedroom. Most nights, just Mama and Daddy eat together. Daddy chooses the most interesting stories from the day’s paper and they talk about it.

I hope they’re not talking about what happened today. I’m saved by a piece of mail from Keith Academy that was waiting for Raymond in

our old metal, wall-mount mailbox. Keith Academy is a private, boys high school run by Xaverian Brothers. Everyone who graduates from there is just about guaranteed acceptance to just about any college any Lowellian might want to go to, including the Ivy Leagues. So tonight, Raymond, Mama and Daddy are eating supper together and discussing the challenging logistics of acceptance. Keith Academy is expensive and way outside of our paper route.

Mama surprises them with a solution. Pointing to the top drawer in the built-in next to her bed, she says to Raymond,

“Grab my cosmetic bag in the drawer there and tell Jackie to join us.”

When I come into the bedroom with Moe in tow, Mama unzips the bag and shows us its contents.

“Every so often, I give Daddy an envelope full of money that he brings to the bank in exchange for a hundred dollar bill,” she explains. “Do you know whose money this is?”

Me and Moe are the only ones who don’t seem to know. “It belongs to you, Raymond and you, Jackie. You earned it. Now, Raymond needs to use some of it. Is that okay with you, Jackie?”

“Sure, I didn’t even know we had it.”

“Okay, then.” Turning to Daddy, she says, “Ray, can you take him to school before work and pick him up after?”

“Sure,” Daddy says. “No problem.”

“It’s settled, then. Congratulations, son. Let Keith Academy know that you’ve accepted.”

Daddy shakes Raymond’s hand, Mama kisses him and no one talks about Detective Dahm and me.

“Good Chinese pie, Jackie”, Mama says.

* * *

Chapter 14

**“Don’t forget, you are the hero of your own story.” —
Greg Boyle**

*F*ind that ring and you’ll find the killer; that thought bitterly flavors Dahm’s morning coffee. *Well, I found it alright; rather, Jackie found it, suspended from the neck of a seven-year old girl. Not exactly a prime suspect. But, now the widow Coutu is. Why would Adele give Davey such an expensive bauble? She wouldn’t....would she?*

He thought about calling Adele Coutu to let her know he’d found the ring but he wants to see the expression on her face when he tells her. Pulling up to her house, he rings her doorbell.

“Hope you’ve got some good news for me,” she says at the open door

If she’s acting, she’s damn good. “As a matter of fact, I do,” he says.

“Then, by all means, come in.” Seated in her parlor, she asks, “Well, did you find my father’s ring?”

Pulling the evidence bag from his pocket, he says, “It wasn’t really lost, was it?”

“What do you mean? Where did you find it? Whoever had it must have killed Dave,” she says.

No one’s that good, thinks Dahm. “Your son had it. At least he did until he gave it away.”

“What are you talking about, Detective? How could Davey... who did he give it to?”

“A little blonde named Diane.”

Bewildered, she asks, “Where did Davey get it?”

Then, something occurs to her. But Dahm speaks the thought first, “Your father-in-law?”

“Yeah, maybe; he must have had the ring. But, if he did, he didn’t tell me. I bet he gave it to Davey and told him not to tell me. “That son-of-a-bitch; telling my son to keep secrets from me. Well, thank you for finding it,” she says with her palm up.

“Oh, sorry, I’ve got to keep this until the case is closed,” he says, putting the bagged and tagged ring back in his pocket.

“How much longer will that be?” she asks.

“Getting closer every day; thanks for your time, Mrs. Coutu.”

At the door, he turns and says, “Oh, a bit of advice, don’t be too hard on Davey. He’s probably already dealing with one angry female.”

After school that afternoon, Davey admits to his mom that Grandpa gave him Daddy’s ring.

“He told me not to tell you. I gave it to Diane because she’s my girlfriend and she thinks it’s pretty. She told me she’s sorry but she doesn’t have it anymore. She said the police came and took it. I didn’t want to make you mad, Mommy, so that’s why I didn’t tell you about that part either.”

Adele thinks back to the day her father-in-law visited. He said something cryptic that she just dismissed as more of his bullshit, but now it makes her wonder. *“You’ll have me to thank on payday,” he said. Was the ring payday? How did he get it? It just doesn’t make any sense. But, my father-in-law rarely does.*

* * *

Driving back to the station, Dahm re-focuses on the gun. *Coutu senior had the ring, did he have the gun, too? Had he killed his*

own son? His mind is on the old man when something moving along the sidewalk catches his eye. It's Jackie and she has her little brother in tow.

Pulling over, he says, "Why aren't you in school today?"

"Hi Detective! Oh, it's okay. My dad told me to take the day off to take care of Moe 'cause Aunt Adeline needs to rest."

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"To the Lowell Sun, to give my story to Miss Cormier."

"Get in. I'll take you there."

Dahm puts the rusty, Radio Flyer in his trunk and Jackie and Moe get in the front seat. When they get to the Sun building, Dahm calls Sue from the lobby and tells her to come outside. Seeing her push her way through the heavy glass doors, Dahm rolls down his window and says, "Get in."

The Reporter gets in the back seat and Dahm introduces them.

"Jackie, why don't you get in the back seat with Miss Cormier."

Dahm had given Suzanne background information on Jackie and her family the night before. A little additional research on her part revealed the basics about the family. Vic, a bachelor, works at the mill and lives with his sister, her husband and their three kids. The oldest has the biggest single, paper route in the city. Their father is a route driver for Bradt's and their mother seems to be a bit of a recluse....no club memberships, no outside job....Dahm says she's a sickly woman; perhaps that's why she hadn't found much of anything on her.

"Here's a report on what happened," I say handing it to her then getting in and shutting the door.

"Thank you. I'm going to read it now in case I have any questions, okay?"

"Okay," I say, sitting sideways so I can see her expression while she reads.

Although I'm studying her, she reveals nothing to me except her color.

“Make it quick,” Dahm orders brushing Moe’s hand away from his car’s dashboard.

Undeterred, Moe points to and asks Dahm about every button and lever on the dash. Sue finishes reading, looks up at me and asks, “Is this it?”

I don’t know what I expected but her reaction wasn’t it. Unsure of myself, I nod.

“But what made your uncle think you were in trouble?” She asks.

“I’m not sure. I think he misunderstood what he saw. The guy grabbed my arm, but..”

“Why did he grab you?” She pushes.

“Because he wanted to tell me not to deliver his newspaper anymore.”

Shooting Dahm a look, Sue says, “Okay, Jackie. I’ll accept your story at face value but I want an interview with your Uncle.”

“Sue,” Dahm warns.

“Don’t Sue me,” she says. “I’ll play it like a puff piece but I’ve got to flesh it out.”

“My uncle doesn’t speak English very well,” I say hoping to discourage her.

“No problem, neither does my mother,” Miss Cormier replies.

Seeing my desperate reaction, she adds, “What’s wrong with making your uncle a local hero?”

Thinking there was no way out, I finally say, “Meet me at the Humming Bridge, on Monday at five minutes past three and I’ll introduce you to my Uncle Vic.”

“It’s a date,” she says.

Having met Vic and knowing Sue, Dahm is wary but he passes it off as cynicism. *Maybe this will bring the family some cheer.* Nevertheless, he makes a mental note to be available on Monday.

Just as the reporter is getting out of the car, I ask, “Do you cover Lawrence news?”

“No, not really; Lawrence is covered by the Eagle Tribune.”

“Oh. I was hoping you could find out about a murder in Lawrence.”

Dahm turns in his seat. “What murder?” He asks.

“Mr. Libby. He was Pappy’s, I mean Mr. Bancroft’s partner in their Funeral Home; Bancroft-Libby. Pappy’s my Aunt Blanche’s friend. Mr. Libby was murdered and they never found out who did it.”

“I can look it up,” Miss Cormier says.

“Would you?” I ask hopefully.

“Sure, I’ll bring what I find when we meet on Monday.”

“Great, thanks!” *This wasn’t all bad.*

Driving us home, the Detective quizzes me until he knows everything I do about Messrs. Bancroft and Libby and Aunt Blanche; everything, that is, except what I saw two men do to a dead man in the middle of that one night in Pappy’s funeral parlor. I never told anyone about that but it is something I’ll never forget.

* * *

After dropping the kids off at their home, Dahm looks at his watch and decides to try to catch old man Coutu at the Old Folk’s Home tonight after dinner. *Caroline will be glad that I finally made it home for dinner on time.*

Sitting across from him at the dinner table, his wife says, “I talked to Sister Collette today. She signed us up for Catholic parenting classes; Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 3 to 5 for four weeks, starting this Monday.”

“This Monday? Geeze, Caroline; that’s not a lot of notice, is it? It’s not like I don’t have a job.”

“But, I thought you wanted to get started on this right away?”

“Yeah, I do but if I don’t work, we won’t be good candidates for....” he cut himself off. “I’m sorry, Honey. Of course, it’s okay. I’ll be there.”

Caroline rushes him with a kiss of passion renewed. “You know, everyone says the way to get pregnant is to adopt....”

“I heard that,” he agrees. “But I also heard sex helps.”

Giggling, she lets him carry her to the bedroom.

* * *

Chapter 15

“Until one looks back on one’s own past one fails to realise what an extraordinary view of the world a child has.”

—Agatha Christie

Sunday mornings start early for me and Raymond. We have extra customers on Sundays so, besides the paper being thick with ads and supplements, we have more deliveries to make. The number of bundles the delivery truck thunderously drops takes up the length of our sidewalk from the corner to our porch. Most of our customers want their paper before church so Sunday is a hustle. Raymond can only take a quarter and I can only take half of the papers we need. We have to double-back and replenish to complete our routes. Most people on our routes are bright but there’s one section that isn’t. I hurry through that section. When I complain to Raymond that there are so many grays there, he tells me that it isn’t nice to call old people grays.

“They’re not all old,” I explain to deaf ears.

This Sunday isn’t routine though. Daddy took Mama to the hospital last night. They weren’t gone too long before the phone rang. It was Daddy.

“Doctors want to send Mama to a different hospital, one in Boston. I’m going to go with her. I’ll be back late tomorrow night. You and Raymond take care of Moe and Uncle Vic.”

“Will Mama come back? I mean will she come back with you tomorrow night?”

“I’m not sure.”

Then he hung up.

When I told my brothers and Uncle Vic what Daddy said, Uncle Vic cried. Raymond said, “I’ll deliver all the papers, today. You take care of things at home and make dinner.”

From the back of a cabinet, I dig out the old meat grinder that, like a chocolate bunny, only sees the light of day once a year. That’s when Daddy scrapes all the hard to reach pieces of meat and fat off the Easter ham bone. Then he pushes all the scrapings through it. Spread on Sunbeam bread with a little mayonnaise and relish, it’s the second best thing about Easter. The worst thing is the bare bone pea soup that comes later.

Tightening the C-clamp onto the kitchen table, like Daddy does, I take out the packaged beef chunks and feed them through the grinding plates, a process that Moe finds highly entertaining. I fashion the coarsely ground meat into loose patties as best I can. It doesn’t hold together like hamburg. But, I season the little piles of meat and put them in the fridge. As I’m cleaning out the old grinding machine, I think about it belonging to Daddy’s mother, a woman I never knew. I can’t think of anything else that belonged to her.

While waiting for Raymond, I lay out church clothes for me and Moe. I tell Uncle Vic who’s wearing pajama bottoms and a tank-style undershirt, to get ready too.

“Are we going to walk to church?” Uncle Vic asks.

“Yes; we’ll all go and pray for Mama.”

While still rocking, Uncle Vic says unconvincingly, “Raymond and I are going fishing up the Merrimack today.”

“You can still go fishing but you can’t take the boat,” I assert.

“I can pull the trailer myself,” he says hopefully.

“It’s against the law,” I say, not knowing for sure if that were true. “Time to get ready.”

“Okay,” says Uncle Vic, “but it’s a good day to boat to New Hampshire.”

“Can’t take the boat; next week-end, maybe.”

Obviously disappointed, Uncle Vic stops rocking and heads to the stairs. I follow him to the bottom of the staircase and touch his powerful arm. He turns to look at me.

“Uncle Vic, do you remember when you held that man over the river but you made sure you didn’t drop him?”

“Bâtard,” he says.

“Yes, well some people saw you do it. And a Lowell Sun reporter wants to write a nice story about how strong you are.”

“Bâtard,” he says again.

“Yes, but if this reporter wants to talk about that awful man, we’ll just say it was a misunderstanding...we’ll just say it looked like he was trying to hurt me but he really wasn’t. He was one of my customers, you know. He just stopped me to tell me he doesn’t want me to deliver the paper to his house anymore.”

Uncle Vic says, “So you don’t go to his house anymore?”

“No, not anymore.”

“He better never touch you again.”

“I’m sure he won’t. So, do you want to meet me and that woman reporter tomorrow after work? She wants to take your picture. The story will be about Victor the Strongman. Remember, she doesn’t want to talk about the Bâtard. She just wants to talk about you. She wants to write a story for the Lowell Sun about you. What do you think?”

“I wish Mémère could see it. Do you think Mama will?”

“Sure she will,” I say smiling. “She’ll be so proud of her big brother.”

Uncle Vic nods and heads up the stairs to his room to get ready for church.

* * *

Marguerite's long-time doctor, Anthony Repuccini got some of his more influential colleagues to talk to their more influential colleagues who finally get the ear of one of the most celebrated cancer specialists in the country, Dr. Jane Wright. Chemotherapy is experimental at best and Dr. Wright is investigating the safety, efficacy and tolerability of anti-cancer chemicals on the human lymphatic system. Her hand-selected clinical trial participants are patients with advanced malignancies; unfortunately, Mama is a prime, though late-entry, candidate.

That night, Daddy comes home alone and says, "Your mother has been accepted in a clinical trial. That's the good news. But, it means she won't be coming home for a couple of months. So, we'll all have to pull together to keep things status quo around here."

"Did they figure out what she has?" Raymond asks.

"Just that it's some kind of cancer," Daddy says with a catch in his voice.

Taking me aside, Daddy says, "With Mémère gone and Mama in the hospital, you're now the woman of the house. It's up to you to run things around here and take care of Moe."

Before I can even answer, he grabs the newspaper and goes to the bathroom. After several melancholy minutes, Uncle Vic goes to his room to listen to records and rock and Raymond closes the door of his room to study.

I play army with Moe; both of us are prone on the linoleum floor in the kitchen taking aim at each other's army guys. I obliterate Moe's army. Moe runs to our bedroom to rally a prehistoric cavalry that wipes out my men. Only the dinosaurs are left standing in our upside-down world.

When Daddy finally comes out of his sanctuary, Moe Chou-Chou runs to him and together they find a baseball game on TV. I go upstairs to prep Uncle Vic some more.

From that night on, Daddy gives us a slight variation of the same report: "Your mother told me to tell you how much she loves you and that she's doing fine and will be home soon."

Every evening, Uncle Vic cries. Then, he says goodnight and swaps his downstairs rocking chair for the one in his room where he blasts his Caruso and Lanza records with a six-pack on the floor by his rocker. Each successive beer fuels a faster and faster ride on the chair's rails.

Tonight we all hear a large boom coming from his room. Moe and I race each other up the stairs. When we get there, the chair is upside down and Uncle Vic's on the floor holding its severed arms in his hands.

"Pourquoi Dieu laissez-ça? He cries out.

I can't answer him. *Why indeed does God let this happen?* I wonder.

Moe starts laughing so hard, he makes us all see the funny. Daddy and Raymond join us and Daddy says, "I can fix your chair, Vic. In the meantime, use the other one up here."

Like water gushing over a breached dam, my laughter feels unstoppable. After a while, Uncle Vic starts looking annoyed. Still, I have no control. So, I give him a quick peck on the cheek and go back downstairs where Raymond has already joined Moe and Daddy in front of the TV. I try to watch TV with them but I can't suppress sporadic bursts of laughter that threaten to morph mournful. I say good-night and I finally fall asleep on a wet pillow.

* * *

Chapter 16

“The proverb says that Providence protects children and idiots. This is really true. I know because I have tested it.”

— Mark Twain

Dahm strikes out the entire week-end. He finds out that there are poker games on Friday and Saturday nights but old man Coutu doesn't always go. The boys tell him he never misses their Tuesday game when they play at the Desmarais house across the street. Dahm goes back to the bunkhouse but he isn't there either. *I'll have to wait until tomorrow to catch up with him. In the meantime, the bus and taxi stations have my number and the picture of him Adele gave me.*

Monday afternoon, Dahm finds himself in a Catholic Charities classroom. He and Caroline are sitting at student desks, he uncomfortably while his wife's petite and youthful figure looks right at home in her seat. Subject to the black-clad nun and surrounded by dark wood paneled walls, hardwood floors and wood-plank ceilings, Caroline is a beacon. Sister Collette is saying something about raising any child they may be blessed with in the Catholic faith. Caroline's nodding so he nods too. She smiles and squeezes his hand. *She's glowing. This is good.*

Despite his best efforts to concentrate on the good sister's words, his thoughts turn to Jackie and her uncle. He feels guilty

about not being there with them when they meet with Sue Cormier today. He makes a mental note to follow up with Sue to see if he can steer her story. He's come to feel very protective of Jackie and her family.

Sister Celeste excuses herself after giving Dahm and Caroline some reading material. "I'll be back in a few minutes to answer any questions you may have," she says.

Beset by old demons, Caroline whispers to her husband, "What if I'm not a good mother and the child doesn't love me?"

Dahm wants to tell her she's being ridiculous but she isn't... she's being Caroline and he knows it.

"It'll be fine, Honey, you'll see. You'll be a great mother and I'll be the best father that I know how to be. And, if I'm not, you'll tell me. Together, we might even have a half-decent shot at raising a law-abiding, God-fearing, housebroken kid."

Taking his wife's hand, Dahm adds, "Besides, if we don't do a good job, Sister Collette will crack a ruler across our fingers."

"You think so?" Caroline asks.

"I don't doubt it for a minute," he says jokingly. "In fact, she may smack us when she gets back if she catches us talking and not reading."

* * *

That same afternoon, across the St. Louis parking lot, the dismissal bell rings. I'm one of the first kids out. I'm anxious to get home to relive Aunt Adeline from babysitting Moe. When I get home, I grab Moe and a little bag of Daddy's oyster crackers for him to snack on and I say, "Bye, Aunt Adeline. I'm taking Moe for a little ride in my wagon. See you tomorrow!"

Outside, I say to Moe, "We're going to meet Uncle Vic at work, today. I'll pull you in the wagon, okay?"

Moe says, "And maybe we can get ice cream."

“Maybe, but only if you promise to stay in the wagon,” I say lifting him in it.

Moe won't bend his legs. Frustrated, I say, “Come on, Moe. Stop fooling around. Sit down and hold on. I'm going to pull you as fast as I can.”

That sounds good to Moe so he complies. By the time we get to the Humming Bridge, I'm pretty worn out. Relieved that no mill workers have been let out yet, I allow myself to slow down. Moe hands me the plastic bag of Bradt's oyster crackers to open for him. He snacks on them while we bumpily roll across the bridge grates. When we get to the sidewalk on the other side, I can see Sue Cormier is parked in the vacant lot across the street. I wave at her and she waves back. *I hope Uncle Vic hasn't forgotten about the interview.* Looking down at the mill yard through the chain-link fence, Moe and I watch as the first shift workers flow out of the mill like a murmuration. I pick out Uncle Vic. He and another man break from the flock and walk together toward us.

“Look, he only has one arm,” Moe says loudly. “Why?”

“I don't know, Moe. Maybe he was born like that. Don't ask him. If he wants to talk about it, he will.”

Moe nods. As soon as they're in earshot, Moe yells, “Why you have one arm?”

I seem to be the only one who's embarrassed.

“Hi there, you must be Jackie and you must be Chou-Chou. I'm a friend of your uncle here and my friends call me, One-arm Yiannis. You wanna' know why?”

“You have one arm!” Moe says.

“Good guess; do you want to know how I lost it?”

Moe nods.

“Well, I'll tell you. One day, I was fishing down there,” pointing to the banks of the Merrimack, “and a bear comes out of nowhere; blind-sides me as I'm reeling in a monster river fish. Well, the bear grabs my rod. But I don't let go. I hang on tight. But, I'm no match for the bear and he pulls my arm right out of my shoulder! Then, he

plies my fingers from the rod and throws my arm in the river. Then, your Uncle Vic, here, he comes down and throws the bear into the river. The current carries him all the way out to the Atlantic Ocean. But you know what makes me really mad?

Eyes-wide, Moe shakes his head. "That bear still has my fishing rod!"

Moe laughs first. With a wide smile, "One-arm turns to me and says, "Your Uncle told me about the reporter and I thought I'd come along to verify."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Yiannis," I say. "That's the reporter, parked across the street there. Her name is Miss Cormier. She's waiting for us. Are you ready, Uncle Vic?"

Uncle Vic nods. We all walk across the street together, Uncle Vic who's built like a bow-legged, walking fire plug, Mr. One-arm, me and Moe, riding in my newspaper wagon.

Watching them, Sue Cormier muses, *they look a little like a circus caravan.*

I'm grateful to Mr. Yiannis. He talks so much and so fast that Miss Cormier can't even get a question in. While sitting almost sideways in the front seat with her, Mr. Yiannis is telling stories about Uncle Vic's incredible strength; all the challenges he met and all the young, strong men he beat; once in a while, Mr. Yiannis looks back at me, Moe and Uncle Vic to sprinkle the word, "magnificent" over all of us.

"Great stuff, Yiannis," Miss Cormier says. "But now I'd like to hear from Victor himself." Turning around to face Uncle Vic, she asks, "Do you have anything to add?"

Uncle Vic says, "C'est tout".

"How about a picture, then?"

We circus freaks exit her car. Uncle Vic stands with his back to the old mill building like he's about to be executed.

"Dis fromage!" Miss Cormier says.

Uncle Vic says fromage like he doesn't like cheese.

“I have an idea,” I say. “We do this at home all the time. Uncle Vic, show us your muscles.”

Uncle Vic raises both arms in the classic strong man pose. Then Moe and I hang from his each of his biceps. Miss Cormier takes a few pictures while Uncle Vic easily holds the pose. Then she takes a couple of Uncle Vic with his friend, Yiannis who’s clearly thrilled to put his only arm around Uncle Vic’s shoulders.

“I think this will make it in the Sunday features supplement,” Miss Cormier says happily. “Thank you all.”

“Ice cream?” Moe asks eagerly.

“Sure, why not?” says Sue. “Let’s put your wagon in my trunk and we’ll all go.”

“Not me, thanks,” says Yiannis. “I’ve got to be going. Nice meeting you, Miss Cormier. Enjoy yourselves, kids and see you tomorrow, Vic.”

“Where shall we go?” asks Miss Cormier.

“This is the time I drink beer,” Uncle Vic says.

So, Miss Cormier drives us to Cote’s Market in the Acre Section for a six-pack and three ice cream push pops which we enjoy in the parking lot. While we’re eating and drinking, Miss Cormier motions for me to walk to the trunk of her car. She opens it, slides her briefcase over and takes a Manilla envelope out of it.

“Here’s everything I could find about Mr. Libby’s murder.”

“Do they know who did it yet?” I ask taking the envelope with my free hand.

“No. I even called my contact on the Lawrence crime desk. They had a couple of suspects. The dead man’s partner, a guy named Bancroft and another guy named Larry Curtin. There are photos of both of them in the envelope. Looks like they cleared Bancroft based on his alibi, a woman named Blanche. Seems like they never had anything solid on the Larry guy; just rumors that he hated Libby. Anyway, the case went cold.”

Before bed that night, I read every word in the file. This was a real-life Perry Mason case. *Pappy and Aunt Blanche didn’t do it; I*

knew that. But, I never saw the guy Larry before. I wish I could go back to Lawrence to solve Mr. Libby's murder. Detective Dahm doesn't seem to want my help here.

* * *

Chapter 17

“Honesty is the best policy.”
— Benjamin Franklin

The next night is Tuesday; poker night at the Desmarais house. When Dave Coutu Sr. arrives, he sees that besides, Bill, Jack, Walt, and Rick, there’s another fella’ at the table. *But, what the hell*, he thinks; *bigger pot for me*. Then the new guy turns around and old man Coutu recognizes Dahm.

“Not sure if I want to play with anyone who’d have me at their table,” says Dave Sr.

“Fellas, what do you say we change the game to liar’s poker since an expert just walked in?” Dahm asks. “Maybe, if we’re lucky, he’ll give us a pointer or two. Or, maybe, if he’s lucky, I won’t take him downtown tonight. What do you say, Mr. Coutu? Are you feeling lucky?”

Dave Sr. doesn’t say anything but he follows Dahm’s lead into a tiny bedroom; Dahm points at the flannel-draped bed. Dave Sr. sits on the edge. The bed springs creak. Dahm shuts the door and the walls of the stuffy room seem to close in. The old man sits with his head down staring at the peeling linoleum floor between his feet.

Dahm says, “Here’s what I know. You lied to me. Your son didn’t give you a ride home the night he was killed. As a matter of fact, after you humiliated him, he left here alone. Now, that makes me wonder why; why would you lie about that? Enlighten me, please.”

Without looking up, the old man says, "I guess I forgot. He usually gives me a ride back to the barracks..."

"You mean, the bunkhouse?" Dahm corrects.

"Yeah, the bunkhouse. I call them the barracks. Anyway, I made a mistake, that's all. Ain't a guy my age allowed to make a mistake?"

Feigning a memory search, the old man's figuring... *I can't admit I took a taxi because he'll just get the taxi cab records.* "Now that I think of it," he decides, "I remember, it was a nice night so I decided to walk."

"The 'barracks' are almost twenty miles up the road. Are you training for a marathon, old man?"

"What's it to ya' if I am?" He challenges. "Besides, I rode my thumb most of the way."

"Who picked you up?"

"Damned if I know. We didn't become pen pals; just two strangers in the night."

"What kind of vehicle; car, truck?" Dahm pushes.

"It was a car, an old sedan; don't know the make; too dark to see the color."

"Didn't happen to see your son's truck on the way?"

"Wish I had," he says head down again. "I would've popped the son-of-a-bitch that shot him."

"Popped him? How?"

"With these guns; pop, pop!" the old man says, shadow boxing. Nodding, Dahm says, "Fearsome, but your .45 would be more lethal, wouldn't it?"

"If I had one, which I don't," the old man says.

"Then you don't mind if I pat you down?"

"Not until you buy me some drinks and dinner, Sonny. Are we done here? My boys out there are dying to give me their money."

Dahm leaves convinced that the old man is hiding something. *But what? I'll bring a search warrant to the next game.*

* * *

The following Sunday morning, I run outside as soon as I hear the newspaper bundles drop. I cut the twine and grab our family paper off the top. Running back inside with it, I scream, “Uncle Vic, Daddy!”

Moe comes running first. While removing the Sunday supplement, I call upstairs,

“Raymond, hurry up paper’s here!”

With Moe, Uncle Vic, Daddy and Raymond gathered around me, I hold open the Sunday supplement to the center story spread.

With a huge grin on his face, Moe says, “That’s me!”

“It sure is and there you are, Uncle Vic!”

Uncle Vic beams while I read the story aloud. Stumped, Raymond and Daddy look at each other. “How did all this happen?” Raymond asks.

Daddy says, “I’m taking this one to read to your mother. Can you get more copies?”

Raymond says, “Sure, I can get us a couple more but how did this story happen?” He asks again.

Uncle Vic starts to say something but I quickly cut in. “This guy,” pointing to one of the pictures with One-arm Yiannis, “told a reporter how strong Uncle Vic is and she decided to write a story about him. Just so happens that that’s the day I took Moe for a wagon ride over the Humming Bridge and we met up with Uncle Vic, Uncle Vic’s friend and Miss Cormier, the reporter who interviewed us for this story.”

“Can I take this to work after you show it to Marguerite?” Uncle Vic asks.

“Mama can keep this one,” Raymond interjects. “Come outside with me, Uncle Vic and I’ll give you a copy you can keep.”

Daddy looks at me and says, “Sometimes truth is even stranger than fiction, isn’t it?”

My face tells Daddy more than my words do.

“Mama’s going to have a lot of questions about this and so far, you haven’t given me many answers.”

“I have to go deliver my papers now, Daddy. Kiss Mama for me. Moe, say good-bye to Daddy. We’ve got to get going.”

* * *

Meanwhile, after Mass, Dahm and Caroline meet Sister Collette at the rectory to go over the religious duties of adoptive parents.

“You both must be baptized and confirmed and I’ll need you to bring in those certificates for your file.”

Dahm speaks up, “That may be a problem, Sister. I really don’t know if I was ever baptized and I’m pretty sure I was never confirmed.”

“Oh! I just assumed. Well, in that case, you’ll have to take adult Catechism classes before you’re eligible for the Sacraments. And, you’ll have to complete all of these steps before we move forward.”

“But I’ve been baptized and confirmed and I take Holy Communion at least once a week,” Caroline says, hopefully.

“That’s supposed to be a given,” Sister Collette says. “And, it must be true of both parents to be in our program.”

Caroline looks crushed. “I’ll do it,” her husband says. “Sign me up, Sister.”

“Well, let’s see....” she says, looking at a calendar. “You’re in luck! Father Morrisette is starting a new course tomorrow night. It’s on Mondays and Tuesdays and runs for twelve weeks. I’ll sign you up, now.”

“I’ve got police business this Tuesday night. But I’ll be there on Monday.”

“Full attendance is mandatory. Being a Catholic parent is a very serious undertaking and to show your commitment, you must give the process top priority. The course prescribed must be adhered to

without deviation. If you're incapable of meeting those requirements, maybe you should reconsider this journey. Some occupations don't lend themselves well to the rigors and demands of parenthood, after all."

Dahm can see Caroline is fighting back tears. Checking his anger, Dahm says, "Unconventional hours go with my job. Would you give a doctor the same lesson in priorities?"

Caroline says, "It's okay, Dennis. Let it go."

"Perhaps that's for the best," says Sister Collette.

On the way home, Caroline fights back tears while looking out the passenger side window. Neither she nor Dennis speak a word on the way home. Once there, Dennis picks up the Sunday paper off their porch. Caroline goes in first, puts on a pot of coffee then starts Sunday dinner while Dennis sits at the table reading the paper.

Wanting to get her mind off the adoption thing, Dahm says, "Well look at this."

Caroline turns to see a picture of a man with a child hanging from each flexed bicep. The opposite page shows another man whose only arm is resting across the broad shoulders of the strong man. "Who am I looking at?"

"The long and short of it is that this guy's name is Victor and the kids are his niece and nephew. Victor lives with his sister, her husband, and their three kids. These are the two youngest. I met the girl, Jackie, when she came to the police station to volunteer an alibi for a suspect in the Coutu murder case. While checking out the alibi, I learned a lot about her and her family. Her mother is extremely ill. Victor, here is a little simple and Jackie, the girl in the picture is a spunky kid who takes care of her little brother and, it seems, her uncle too. She and her older brother, whom I haven't met, share the single largest newspaper route in the city. Now that I think about it, maybe he's our paper boy."

"I think our paper boy's name is Raymond. I never talk to him though because he drops the paper between our screen and front

doors then disappears before I can get out there. I leave the money in an envelope under our welcome mat for him.”

“That must be him,” Dennis says. “His little sister not only provided an alibi for my suspect but she also helped me find a key piece of evidence in the Coutu case.”

“Really? What was that?”

“A one-of-a-kind ring that the murder victim wore. This is where the story takes a strange turn. She actually saw the ring on a chain around the neck of a first grader at her school.”

“Was the first grader the murder victim’s child?”

“No, but the first grader’s boyfriend, the kid who gave her the ring, is.”

“Boyfriend?”

Dahm laughs. “Kids grow fast these days, Caroline.”

“But how did Jackie know the ring belonged to the victim?”

“She saw a picture of it on my desk,” said Dahm not mentioning that Jackie had actually seen the vic wearing it, though, at the time, she didn’t know who he was.

“She sounds like a strange kid,” Caroline says.

“She is, actually. She’s sweet though, and smart.”

Looking at the photo with renewed interest, Caroline says, the little boy’s a cutie, isn’t he?”

“He’s a spitfire like his sister. I deputized him the other day.”

“So, you know them both?”

“It’s almost impossible to see one without the other. She babysits him after school every day.”

“Sound like you have a sweet spot for them.”

“I guess I do.”

Focusing on the girl, Caroline says, “She’s cute too in a plain sort of way. Her hair looks like it hasn’t seen a brush in a while and her school uniform looks too big for her. And, is she wearing two different socks? Those blue eyes, though. They’re everything.” *If she were mine, I’d dress her like a princess.*

Dahm doesn't say anything but Caroline's observations cause him a little pang of guilt. *He never noticed her messy hair and the way she seems to swim in that uniform. More proof that the kid doesn't get a lot of attention. I should have shown her a little more appreciation.*

* * *

Chapter 18

“Jealousy is the jaundice of the soul.”
— John Dryden

That same day at Adele Coutu’s house, the Sunday paper is spread out all over the living room floor. Davey is lifting impressions off the Funnies with soft clay while Adele is checking out Help Wanted ads. She has a big insurance policy on Dave but the insurance company is taking their time holding up their end of the bargain. Every time she calls, they say, “First, of all, please accept our sincere condolences. Then, did you send us his death certificate?”

And each time, she takes a deep breath and says as calmly as possible, “Yes, I did, the first time, three days after his death and the second time, three weeks ago.”

The next step in their dance is always, “Oh I see now. Your claim is being processed, Mrs. Coutu. These things take time to clear.”

Last Friday, Adele suggested, “Why don’t you give my claim to the girl who processes premiums? She works fast.”

“I’ll try to put a rush on it given your circumstances,” the insurance girl says politely.

Adele’s circumstances are that the bank’s patience is being tried as much as hers. She needs a job. When she sees the Cameo’s ad in the newspaper, she figures she’ll give them a try. After all, she waitressed in high school and the Cameo is close to Davey’s school.

The next day, she gets the job. The owner of the Cameo told her Davey could come there after school and stay until the end of her shift as long as he was quiet and didn't run around. When Plouffie first found out who she was, he was furious with his boss for hiring her. He was prepared to hate her guts.

The first part of the week goes by without incident. But today is Thursday, the day Plouffie works through the afternoon. Watching her work for a bit, Plouffie decides to put his misgivings aside. She's friendly to him and to their customers. He suspects that she'd be horrified by her dead husband's loutish behavior toward him. Plouffie likes Davey and offers to help him with his homework. To his surprise, a friendship is developing between him and the widow Coutu.

Adele Coutu soon learns that Leo Boisvert is a regular. Every day, after work, he heads for the last stool at the Cameo counter. He likes his coffee, half-filled and black. After serving him, Adele picks up the tip and the newspaper a customer left on the counter two stools down from him.

Leo's eyes are drawn to the photo in the open Sunday supplement tucked under her arm. "Are you going to put that in the bathroom?" he asks.

"I don't know if we want to encourage our customers to sit on the throne reading," she says with a smile. "We only have the one bathroom."

"Not to read," he counters, "to wipe their asses with. The guy's a few bricks short of a load and that girl is a nosy brat."

Then he points to his empty cup. Adele returns with a pot of coffee and half-fills his cup.

"How do you know them?" she asks.

"We both work at the mill. Someday him and that little shit niece of his will get theirs."

Then he pulls out his flask and tops off his coffee.

* * *

That same afternoon, Dahm decides to drive over to Jackie's house to congratulate the trio on Sue Cormier's story. He finds Jackie and Moe playing catch on the sidewalk with a torn tennis ball.

"It's Detective Dahm!" I say happily.

Rolling down his window, the detective says, "Hi kids! How are you guys doing?"

"We're good. Did you find the killer?"

"Still working on it," the detective says

Doing Kung Fu moves, Moe says, "I kill the killer."

The detective frowns, "Hey now, you're a Deputy. You have to follow the law. That means you can arrest him and put him in jail but you can't kill him."

"But, if he kill me first, I kill him, right?" Moe says chopping the air.

"Self-defense is your right, Deputy. But, if you come ever across any bad guys, you call me and I promise I'll take care of it. Okay?"

"Okay," says Moe.

"As a matter of fact, if you need my help with anything at all, you give me a call at the station and they'll find me, anytime. I mean it; both of you. You got that?"

"Got it," I say.

"Well, I just wanted to come by and tell you what a great picture that was of you guys and your Uncle in the paper."

"Thank you. It was kind of fun reading that story to everyone at home. Some of the kids at school saw it too. I did get in trouble though when Mama found out that I took Moe across the bridge. I'm not allowed to do that anymore."

"Is your Uncle home?" he asks.

"Not yet. He should be here soon. Do you need to talk to him?"

"No, that's fine. Like I said, I just came by to see how you kids were doing and to say great job on the story. You guys are celebrities now."

"Thanks, Detective. Do you want a glass of water or something?" I ask.

“No thanks. I’ve got to get going. But first, do you guys like Animal Crackers?”

Moe and I both nod as the Detective dangles two boxes by their strings. “Here you go.”

“Thank you. Moe, say thank you.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re both welcome. Remember, I’m here for you if ever you need me. All you have to do is call.”

Moe and I wave at him as he drives off. Sitting on our porch steps, we compare animals before we devour them.

“He sure is nice, isn’t he?” I ask Moe. *And his color is even deeper than before.*

“Look, a ephalent,” Moe says popping the pachyderm in his mouth.

* * *

Uncle Vic rides high on the story almost all week. Everyone at work either wants to shake his hand or challenge him. Basking in celebrity, one-arm Yiannis makes a brisk business taking bets and Uncle Vic starts thinking about a buying a bigger boat.

Daddy says the story made Mama happy except she doesn’t want me to take Moe across the bridge anymore. *Miss Cormier was right when she said, “What’s wrong with making your uncle a local hero?” Not a thing.* I admit to myself.

At least that’s what I thought until Friday. After work, instead of hitting the fridge for a beer and saddling up on the kitchen rocker, Uncle Vic walks right past me and Moe. Head down, he immediately goes upstairs. Looking up at the clock, I realize he’s late. I run up the stairs to the closed bathroom door. Putting my ear to it, I hear water running. I knock and wait and knock again.

“Uncle Vic, are you okay?”

The water stops and Uncle Vic opens the door. He had dabbed his face but the clotting remains. I can't tell if he's cradling his arm or holding his side or both.

Shocked, I almost shriek the words, "What happened?"

"Deux bâtards, par-derrière," he says.

Leading him into his bedroom, I say, "Lay down, I'll get you a glass of water."

"Bière," he says, choosing his rocker instead.

"OK, beer; I'll be right back."

Remembering the Detective's words, I run to the phone and call the number he had given me. After a few minutes, I get him on the line.

"Two guys came from behind and beat my Uncle up. I think he needs to go to the hospital."

True to his word, the detective says, "I'm on my way."

When I return to my Uncle with a beer, I drop the needle on the album on his turntable, lower the volume and then I wait with Moe for the doorbell to ring while listening to one of Caruso's unfortunately funereal-sounding selections. But, the music, the beer or both seem to be calming Uncle Vic.

Meanwhile, Moe peppers Uncle Vic with questions; does close-up examinations of his cuts and bruises. More than once, I have to tell Moe to cool it. But it's just all too exciting to Moe who shadow boxes all over Uncle Vic's room to show us what he'll do to Uncle Vic's attackers.

"I kill them," Moe says.

All the while Uncle Vic rocks, drains one beer and asks for two more.

"Please wait until our ride gets here, Uncle Vic. You don't want the hospital to think you were drunk when this happened."

Uncle Vic, as was his way, doesn't argue with me.

Dahm arrives a short time later. With me and Moe in the back seat, he drives Uncle Vic to St. Joseph's, gently probing him for information on the way. By the time we get there, Dahm has a pretty

good idea about what happened and silently resolves to make the perpetrators pay. Moe and I sit in the waiting room until Detective Dahm and Uncle Vic, with his arm in a sling, re-appears.

The Detective and the emergency room doctor come out and explain that Uncle Vic has suffered multiple, superficial injuries; however, his nose is possibly fractured, he has a couple of broken teeth and a right shoulder tear.

“He’ll have to see a dentist and his family doctor for a follow-up visit,” the Doctor says. “But, there doesn’t appear to be any internal injuries. He just needs to take it easy for the next few days.”

“Je dois travailler,” Uncle Vic protests.

“Don’t worry, Vic,” says Dahm. “After I bring you home, I’m going over to the mill to speak to your boss. Don’t worry about your job, when you’re better, it’ll be waiting for you, I promise.”

When we get home, Uncle Vic wants to go back up to his room with a six-pack.

Dahm says to me, “Here’s a prescription the doc gave him for pain. From the looks of him, your Uncle doesn’t seem to need this. But, if he starts complaining, take this to Bailey’s and get it filled for him and don’t let him drink while he’s on them. Okay?”

“Okay,” I say taking the script and a ten-dollar bill from the detective. “Thank you, for everything.”

Just as Dahm turns to leave, a sob surprises me, “This is all my fault, isn’t it? He got jumped because of the Sun story, didn’t he?”

“None of this is your fault, or your Uncle’s,” he says. “The only ones to blame are the two cowards who did this.”

“I think I know who one of them is,” I say.

Nodding, he replies, “I promise. I’ll take care of it.”

Then he hugs me, pulls two pieces of Bazooka Bubble Gum out of his pocket and gives one to me and Moe. After that, Detective Dahm drives straight to the mill. He’s led to the 2nd shift foreman’s office by his badge. He notices the front page of the Sunday supplement posted here and there throughout the old building. The foreman gives him the name and numbers for his first-shift

counterpart and the Personnel Manager. *I'll call them both first thing tomorrow to clear Vic's absence for at least a week.*

On a hunch, he drives back over the bridge to the Cameo where, to his surprise, Adele Coutu is waitressing.

"What can I get 'ya?" she asks him.

"Hello, Mrs. Coutu," he says.

"Call me Adele," she says "and let me ask you again, what can I get you? Coffee and a donut to go?"

"Hold the donut but I'll have a coffee here, if you don't mind. How long have you been working here?" he asks when she returns with a cup and a pot.

"About a week or so," she answers pouring his coffee.

Pointing to the corner booth, he asks, "That Davey over there?"

"Yup, that's my boy. They let me keep him here after school until the end of my shift. Works out for me," she says. "Kinda' need the money until the insurance comes through, you know?"

Dahm nods.

"There's a man who used to come in here often...thought I'd see him today, as a matter of fact; name's Leo. Know him?"

"Yeah, Leo. Comes in every day since I've been here....except for today. Always orders a half-cup of coffee then tops it off with booze from his flask; a real creep, that one."

"What makes you say that?" Dahm asks.

"The other day, Leo went off on that strong guy in the paper. Called him a retard or something like that and said his niece, was a little piece of shit."

"What day was that?"

"Just yesterday."

"Thank you, Adele," Dahm says leaving her a buck tip. "If I can do anything to help you or Davey, let me know."

"Give me back my father's ring," she says.

* * *

The following day, One-arm is furious. Standing on a chair in the lunch room, he says, "For those of you who don't know, our friend, Victor was jumped yesterday right here in the mill. Apparently, after he clocked out, he was lured to the loading dock where he was beaten by two cowards. He'll be out of work for about a week. And I'm passing the hat for him."

As workers dig in their pockets or wallets, the 'hat' is starting to fill with silver coins and a few dollar bills. One-arm takes a look at the collection and says, "Come on, guys, how much did we all win on Victor's back? Now's the time to give back. Dig deep."

After the second go-around, One-arm gets back up on the chair and ceremoniously adds a \$50 bill to the hat. "This is from the man upstairs that signs our checks." That gets their attention. He continues, "How many of you guys think we should use this money to find out who did this to him? We all know he didn't deserve this. He's strong, sure but he doesn't know how to fight. He's as gentle as a baby. Raise your hand if you agree we should put this money up as a reward for turning in the cowards who did this."

Looking around, One-arm sees several hands go up. He stares at those who didn't raise theirs yet until they do.

"Some of you know who did it. The first one to come into my office and sign a piece of paper with the names of both cowards, gets the money. My office will be open until thirty minutes after end of shift. Now, let's get back to work."

Dahm appears during the second collection round. He introduces himself to One-arm as a friend of Victor's family.

"I appreciate your initiative here but I'm afraid you're inviting vigilante justice. How about you pass the word that the LPD is on it and the money will go to Victor after all."

"Are you on it, Detective?" One-arm asks.

"I'll give you their names before end of shift," Dahm promises.

Then Dahm walks himself to the Personnel Office located at the far end of the cavernous mill to speak with Mr. Paul Gaudette, who's expecting him.

“Do you have a name for me?” Dahm asks.

Nodding, Gaudette says, “He’s just a kid...been working with Leo in the Card Room, learning the ropes. The Receiver didn’t want to report it because he jumped off the dock to smoke a cigarette before locking up and clocking out. That’s a big no-no. Anyway, he says he heard a commotion and looked to see what was happening. I’ll let him tell you the rest of his story.”

Then, he dials an internal extension and Dahm hears him say, “The Detective would like a word with you now.”

“Coffee?” offers Gaudette.

“No thanks,” says Dahm.

“What will happen to them?”

“We’ll see.”

When Michael Bergeron arrives, Gaudette introduces him to Dahm. The men shake hands and Dahm says, “Can we have the room?”

“Sure,” Gaudette says taking some papers off his desk and closing the door behind him.

“First of all, Mike, may I call you Mike?”

“Sure.”

“Mike, first of all I want to thank you for coming forward. Have a seat.”

Dahm rolls Gaudette’s chair to the front of the desk facing Mike. “Tell me what you saw.”

Mike says, “Well, it was end of shift. I jumped off the dock to have a cigarette before I locked down for the day. Anyway, while I was down there, I heard a commotion.”

“What did you hear?”

“I’m not sure how to describe it...grunting, I guess. Yeah, no screaming or anything, just kinda’ grunting. Anyway, it didn’t sound good. So I looked in. The Receiving dock comes up to about my chest,” he continues, pointing to the base of his neck, “so I kinda’ rubbernecked my head inside and took a look down the hall that leads to the main building. That’s when I saw someone on the

ground. I couldn't see who it was but someone was standing over the guy with some kind of metal rod, like a spinning rod and there was another guy but I think he was just a look-out. Anyway, he was wailing on the guy...could do some real damage, so I yelled, "Hey! Knock if off!" and that's when I recognized the guy doin' the hurtin'. It was Leo, Leo Boisvert, no doubt about it."

"And the look-out?" Dahm asks.

"Don't know his name. He's kinda' new but I made a point of walking by Leo's card station on the way over here to be sure that the kid I saw was the kid working with Leo. He is. Leo did it while the kid watched."

"Thank you," Dahm says. "One last thing....what day and time did you see this?"

"Ummm, yesterday; a few minutes after end of shift, so about 3:05 or so."

"Thank you. We're done here," says Dahm.

Machines stop whirring when Dahm cuffs both men and frog-marches them through the Card Room. When they walk by One-arm Yiannis, Dahm says, "The money goes to Vic."

At the station, Dahm charges Leo with Aggravated Assault with a Deadly Weapon and his side-kick, a kid name Lucien Pacquin, with Simple Assault. For his one phone call, Leo calls his wife Louise who is in the process of emptying yet another wine bottle that will eventually be added to her collection. Leo's telling his wife to look up criminal lawyers in the Yellow Pages and hire a Canuck-sounding one.

Louise locks on a few words....arrested, deadly, weapon. She drops the phone in the middle of his instructions and, bottle in hand, heads toward the bathroom. In the medicine cabinet are her Meproamate pills. With one hand firmly grasping her wine bottle, Louise is having trouble trying to open the prescription bottle. In that struggle, she spills wine onto the floor. Finally, armed with a less than half the bottle of wine and the open bottle of pills, she intends to play out the romantic vision in her addled mind. She'll

be found on her bed with her long, red hair fanned out across her white satin pillow. She'll call the police just before laying down and that handsome Detective Dahm will find her, like a ginger sleeping beauty. Heading out, Louise slips on the spilled wine and crashes her head on the white porcelain toilet. Her blood-blackened red hair fans out across the dirty linoleum bathroom floor.

* * *

Chapter 19

“Spirit is impervious to illness.”
— Marianne Williamson

Marguerite, whose courage and persistence more than doubled her life expectancy, is about to throw in the towel. The injected poisons are killing all that’s left of her. Nevertheless, at 5:30 every evening, her sweet nurse cranks up the head of her hospital bed and props her up against punched pillows. Then she swings the arm-table over Marguerite’s bed, pulls up its mirrored tray and watches as her patient expertly applies camouflage in her war against a deadly adversary.

Her husband, Ray, driving to Mass General after a long day’s work, wipes the mist from his weary eyes. She’s given him much more than he’d signed up for and, for that, he’s grateful. But, like a dangerous intruder, hopelessness threatens to breach his defenses. Nevertheless, at 5:45 every evening, he rides in on his big, white smile ready to rally the bravest warrior he’d ever known.

But, tonight is different. When he arrives, her once beautiful face is tilted sideways against her chest. He stands paralyzed in the doorway until she rouses and greets him with a smile. He runs to her, buries his head in the crook of her neck and dry-heaves dread from the bottom of his gut. She holds him until his body loosens. Then, she takes his face in her hands and says, “It’s time.”

He nods as she continues, “I had a long talk with the head of my medical team today. I asked him, ‘If I were your wife, would you want me here, miles away from you and our kids? Would you tell me to hang in there? Would you tell me it was worth it?’”

“What did he say?” asks Ray.

“Well, he didn’t really answer. He stood at the foot of my bed for quite a while. Then he took my chart, wrote something in it and put it back. Next, he came around to shake my hand and then he left.”

“What did he write?” asks Ray.

“DAMA”

“What does that mean?”

“Discharged Against Medical Advice; right after he left, the nurse came in and told me. She also said that he wants me to talk it over with you. If we decide that I should stay in the trial, I still can. But, if we think I should quit, he won’t try to talk me out of it but the record has to show that I left on my own.”

“What do you want to do, Honey?” Ray asks.

“I want to come home.”

Choking back tears, Ray takes off his paper mask and climbs into bed beside her. Spooning and spent, they soon fall asleep. Before leaving for the night, Marguerite’s second-shift nurse peeks into her room. Seeing them, breaks her heart. She tip-toes over to Ray and gently taps his shoulder. Startled, he opens his eyes and hears her whisper, “Do you plan to stay the night?”

Ray shakes his head. “I can’t.”

He gently extricates himself and walks toward the door. At the threshold, he turns, stares at his sleeping wife and leaves.

Ray’s almost home when a newly licensed teen, driving about 80 miles an hour, loses control on a steeply-graded overpass bridge. The teen crosses into the narrow median, becomes airborne and lands on oncoming traffic on the newly built Lowell Connector.

When Dahm gets home that same night, he finds Caroline asleep on the couch, local news on TV. The anchor cuts to a live look

at the “fatal accident on the Lowell Connector.” She cues the live shot where two casualties, presumably thrown out of one or both cars, lie in body bags on the highway. The third victim, she explains, is in an ambulance on his way to St. Joseph’s Hospital.

Dr. Repuccini is called. One of his patients has been in a life-threatening accident. When he arrives at the hospital, the emergency room Doctor fills him in. He signs off on all trauma protocols already set in motion. His patient is in bad shape but in good hands. When Ray is settled into ICU, Dr. Repuccini goes to his office in the medical arts building across the street, sits at his desk and puts his head in his hands. *Who do I call?*

Helplessness angers and exhausts him. Removing his jacket and loosening his tie, he lies down on his office couch. A few hours after dawn, noting the office is unlocked, his nurse gingerly enters and finds him asleep. Her exaggerated throat clearing wakes him. She turns to make coffee but he stops her. Bringing her up to date on the sad events of the night before, he asks her advice. She suggests they contact the family’s parish priest. From Marguerite’s address on file, she determines their church to be St. Louis-de-France.

As soon as Dr. Repuccini’s nurse hangs up with the priest, the office phone rings. It’s Mass General informing Dr. Repuccini that Marguerite elected to opt out of the trial. Saddened, the nurse makes arrangements to have Marguerite transported via ambulance to St. Joseph’s where she’ll be put on a palliative regimen.

Thirty minutes later, feeling the burden of the tragedy, the priest visits Ray in Intensive Care. He gives him the Last Sacrament and then, praying for Divine inspiration, he asks God to help him administer to the tragic family.

* * *

Uncle Vic is the first to wake. Dressed for work, he goes downstairs where Ray always has the coffee percolating. But, this morning, he can’t smell the brew. Confused, he goes to the kitchen

and sits in his rocking chair. Then, he gets up and looks in at his brother-in-law's neatly made bed. With alarmingly rising awareness, he looks in on each of his nephews and his niece, waking all three.

"Daddy must have stayed with Mama last night, that's all. I'll make the coffee," I say.

While Raymond and I are questioning who we should call, there's a strong knock on our door. Raymond answers it.

"You must be Raymond," Detective Dahm says.

"Who are you?" he asks.

"Detective Dennis Dahm, LPD; I'm a friend of Jackie's; may I come in?"

"Detective! Why are you here?" I ask anxiously.

"Your father's been in an accident. He's at St. Joseph's Hospital."

"What happened?" Raymond and I ask in unison.

"Another driver drove off the Connector and landed on your Dad's car. We're pretty sure he was on his way home."

"How bad is..."

Dahm cuts me off. "Your Dad's in the ICU. He's getting the best care. I'm sure he'll be alright."

"Does our Mom know what happened?" Raymond asks.

"I don't know."

"Well, we have to tell her," I say.

"I'll take you to see her after school," Dahm says.

"All the way to Boston?" I ask.

"Is that where she is?" Dahm asks.

"Yes, she's enrolled in a trial at a Boston Hospital," I say.

"I don't even know which one," Raymond adds. To me, he asks, "Do you?"

Head down, I admit I don't know either.

Dahm says. "Don't worry. I'll look into it. Vic, do you need a ride to work?"

"I walk."

"Okay, listen up. The best thing we can do is keep our routine. That means you kids go to school as usual, Vic you go to work and

we'll all meet here afterward. Who usually takes care of Moe during the day?"

"Aunt Adeline used to but it's too much for her now," I say.

"I go to work with Daddy," Moe says. "I ride in the truck and I help him with the crackers."

"Okay, then, I guess you'll ride with me today."

"What's the joke today?" Moe asks.

"What?" the detective asks looking at me.

"Every day Daddy has a new joke to tell his customers," I explain.

"What's the joke?" Moe asks.

"We're not going to do your Daddy's job, buddy. We're going to do my job," the detective says.

"That's a good point," I say. "Does Daddy's boss know he's in the hospital?"

"I'll call him now," Raymond says.

Moe runs out of the kitchen and comes right back with the LPD badge Dahm had given him.

"Put this on me."

"How about you get dressed first?" I say.

Tousling Moe's hair, Dahm adds, "You don't want to be known as the Pajama Detective, do you?"

After Vic and the kids leave, Dahm drives Moe to his own house. "Mrs. Dahm is going to keep you company for a while today. She's really nice, she loves kids and she loves to bake cookies. What do you say?"

"Funny name, dumb."

"Oh, it is, is it? Dahm's my name, too, you know; if you tell my wife her name is dumb, she might be sorry she married me."

"I won't say it," Moe promises.

Hearing her husband enter, Caroline calls from upstairs, "I'll be right down, Dennis. Is everything alright?"

"Fine," Dahm replies.

Moe follows him to the den where, from the middle drawer of his desk, he pulls out a deck of playing cards. Then he leads Moe to the kitchen where he pulls two chairs side by side, opens the deck and starts building a house of cards. Moe watches as he carefully stacks one layer on top of another until he has a 3-story house. Then, he invites Moe to “huff and puff and blow it all down!”

Delighted to accommodate, Moe does.

Then, Dahm says, “Now, pick up all the cards and build one.”

Accepting the challenge, Moe goes to it. Dahm meets Caroline at the bottom of the stairs and points to Moe in the kitchen.

“That’s Moe. The girl, Jackie I told you about, he’s her little brother. Their parents are both in the hospital. From what I understand, they’re both in pretty bad shape. Can you watch him today?”

“Don’t they have any other family?” she asks.

“We’re working on that,” he says. “I told him you like to bake cookies.”

“Like you like to build houses?” she teases. “He’s adorable. Sure, I’ll watch the little guy. We’ll have fun.”

“You’re the best,” he says. “Come on, I’ll introduce you two.”

“Moe, this is my wife, Mrs. Dahm. She’ll look after you today.”

“That’s a good-looking A-frame, Moe,” Caroline says.

“It’s a house,” Moe says. “But, you’re not dumb.”

Dahm laughs and Caroline looks at them quizzically. “Inside joke?” she asks.

“Yup, kid’s a character. Have fun, you two, gotta go.”

* * *

Everyone follows Dahm’s plan except me. Instead of going to school, I walk to St Joseph’s Hospital while constantly checking over my shoulder for the Detective’s car.

When I finally get there, I sneak in through the Outpatient Department. Walking past Admitting, I hear someone say my mother's name.

"She's a transfer. Dr. Repuccini's patient. She should be here in about thirty minutes or so."

They must be bringing Mama here to see Daddy. That means she must be better!

After sneaking a quick look down both sides of the aisle, I dash toward the Exit sign, pull the heavy door open a sliver and slide into the stairwell. *Mama's been in the ICU a few times and I'm pretty sure I remember where it is.* Racing up the stairs to the fourth floor, I push the door open, peek first, then venture out into the quiet hall.

Facing closed double doors and a "Do Not Enter" sign, I enter anyway. Encircled by an island command and control center, a nurse looks up and sees me. Hastily looking around, I see that only four of the six surrounding beds are occupied and only one by a man. From opposite directions, the nurse and I quietly but briskly walk toward him.

"Is this your Daddy?" she asks in a voice as warm as her color.

I nod. The nurse puts her arm around my shoulder and says, "He's in a very deep sleep but he might be able to hear you."

In a thin voice, I whisper, "I'll take care of Moe, Daddy. I promise."

The Nurse asks, "Anything else?"

I can't get anything else out so I just shake my head. We both leave his bedside.

* * *

Having already given Ray the Last Rites, Father Morrisette goes downstairs to meet Marguerite's ambulance at the entrance. After a brief exchange, he follows the orderlies pushing her gurney to her room. When she's in her bed hooked up to an I.V., the nurses

tell the priest he has a few minutes before the medication Repuccini ordered knocks her out for a while.

Telling Marguerite about Ray is one of the hardest conversations Father Morissette's ever had. He prays with her until she slips into a drug-induced sleep. He's coming out of her room when he catches me hugging the wall, peeking in the open doorways of each patient room. I freeze when I see him. He motions for me to come to him.

"I just left your mother. She's sleeping now."

"Is she better? Did the hospital in Boston help her?"

"All we can do is hope and pray. Did anyone talk to you about your father?"

"Detective Dahm came to our house early this morning to tell us about the accident."

Father Morissette says, "The best thing you can do for your parents is to let me drive you back to school. That's what they would want you to do."

"No thank you, Father."

"Do you know that you're breaking the law right now? You're a truant. Do you know what that means?" the priest asks.

I nod but he doesn't scare me a bit. His glow is very warm.

"You either come with me and go back to school or I'll call the Truant Officer who'll come and pick you up."

"I'm not leaving until I see my Mother."

Sighing, Father Morissette says, "I'll let you peek in to see her if you promise not to wake her. But, your father is in the ICU, that's a separate part of the hospital where they don't allow any visitors at all."

I don't tell him that's not true; instead, I follow him back down the hall to Mama's room. The priest puts his finger to his lips and motions for me to enter quietly. I creep up to Mama's bed and stare at her for a few minutes. Even though I'm used to seeing her like that, a heavy sadness overcomes me. I feel like someone is standing on my chest. On a river of tears, I wash out of the room.

Wiping away my tears I sob, "I can't go to school today."

Father Morissette puts his hand on my shoulder and says, “Of course you can’t. Not until you have breakfast. You hungry? How about we get some breakfast first? Did you ever have a toasted bacon sandwich?”

I shake my head no.

Winking, the priest says, “It’s so good it’s sinful unless you eat it with a priest.”

The two of us take the elevator to the basement cafeteria. I wait at a table looking idly through my school bag while Father Morissette orders two toasted bacon sandwiches with mayonnaise and two chocolate milks.

I eat one-quarter of the bacon sandwich then excuse myself. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

“I’ll be here,” the priest says. After a while, Father Morissette begins to suspect that he’s been ditched. He dumps their trays in the garbage receptacle and leaves the cafeteria.

Heading back toward the elevator, the priest thinks, *I bet she went back to her mother’s room.* The elevator door opens to Detective Dahm stepping back to let the priest off.

“Have you seen Jackie?” The priest asks him.

“What do you mean? She’s at school, isn’t she?” Dahm asks.

“She skipped school. She came to visit her parents. I told her I’d drive her back.”

“Well?” Dahm questions.

“Well, after I let her peek in at her mother,” Father Morissette sheepishly explains, “I took her to the cafeteria where, after eating half her breakfast, she told me she had to go to the bathroom. After a while, I realized she ditched me. I figured she came back up here to see if her mother was awake yet.”

“Her mother’s here?” asks the Detective. “The kids told me she was in Boston.”

“She was. They transferred her back here this morning. Apparently, last night she and Ray agreed to drop out of the trial after the doctors told Marguerite they weren’t able to do anything

further for her. Ray was on his way home from Boston when the accident happened.”

“My God, hasn’t this family suffered enough?” asks Dahm. “Sorry, Father; but those poor kids and Marguerite! Where is she?”

“Down the hall that way.”

They look in on Marguerite but she’s still sleeping and there’s no sign of Jackie.

“Do you know where the Dad is?” Dahm asks.

Father Morissette nods, “ICU, two floors up. I’ll go check.”

“Meet me back here,” the Detective says.

Dahm waits in the corner of Marguerite’s room. If she wakes up, he’s going to offer to watch over her kids temporarily. But, she doesn’t awaken.

When Father Morissette comes back without Jackie, they decide to go back to the cafeteria.

“Oh, yeah, she came back here; looking for you, I guess,” the aide replies to Father Morissette. “There was no one else here. It’s pretty slow here between breakfast and lunch.”

“Did she say anything?” Detective Dahm asks.

“Not to me,” the aide answers. “She just looked at the empty tables and left.”

“Maybe she started walking home,” the Detective says. “Anyway, I’m sure she’ll be there by the time school’s out. She’s a reliable kid. She’ll be there to take care of her little brother.”

Meanwhile, in the hospital chapel, I reluctantly uncurl myself from the globe-shaped bottom of the statue of the Blessed Mother in plenty of time to merge with the after-school foot traffic emptying out of St. Louis-de-France. *I promised Daddy I’d take care of Moe.*

At home are Moe, Detective and Mrs. Dahm. Uncle Vic is followed by Raymond who took two buses home from high school. After introducing his wife to them, the Detective says he has work to do and leaves. “I’ll be back for dinner,” he promises.

“Well then, we better get started,” says Caroline. “Jackie, would you show me around your kitchen, please?”

While Raymond does homework, I help Caroline prep the groceries she brought with her. Uncle Vic rocks by the kitchen window and, when they all hear the squeak of the truck brakes and the thud of the newspaper drop, Raymond, Moe and I go outside to deliver our newspapers.

Daddy's accident is in is on the front page. A photo shows that his car was flattened. Raymond and I each read from our own newspaper.

"Let's not bring one inside," Raymond says.

"Uncle Vic doesn't need to see this," I agree.

Oblivious to us, Moe climbs in the wagon and says, "Let's go!"

Pulling him down the sidewalk, I ask, "Do you like Mrs. Dahm?"

Nodding, Moe says, "She gave me ice cream; and, she's not dumb."

"What did you do this afternoon?"

Shrugging his shoulders, Moe says, "Made paper houses, watched TV. When's Daddy coming home?"

"Soon," I tell him.

After papers, we gather around the table for dinner. Uncle Vic looks from his plate to Caroline's face like a hungry dog willing his owner to fill his empty bowl. I stab my chop with my fork and add it to the one already on Uncle Vic's plate. Then, I cut up Moe's chop and steal a small bite. This bit of theater does not go unnoticed by Caroline.

Dahm is the first to break the silence at their dinner table, "I talked to your Aunt Margie, today. She says she lives close to Keith Academy and that you can stay with her. What do you think, Raymond?"

"Give up my paper route?" Raymond asks.

"Yeah, you'd have to suspend it for a while," Dahm concedes.

"I can do it," I say.

"No, you can't," Raymond says.

"Yes, I can," I insist.

“Not an option,” Dahm says. “But, maybe you could keep your piece of the route. What do you say, Raymond? Do you want me to talk to them? Figure it out?”

“Let me think about it,” Raymond says.

“No rush; delicious dinner, Honey. Thank you.”

“Jackie helped me prep,” Caroline says.

After dinner is cleared away, everyone falls into their usual routines. Uncle Vic goes to his room to rock fast and loud with Mario Lanza. I make Moe take a bath then, clad in our pajamas, we both knock on Raymond’s door.

“Are you gonna go live with Aunt Margie?” I ask.

“I’m not sure yet. I don’t really want to leave you guys, but I’m just not sure.”

While the kids are upstairs discussing their situation, Dahm and his wife are downstairs discussing theirs.

“Victor eats enough for three grown men, hardly talks but has an operatic voice that shakes the house.”

“He has the strength of three grown men, too,” adds Dahm.

“The two oldest seem so much older than their years, the boy, so serious and the girl is a mother to her little brother and her uncle. They’re an odd lot, aren’t they? What’s going to happen to them?”

“I’m not sure. I hope at least one of their parents gets well enough to come home to them.”

“You look tired, Dennis. You need to get a good night’s sleep.”

“I’m fine. It’s just that I can’t seem to square away things at work and now things at home are a little out of control too,” he admits. “Sorry I brought you into this mess.”

“This too shall pass,” Caroline says.

Dennis nods, “But for now, at least, one of us is going to have to stay here.”

“Maybe I can take Moe....” Caroline starts.

“No!” I scream from the stairwell. “You can’t take Moe.”

From the bottom of the stairs, Caroline explains, “I just meant overnight.”

Abruptly turning on my heel, I mow Moe down. "Sorry."

Then I lead Moe into our room. "Do you want to sleep at Mrs. Dahm's house tonight?"

"Are you coming, too?"

"No, I have to stay here with Raymond and Uncle Vic."

"I want to stay with you guys," Moe says.

"Okay," I say hugging my little brother.

Then, I pick out my American History book and read the bookmarked chapter with enough drama to keep Moe interested. Closing the book at chapter's end, I silently wish the Dahms would go home so I can go back in the kitchen to make the lunches.

In the kitchen, Caroline says, "Well, we could stay here tonight, but where? We can't sleep in their parent's room."

"No, we can't," Dennis agrees. "How about if I talk to Jackie... convince her to let you take Moe to our house, just for tonight, and I'll stay here, on the couch. I think Raymond will go along with that."

Nodding, Caroline says, "I'll take Moe to church tomorrow morning and light a candle for them."

Saying, "I have to make the lunches," I march into the kitchen, take a loaf of Sunbeam bread out the freezer and the store-bought carton of corton from the fridge.

"Moe doesn't want to go to your house tonight. Thank you anyway but you guys can go home now."

"No, I'm afraid we can't," Dahm says. "We can't leave you guys without adult supervision."

"Uncle Vic's an adult," I point out.

"I'll get a taxi home; you stay here," Caroline says to her husband. "We'll take it one day at a time."

The next day, Dahm wakes with a stiff neck. The couch he'd slept on wasn't meant to be. Irritated, he watches over the irregular household as they go about their daily routines.

“Jackie, I want you to promise me that you’ll go to school and stay there all day until school lets out,” Dahm says. “No leaving early either; now, promise me.”

“I don’t want to,” I admit.

“I understand that but you have to understand that I’m an officer of the law and truancy is against the law. I can’t let that happen.”

“Okay, I promise that I’ll go and stay today.”

“Thank you,” Dahm says, making his way to our wall phone. He dials, waits a few minutes and says, “It’s Dahm. Anything earth shattering going on?”

“Depends whether or not you think a call from a Mrs. Robitaille is earth shattering,” says Sergeant Moody.

“Did she leave a message?” Dahm asks looking over at us.

“Just wants you to give her a call.”

“I’m two minutes from there. I’ll swing by on my way in,” Dahm says before hanging up.

The detective, Moe and I are the last ones to leave the house. I watch as Moe happily climbs into the detective’s car. Waving at them, I slowly walk to school bitterly reminding myself that I had promised to do so.

After a short ride, the detective and Moe arrive at Mrs. Robitaille’s house. Opening the door she says, “I don’t mean to be a bother but I’m worried something’s wrong at my neighbor’s house.”

“It’s no bother, Mrs. Robitaille,” the detective assures. “Which neighbor?”

“The Boisverts,” she says pointing across the street. “I don’t think Leo lives there anymore and it’s been a while since I’ve seen Louise too. I’ve tried calling but the phone always rings busy. Their mail box is so full that some of it spilled out and the wind took it to the street. I picked it up and rang the doorbell but nobody answered.”

Knowing Leo’s in prison, Dahm figures that Louise is just staying with family somewhere. But, still...

“Can Assistant Detective, Moe stay here with you while I check across the street?”

“Oh, sure. But wait. Let me give you their mail first. Detective Moe, you come right in, Honey. Do you like coffee cake?”

“I like cake but Jackie doesn’t let me have coffee.”

* * *

Across the street, Dahm rings the bell a few times before he walks around to the back. He knocks loudly on the back door and peers in windows. Alarmed, he puts his shoulder to the door and rams it open.

“Louise, it’s Detective Dahm, are you home?” he calls loudly.

Following the dreadful smell, a little piece of his heart breaks when he sees her. There’s no doubt she’s been dead for a while. He goes into the den, picks up the dangling handset and clicks the plunger to get a dial tone. He calls the station first. Then he calls Mrs. Robitaille who’s able to keep her composure for Moe’s sake. She agrees to keep Moe while he waits for the M.E. Once his presence is no longer required at the sad scene, Dahm goes across the street to get Moe. Anticipating that he won’t have time to come in, Mrs. Robitaille hands him a huge hunk of the cake, wrapped in plastic wrap.

“Take it home with you and feel free to bring Moe by anytime. I’ll be happy to look after him. He’s good company.”

Dahm drops Moe and the cake off at his house where Caroline greets them warmly.

“We’ll take a walk to Church today and light a candle for your parents, okay?”

Moe likes the idea of lighting those long matches.

* * *

Chapter 20

“The idea of evil is always subject to denial as a coping mechanism.”
—John Bradshaw

Jackie’s expanded paper route includes Adele Coutu’s house. Excited that their paper is now being delivered by a girl and, one he actually knows, Davey insists Jackie come inside to meet his mother’s *“fat friend.”*

I allow Davey to lead me into the kitchen, and I’m gobsmacked to see Penguin Man at the stove. Checking the urge to greet him as an old friend, my eyes fall on an open box of Bradt’s Soda Crackers and I lose it. I try but fail to beat my tears to the door.

Penguin Man’s surprise at my outburst quickly gives way to compassion and he opens his arms to me. Allowing myself to be engulfed, my sobs are absorbed by his mass. Davey and Adele stand there, bewildered.

“What’s going on?” Adele asks.

“She’s our new paper girl,” Davey answers innocently. “Sometimes she watches my class for Sister Celeste.”

“Ronnie?” Adele inquires.

With a shoulder shrug, Ronnie indicates he doesn’t know.

“What’s wrong, Honey?” she asks putting her hand on my shoulder.

Pulling myself away from Penguin Man, I wipe my eyes and nose with the back of my hands and say, "I'm sorry. I need to go home now."

"What's your name, Honey? Adele prods.

"Her name's Jackie," Davey says.

"Tell us what's wrong, Jackie. Maybe we can help," Penguin Man says.

Looking at them with a newspaper ink-stained face, I say, "I'm just tired. I better get home before it gets too dark."

"Where's home?" Adele asks.

"Ludlam Street."

"That's on the way to your house, right, Ronnie?" Adele asks.

Nodding, Penguin Man says, "You're mine and my mother's paper girl, too, aren't you? My mother says you always knock on the door and hand her the newspaper because you know she can't bend down to get it. Isn't that right?"

I nod.

Do you, by any chance, know Detective Dahm?"

Flushed, I say, "Yes, he's a friend of mine."

"And so am I," Penguin Man says extending his hand. "You're my alibi, aren't you?"

I can't seem to find my voice.

Not wanting to further embarrass me, Ronnie changes the subject, "Is your father's name Ray?"

Like a mute, I nod again.

"Your dad's a really nice guy," he says. "I know him from the Cameo Diner. I'm a cook there and your dad is one of my vendors. He always comes in with a new joke; makes my day. I was so sorry to hear about his accident. I hope he'll be alright."

"Thank you," I finally manage to say.

Adele's confusion lifts. She had briefly met Ray at the Cameo before his accident and Ronnie had told her about the family. Her eyes go to the Bradt's crackers on her counter and she realizes that might have been what triggered me.

“I’m sure your Dad will be okay,” she says comfortingly. “Why don’t we give you a ride home? We were just getting ready to take Ronnie home anyway.”

“Okay, thanks.”

In the car, Adele breaks the silence, “Ronnie came over to teach me how to make his delicious meatloaf. He says the secret to it is your Dad’s crackers.”

“Can’t make it without ‘em,” Penguin Man agrees.

“I like them with peanut butter,” says Davey.

“Me too,” I whisper.

Staring at the back of his mommy’s head, I smile sympathetically at Davey. *Too bad his mommy is so dim.*

* * *

Chapter 21

“If you have an impulse to kindness, act on it.”
— Douglas Coupland

On Dahm’s agenda today is a visit to the hospital where he hopes to get some direction and permissions from Marguerite about her children. Relieved to find her awake and speaking with Father Morissette, he stops in the doorway and waits to be acknowledged.

Noticing him, Marguerite motions for him to come in. Father Morissette turns, acknowledges him and says, “She wants me to take her to see Ray.”

“I’ll go get a wheelchair.” Dahm says.

At the nurse’s station, the charge nurse calls ICU. “We have a patient here who wants to visit her husband, your patient. Name is Ray...” Cut-off, the nurse smiles at Dahm and nods. “Okay, thanks. We’ll be up in just a few.”

To Dahm, she says, “She thinks it might be good for him to hear his wife’s voice.”

Dahm returns to Marguerite’s room followed by a nurse’s aide pushing an empty wheelchair. The aide expertly maneuvers the chair making it as easy as possible for Marguerite, with the aide’s help, to lower herself into it.

Father Morissette puts his hand on Marguerite's shoulder and says, "I'll leave you in good hands, Marguerite. I have to visit another patient but I'll be back tomorrow."

Dahm follows the aide who wheels Marguerite up to ICU. At Ray's bedside, Marguerite stands to embrace him over the guard rail. When she falters, Dahm quickly braces her. The aide lowers the rail and she and Dahm help Marguerite inch over to Ray's side.

Taking Ray's hand in hers, Marguerite says, "Hi Ray, it's me. Do you hear me, Ray? Squeeze my hand if you do."

Marguerite, the detective and the aide wait in hopeful silence. A minute or so passes. Marguerite continues, "That's okay, Ray. I know you can hear me. I want you to meet Detective Dennis Dahm. He's been a very good friend to our family. Thanks to him, the kids and Victor are fine but they need you. They need their Daddy. Get better, Ray. Come back to us. I love you."

Physically drained but not wanting to leave, Marguerite tries to climb into bed beside her unresponsive husband. With Dahm's help, she manages to do so. The extraordinary ICU nurse pretends not to notice. Dahm puts the guard rail back up, excuses himself and quietly retreats. Teary-eyed, the aide stands sentry at the foot of the bed. After several minutes, the aide motions for Dahm to come back. Together, they put Marguerite back in the wheelchair.

Exhausted and back in her bed, Marguerite thanks the aide who takes the wheelchair back. Finally finding himself alone with Marguerite, Dahm removes a folded sheet of paper from his breast pocket and hands it to her. Holding back tears, she reads and signs the document giving temporary custody of her children to the detective and his wife with the understanding that they will also look after her brother, Victor.

"Get some rest now," Dahm says folding and returning the document to his jacket.

* * *

After school, Mama calls home. She urges Raymond to take Aunt Margie up on her offer and temporarily move in with his cousins; she tells Jackie to let Detective and Mrs. Dahm help take care of Moe and she tells Moe to be a good boy. Promising to call later to speak with Uncle Vic, she tells them all she loves them very much.

Dennis and Caroline temporarily move in with Victor, Jackie and Moe. Dahm makes some discreet inquiries at the Lowell Five Cent Savings Bank and discovers that Ray had mortgaged the house to the hilt to pay for Marguerite's medical expenses which, he himself is now compounding daily.

Most mornings, I go to school but I rarely stay through the entire day. At lunchtime, I head for the hospital chapel where I pray at the feet of the Blessed Mother. *After all, what could be more important than praying for Mama and Daddy? Besides, my promise to Detective Dahm was only good for one day.*

Every night after supper, Caroline stations herself at the bottom of the staircase to listen to Victor sing. After a few nights of this, she makes a plan.

"Victor, may I talk to you for a few minutes?" she calls through his closed door.

Victor opens the door. Caroline enters the tidy room and sits on his bed. "Victor, how would you like to sing at Church?"

Victor shrugs. "I don't know any church songs," he says.

"May I play this album?" she asks.

Victor gets up, lifts the stylus and replaces his album with hers. Together, they listen to Caruso's Ave Maria. Tears run down both their cheeks. When the song's over, Victor gets up and plays it again. The third time, he sings it with Caruso.

"Beautiful," she says.

Victor's pleased. He plays it several more times before going to bed and he sings it over the Humming Bridge to his beloved, late mother every day on his walk to work. Victor the Strong Man becomes known at the mill as the Singing Strong Man.

After a few weeks, Caroline asks, “Victor, would you like to sing the Ave Maria at Sunday mass sometime?”

Uncle Vic says, “You mean play my album and sing like I do at home?”

“Maybe you could practice with Mrs. Dionne, the organist. I already talked to her about it and she said she’d love to accompany you.”

“I don’t want to practice with all those people in church,” Uncle Vic worries.

“You’d practice on Saturday afternoons when the church is empty,” Caroline says.

“I used to go fishing with Raymond on Saturdays and now I don’t,” Uncle Vic says.

“You want to give it a try then?” Caroline asks.

“Oui,” Uncle Vic nods.

* * *

Chapter 22

“Evil, when we are in its power, is not felt as evil, but as a necessity, even a duty.”

— Simone Weil

For the next couple of weeks, old man Coutu stays away from the Desmarais poker games. During that time, Dahm becomes pretty friendly with the old timers, especially when he brings pizza in exchange for their promise to call him if Coutu ever shows up.

During the course of his on-going investigation, Dahm also makes several visits to the Cameo for coffee and chats with Adele. Something is different about Adele’s attitude toward her late husband’s father. It softened, somehow. *Maybe time tenderized her*, he muses. In any event, she says she hasn’t seen him since the time he secretly gave Davey the dragon ring.

Occasionally, with her permission, Dahm brings little Davey a brown bag of penny candy. Today, he has a grab bag for Davey and an evidence bag for his mother.

“You mean I can finally have it?” she asks.

“It’s yours to keep for Davey, just like your father wanted,” he promises.

“It’s about damn time,” she says putting the ring in her apron pocket. Then, it hits her, “Does that mean you found his killer?”

“Wish I could say I had. You know, I’ll never stop looking for your husband’s killer, Adele. I promise you that.”

Adele looks at him sphinx-like.

I bet she’s a better poker player than her husband. “Can I get a coffee?”

Dahm brings his freshly poured coffee over to Davey’s booth and places a box of candy cigarettes in front of the boy.

Smiling, Davey grabs the box, shakes one out and puts it between his lips.

“Thanks,” he says. “Look, I can talk with it in my mouth just like Pèpère does.”

“Cool trick,” Dahm says.

Davey nods happily.

“Do you ever share your candy with your Pèpère?”

With a sheepish look, Davey says, “I meant to.”

“So your Pèpère comes to see you?”

“I guess so,” Davey says glancing over at his mom.

“When do you see him?”

Davey whispers conspiratorially, “He sometimes sleeps over but we don’t talk about that.”

Adele doesn’t like the look of the whole scene. A cigarette hanging from her son’s mouth, looking like his dad, sharing secrets with the detective.

“The boy has homework to do,” she says.

Looking at Davey, Dahm says, “You heard your mother, better get to it.”

* * *

That night, Dahm stakes out the Coutu house. Sitting alone in his car in the dark, he thinks about Caroline and Sister Collette. *I could never have made it to all those classes and meetings.* Then he thinks about Jackie and her family. *Caroline is in love with the little guy, but she says Jackie is more stand offish; not to me, though. I’m beginning to*

think of her as my own little girl. Pouring coffee from his thermos, he sees a man approaching the house, *finally!* Grabbing his binoculars, he confirms it's old man Coutu. He continues watching as Davey opens the door for him and he enters.

Good time for a surprise visit. He walks over to the house. Looking through the front window, he sees the three of them, beer, wine and a liter of Coca Cola in the middle of the kitchen table. *Looks like a family celebration of some kind.*

He rings the bell and hears rats scurry. "Stay here, Davey!" he hears Adele shout.

He rings again. This time, Adele comes to the door. "Detective, twice in one day. How did I get to be so lucky? Are you here with news about Dave's killer?"

"Could be," he says. "What do you say we ask your father-in-law?"

"I told you....."

"Hi Detective!" Davey interrupts delightedly. "Did you bring me anything?"

"Sure did," he says pulling out a plastic badge from his pocket. Dahm pins it on Davey while Adele looks on.

"Now, for your first official act as my deputy, will you please tell your Pèpère I'd like to see him?"

Davey runs down the hall loudly calling, "Pèpère!" He stops at and tries to open a locked bedroom door. Knocking on it, he calls out again, "Pèpère, Detective Dahm wants to see you!"

Resignedly, Adele swings the front door wide open. Dahm enters and they both wait for her father-in-law to appear. Davey calls through the door again. Dahm abruptly bolts back outside and runs to the side of the house where, under a window, he finds Dave Sr. hiding behind a thick holly tree.

"Behave yourself and I won't cuff you in front of Davey," Dahm says.

"You're arresting me? What for?" the old man asks.

"Evading the police, obstructing a murder investigation, and I'll think of more charges on the drive over."

Coutu Sr. lets himself be herded into Dahm's car.

"Where are you going?" Davey asks. "Can I come?"

"Deputy, I need you to take your mother back inside right now and take good care of her," Dahm replies.

Diving to the station and fed up with the old man, Dahm decides to let him cool his heels overnight. *Adele's words, come back to mind; find the ring, you'll find my husband's killer.* He needs some sleep to be on his game in the morning when he hopes to get the old man to confess to the murder of his own son. *What Dahm doesn't understand is what caused Adele's change of heart toward her father-in-law? Could it really be only for the sake of her son?*

At the station, Dahm puts old man Coutu in a cell with Leo Boisvert.

The detective taunts, "What's up Boisvert? Can't make bail?"

"Fuck you," says Boisvert.

"Not exactly the luxurious digs I'm used to, but it'll do," says Coutu.

* * *

When Dahm gets to the station the next day, Moody says, "Lots happened last night."

"Like what?" Dahm asks.

"When Boisvert realized who his roommate was, he went bonkers; tuned up the old man pretty good."

Dahm says, "How bad?"

"In the hospital," Moody says. "Put a rookie at the door."

"Anyone come for Boisvert yet?"

"Nope," Moody says.

"Charge him, AA/DW and move him over to County."

"Already in motion."

"Great; off to St. Joe's."

At the hospital, Dahm checks in on old man Coutu. He looks a lot worse than he is; black eyes, broken nose; kept overnight for a

possible concussion; all in all, no big deal. *Either punk Boisvert's heart wasn't in it or he's a pussy*, Dahm muses.

"Time to stop playing games, old man. Do the right thing by Adele and your grandson. Admit what you've done and let them get on with their lives."

The old man, looking like he aged ten years in 24-hours, nods sadly. "That's why I did it."

"That's why you killed him?" Dahm asks.

"You think I killed my own son?" he asks incredulously.

"Just tell me what you did," Dahm says quietly.

Realizing Dahm has nothin', old man Coutu's moxie comes back to bear. "I took that dragon ring from him at poker. But then I gave it to Davey. So, even-steven, as they say."

"If that's all you did, why did you hide from me at Adele's house?"

"Because I'm ashamed. I'm still ashamed. The last time I saw my son, I bullied him. I have to live with that. I wasn't a great father to him but I'd never kill him."

"If you didn't kill your son, who did?"

"I don't know."

Frustrated, Dahm heads to the nurse's station to inquire about Coutu's condition. The charge nurse checks his chart and says she expects the doc to discharge him today or tomorrow.

"Why's he on oxygen?"

"Protocol for a man his age with a 2-pack-a-day habit. Oxygen's probably making him light-headed. He'll be off it soon."

Dahm dismisses the uniform posted at the old man's door. "Coutu will be discharged soon. We don't have enough to hold him. As it is now, the city is responsible for his care. Don't want to spend another cent on him until we're sure we have him."

Dahm drives back to the station. Frustrated by Coutu's obvious lies, he decides to go back to basics and review everything they have, one more time. Told he'll be free to go, Coutu decides to unburden himself of a terrible secret.

He reaches over to grab the telephone. "I need to talk to you."

"At the jail?" she says.

"No, I'm at the hospital."

"What happened?" Adele asks.

"I'm fine. I'll tell you about it when you get here."

Curious, Adele agrees to come over. She's shocked to see him bruised, on oxygen and hooked up to an I.V.

"Did Dahm do this?" she asks.

He shakes his head then motions for her to draw near to him. In a wheezy voice, he whispers into her ear.

Shocked, Adele's instinct is to slap him. "What are you sayin'?"

Then rage overtakes her, "You lying son-of-a-bitch. What are you saying?"

Hysterical, she yanks the oxygen cannula out of his nostrils and covers his nose and mouth with both her hands. The panicked old man tries to pry her hands off his face digging his nails into her. He desperately moves his head back and forth but her hands seem to be glued to his face. He tries to kick away from her but only succeeds in smashing his knees against the over-bed table. Sweating and starting to cramp, she presses the full weight of her body down harder, flattening his possibly already broken nose. His cries can't escape her death mask. He tries to bite her but his ill-fitting dentures shifted to the back of his throat, prompting a trapped gag reflex that pinches the inside of his right cheek. That pain merges with the pain from his nose causing him to weaken. Breathless, he continues to jerk his head from side to side.

Just when she feels like she can't keep this up much longer, he drops his I.V. syringed hand to his heart and his face scrunches in pain. When she sees his eyes widen then freeze, Adele knows they've both gone beyond the point of no return. She holds her death mask a minute longer. Only when his pupils dilate and she feels his body go slack does she lessen her hold. She removes her hand slowly, poised to snuff out any resurrection. Satisfied there would be none, she replaces the cannula across his upper lip and refits it into his nostrils.

Wiping her hands against the hospital-white sheet, she steps back and looks at him dead-eyed.

As cold as her father-in-law, she rationalizes that the old man had it coming. *What's done is done.* She pulls a chair up to his death bed, sits and pledges to herself that no one would ever learn his last words. Then, she pulls **Hot Moroccan Romance** from her purse and starts reading where she'd left off. Thirty minutes later, she presses the emergency call button.

Hospital protocols are familiar to me. So, when the PA system intrudes the serenity of the hospital Chapel with a "Code 9; Med/Surge" blast, I bolt. Taking the stairs to Mama's floor, I burst into her room to find her alone and sleeping peacefully.

When the crash cart careens past, I step out into the hallway to see the emergency staff push it into the room a few doors down. Seconds later, Mrs. Coutu, drained of the little color she had, steps out of that same room. Not wanting to get caught out of school, I quickly retreat into the narrow entrance of Mama's room and peek out. I watch her walk quickly toward the elevator from which a familiar shiny black shoe and creased black cuff emerge. Abruptly, she changes direction and ducks into the stairwell.

I look over at Mama. She doesn't even know I'm here. Standing by her bed, I say a few Hail Marys and blow her a kiss. Looking at the clock on Mama's bedside table, I see that it's about time for me to go. I slip past the room Mrs. Coutu came out of and see that the door is closed.

Later that day, on the last stop of my paper route, I ring the Coutu's doorbell. Davey opens the door.

"Hi Davey, will you please tell your Mom I'm collecting today?"

"Mom's sleeping. I'm supposed to be quiet. I'll get Ronnie."

Penguin Man comes to the door with cash, "Hi Jackie, I'll take care of this."

Ronnie stops me from unzipping my change bag by saying, "That's okay, Honey. Keep the change."

"Thank you."

“Davey and his Mom are sad,” he says. “Their Pèpère passed away.”

“I’m sorry you lost your Pèpère, Davey. I’m sorry for you, too Mr...”

“Call me Ronnie,” Penguin Man says.

Davey says, “Pèpère’s in heaven with my Daddy now.”

“That’s right,” says Ronnie.

“I’ve got to get home,” I say.

* * *

Chapter 23

“Music is the voice that tells us that the human race is greater than it knows.”

—Napoleon Bonaparte

Speaking over the telephone to Raymond at Aunt Margie’s house, I say, “You’ve got to come to Church with us on Sunday. Uncle Vic’s going to be singing the Ave Maria.”

“In the choir?” Ray asks picturing his uncle in the loft standing with the St. Louis Children’s choir.

“No, solo!”

“You’re kidding!”

“Nope,” I assert. “Mrs. Dahm bought him the record so he could learn it then she brought him to Church on Saturdays to practice with Mrs. Dionne. They’re going to perform this Sunday!”

“Tell Uncle Vic I’ll be there even if I have to take a taxi. How are you and Moe doing?”

“We’re okay. We miss Mama and Daddy, and you, but Detective and Mrs. Dahm kinda’ took over here.”

“Okay, good. See you Sunday,” Raymond says, hanging up.

* * *

That evening after supper, Uncle Vic tells me he doesn’t want to wear his funeral suit.

“You don’t have to. Just wear a pair of pants and I’ll iron one of Daddy’s white shirts for you. If you want, you can borrow one of his ties.”

Caroline says, “Don’t forget, we have to leave a few minutes early so Victor and Mrs. Dionne can get ready.”

“I’ll do it tonight, then,” I say.

The next morning, when Raymond arrives at Church, I slide down the pew pushing up against Moe, Mrs. Dahm, and the detective. Together, we sit through the longest mass Father Morissette ever said. When it’s finally time for Uncle Vic to sing, and even though the nuns always say not to, my brothers and I turn around to look up at the choir loft in the back of the church.

Dust particles float in the sunbeam through the stained glass window while Uncle Vic’s unmagnified voice fills the packed Church. Tender, strong, simple and pure, his rich voice bellows from his barrel-chest through his wide-open mouth. Reverence reverberates with each word as tears stream down his cheeks. His riveting performance bows the heads and bends the knees of many worshippers, among whom I’m pleased to see Mr. One-Arm, Ronnie, Mrs. Coutu and Davey, Miss Martin, Mr. Soteau, Mrs. Robitaille and many others of my customers in whose newspaper I slipped an invitation to hear Uncle Vic sing at this Mass.

When Uncle Vic’s song ends, Moe starts clapping. I join him and Raymond is about to stop us both but he’s drowned out by the clapping congregation. It’s a triumph and Caroline is happy she invited her brother Jack and his wife, Joan from New York City to come back to Lowell to meet their “adopted family”. Looking down the pew with happiness tinged with guilt, I think, *it’s almost like we have a whole new family.*

Outside, after the service, Uncle Vic is surrounded by admirers, slapping his back, shaking his hand. Waiting his turn, One-arm approaches and says, “Hey Victor, my daughter is getting married next week-end and I’d love to have you sing at our Church.”

“I don’t know,” replies Victor.

“Aw, come on, you’d do it for me, wouldn’t you?” One-arm cajoles.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, think about it,” One-arm says. “You’d be invited to the reception, too; free meal, good time; and, you don’t have to sing at the reception. We already have a DJ. I mean, you could if you wanted to; but just the Ave Maria in church. What do you say?”

“Where is it?” Uncle Vic asks.

“Transfiguration, downtown; the reception’s upstairs,”

“Okay, I can walk it.”

“What do you mean walk? You’ll be our honored guest,” One-arm says with a wide smile. “We’ll pick you up and take you home.”

“Okay.”

“Great!” says One-arm slapping Uncle Vic on the back.

While the two men are talking, Dahm notices that Ronnie is taking Davey to the school playground while Adele steers Father Morissette away from his congregation and engages him in a private conversation.

Uncle Jack, a local celebrity in his own right, is acknowledging the lesser crowd of admirers gathered around him. As each group gradually disperses, Uncle Vic and I gravitate back to our own little circle.

“Is the Old Worthern House still open?” Uncle Jack asks.

“Yes, it is,” answers Dennis.

“Good, let’s brunch,” says Uncle Jack making a noun a verb.

Excited, I say, “That’s the place where Edgar Allen Poe used to go. They have a black raven over the bar there.”

“Is that true?” asks Raymond’s lifted eye-brow.

“Pretty sure,” says Uncle Jack. “Unless they changed the place since I was last there.”

“How in the world did you know that?” my brother asks me.

I just shrug.

“You three kids ride with me and Joan,” says Uncle Jack. “Victor, you go with Dennis and Caroline. We’ll meet there.”

Sitting in the back seat behind “Aunt Joan”, I stare at “Uncle Jack” silently marveling at the intensity of his light. It totally eclipses Joan’s. Looking over at my brothers, I’m proud that they outshine him.

Meanwhile, back outside St. Louis-de-France church, Adele and Father Morissette are having a very sober conversation; the urgency of which puzzles the priest.

“May I ask you a question?” She asks.

“Sure,” the priest replies.

“Do murderers or people who commit suicide ever get to go to heaven?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Can you please just answer the question, Father?”

“Well, that’s a hard one, Adele. Without knowing all the details, it’s hard to give a definitive answer. If it’s in self-defense or during wartime....”

“Say it’s neither of those. Say they killed to protect someone else....”

“If it was to protect someone from physical harm, I suppose it could be justified. But, it really depends on the circumstances.”

“How about suicide? Can a person who commits suicide go to heaven?” she insists.

“Okay....suicide, like murder, is a mortal sin. Both can cost you eternal salvation. But, if a person kills himself while under diminished mental capacity for whatever reason, then this person may not be totally culpable.”

“You mean they could still go to heaven?” Adele asks smoothing her hair.

“No one but God knows what’s in a person’s heart but, to be sure, God is just.”

“But is He merciful?” Adele’s matte eyes plead.

“Adele, like I said, only God knows a person’s heart,” the priest repeats.

* * *

At the Worthern, the hostess leads Uncle Jack to a big, semi-circular booth that holds all eight of them. Walking past the bar, Moe shouts, "There it is, there's the black bird!"

"It's a raven." I say, "It's supposed to make you think of Edgar Allan Poe who wrote the famous poem, *The Raven*. I guess he used to come here."

"You're right, Honey," says the Hostess. "It's one of our claims to fame. The other is our lobsta' thermidor."

Wondering what that means, Moe scoots to the middle of the luxurious leather booth from one end and I do the same from the other.

Recognizing Uncle Jack, a woman from another table approaches him and asks, "Forgive me for bothering you, but would you please sign my book?"

Jack takes the offered book, studies the cover as if seeing it for the first time, opens it to the title page, and signs it with her pen.

"Looks like a blue elephant on the cover," Moe says.

"It is what it is and might be what it isn't," answers Uncle Jack.

"Did you write that book?" I ask.

"It came to me," he says. Picking up the menu, he adds, "Let's see what came to the Chef."

"There's a lot of talent at this table," Caroline announces.

"Yes, Uncle Vic, you sounded great! Are you going to do it again?" I wonder.

"Sure he is," Uncle Jack answers. "He'll sing at the Met."

"Is that downtown?" Moe asks.

"Downtown New York," Uncle Jack says.

"I've always wanted to go to New York. What's it like?" I ask.

"You want to know what New York's like? I explain exactly what it's like in my new book, "**Lonesome Traveler**". What's Times Square doing there anyway? Might as well enjoy it. — Greatest city

the world has ever seen. — Have they got a Times Square on Mars? What would the Blob do on Times Square? Or St. Francis?”

“Or me?” joins Moe. “I kill the Blob.

“Or me?” Uncle Vic asks.

“You, why you’d be a hit, Victor,” Uncle Jack declares. “You’d sing and live and live and sing and you’d be a hit unless you weren’t.”

“You, little guy,” Uncle Jack says to Moe, “You’d be eaten alive.”

“By the Blob?” Moe asks.

“Let’s order,” says Caroline.

Having read the title of the book, he just signed, I ask, “Are you the lonesome traveler, Uncle Jack?”

“Aren’t we all?” he answers.

I nod. Maybe it’s our names. I wonder if there are a lot of grays in New York.

* * *

Dahm is thinking about Adele and Father Morissette’s tête-à-tête. *It looked like an out-of-the-box confession . I’ll ask the priest about it as soon as I can get free. If he cites the confessional seal, I’ll know that it was what it looked like. But, what did Adele confess to?*

I’ll have coffee at the Cameo tomorrow; talk to her.

“What are you thinking about?” Caroline asks her husband. “Isn’t this nice?”

“That’s what I was just thinking,” Dahm replies with a smile.

Aunt Joan looks up from her menu and declares, “Let’s make plans for all of you to come down to New York for Thanksgiving! The Macy’s Day parade is a thrilling experience, I promise.”

“Yes, thrilling,” Uncle Jack says like he’s spitting sawdust.

“Thank you for the invitation,” Caroline says. “It sounds wonderful but we’ll have to get back to you on that.”

“Of course,” Joan says.

“Thanksgiving is at Uncle Moe’s house every year,” I say.

Surprised, Caroline asks, “Who’s Uncle Moe?”

“Mon frère,” replies Uncle Vic.

“He’s funny, I’m named after him,” Moe says.

Trying to sound casual, Caroline asks, “Does he live around here?”

“Not far from the hospital,” I say.

Knowing his wife would perceive this ‘Uncle Moe’ to be a threat, Dahm pats her hand and whispers, “I’ll take care of it.”

Meanwhile, whispered memories of a dancing turkey with a beer up its butt makes all three of us giggle. “How could Macy’s top that?” I ask my brothers causing Raymond to hilariously gush Coca Cola out of his nose. All eight of us enjoy outstanding main courses while my brothers and I seem to share a rare side of silliness from the kids’ menu.

All things considered, it’s a good day.

* * *

Dahm awakens early the next day and asks, “Victor already gone?”

Caroline says, “Yup, ate breakfast, then ate breakfast, then grabbed his lunch and left.”

Dennis kisses his wife, tells Moe and me to be good then swings by the rectory and asks for Father Morissette. The priest is adamant. He won’t even hint at what he and Adele had spoken about the week before. He did allow that Adele was distraught.

“She has a right to be, doesn’t she? Losing first her husband then her father-in-law?”

“What do you mean? When did she lose her father-in-law?” Asks Dahm.

“He died last week; a heart attack, apparently. You never know, do you? I visited him earlier in the day and he seemed fine; expected to go home that afternoon. That’s why his death was such a shock, especially to Adele. I was still doing my patient visits when I was

called. By the time I got back to his room, he was already gone. I wasn't able to give him the Last Rites, even."

Something tells Dahm to ask the M.E. if he did an autopsy on Coutu Sr.

* * *

At the morgue, the Medical Examiner says, "You know how it works, Dennis. No hospital refers natural cause deaths for autopsy. If they did, I'd need at least a dozen more staff. But, if it makes you feel better, I'll call medical records for the official C.O.D."

"Yes, thanks. Call my office when you get the info."

At his desk, Dahm looks into 'Uncle Moe'. To his surprise, there's a file thick enough to be a novel. Youthful vandalism; dishonorable discharge from the Navy; numerous DUIs; public drunkenness; disturbing the peace; simple battery....

Dahm understands why Marguerite didn't reach out to her older brother to watch over her family. *Caroline will be relieved.*

Now, for that cup of Cameo coffee.

* * *

"Adele called in sick today," a new waitress tells him.

"Sorry to hear that," he says, "Make my coffee to go, please."

Driving to the Coutu house, Dahm spies Ronnie Plouffe walking ponderously uphill. He stops to offer him a ride.

Peering through the window, Ronnie's pleased to see the Detective. Bubbles of sweat dot his bucket head as he wedges himself into the passenger seat.

"Where are you headed?" Dahm asks.

"Adele Coutu's house. We're friends now. Funny how the world turns, ain't it? I know you're not supposed to speak ill of the dead but she's nothing like her prick husband."

“Speaking of the dead, I hear old man Coutu passed away,” Dahm says.

“Yeah, tough on Adele and Davey. That’s why I’m going over there. Adele hasn’t left her bed since Sunday after church. I’m going over to help out and babysit Davey when school lets out.”

“What did the old man die of?” Dahm asks.

“I’m not sure, really. I guess old age.” Plouffie says wiping his brow and upper lip.

“He wasn’t all that old, was he?”

“Yeah, no; I guess you never know,” says Ronnie.

“Maybe I’ll stop in and give Adele my condolences,” Dahm says.

Ronnie nods.

* * *

Adele refuses to come out of her locked bedroom. While Ronnie gently tries to persuade her to get out of bed, Dahm looks around the living room and kitchen. On the table, there’s a ripped envelope from John Hancock Life Insurance Company. The stub of a check is peeking out. He can’t resist. *That’s a bunch of money.*

Ronnie comes into the kitchen. “Sorry, she doesn’t want to talk to you or to me either, for that matter. I’m just going to tidy up the place a bit while I wait for Davey to get home.”

“Tell her I’ll stop by again later,” Dahm says. “And, please give her my condolences.”

At the door, Dahm turns and says, “Say hi to Davey for me.”

After she hears the door shut, Adele sits up and hides a full bottle of aspirin in the drawer of her bedside table. Then she calls to Ronnie and asks him to go to Harry’s corner store for aspirin. When he’s gone, she gets out of bed and walks into the hall. She grabs the telephone directory from the maple telephone table in her foyer.

Walking past her son’s bedroom, she notices her father-in-law’s battered suitcase protruding from under Davey’s bed. After putting

the directory on the bed, she pulls out the old luggage and slides the brass side catches outward until the middle latch pops up. Dumping everything on the floor, something lands with a thud. Quickly sifting through the clothes, her hand bangs against cold, hard metal. Her heart seems to plunge to her stomach.

She stuffs everything back in the suitcase except the gun; that she hides between her mattress and box spring. She returns to Davey's room to get the suitcase and place it by the front door. *When he gets back, I'll have Ronnie to put it out in the trash.*

* * *

Chapter 24

**“Make yourself sheep and the wolves will
eat you.”**

— Benjamin Franklin

Now that Caroline took over with Moe, I don't have to skip school to visit Mama and Daddy at the hospital. I walk over right after school, still wearing my uniform. I try to think of interesting things to say. Mama listens and sometimes a tear or two runs down her cheeks. Sometimes she asks questions but often she looks so exhausted, that I kiss her good-bye and go see Daddy. He just listens or at least I hope he does. When I run out of things to say, I go downstairs to the Chapel and rest at the feet of our Blessed Mother.

It's Friday and I know most people look forward to Fridays. But not me; I'm always saddened by the number of grays I see on Fridays. During the week, I just drop the newspaper on their doorsteps so I don't actually see my customers. But on collection night, I have to come face to face with them and when they open their doors, the first thing that hits me is a stale smoky smell. In some of their houses, the smokiness is mixed with the smell of sweaty feet. Others smell spicy or greasy.

It's strange but a lot of my customers seem surprised to see me. That's especially true of the grayest ones. They make me feel like I'm robbing them and they don't give me a tip. Some don't answer

the door but I know they're home because I can hear them. The doors I most hate to knock on though are the ones that belong to the warmly colored people who ask me how my family is doing. I hate that. I stopped thanking them for asking. But some still do and I always give them the same, truthful answer, "We're good"; not well, or fine but good which is more than I can say for the grays.

Back home, when I'm done my route, I count out what I owe the Lowell Sun, fill out their form and zip everything up in the pouch they gave me. Just like Raymond taught me, I fronted the customers who didn't pay and make a note of them for myself. Then, I put all the extra money in my drawer which is becoming so heavy I can barely pull it open.

After supper, I go upstairs to help Uncle Vic get ready for the wedding tomorrow. Going through his closet, he complains, "But that's my funeral suit."

"It's actually the tie that makes the difference. See, when you wear a black tie with it, it's a funeral suit. But, when you wear Daddy's gold tie with it, it's a wedding suit," I tell him.

"D'accord," he agrees.

"It's nice of you to do this for Mr. One-arm. I like him."

"I don't know what Greek food tastes like. I hope it's good," Uncle Vic worries.

"I'm sure it's delicious, Uncle Vic."

The following morning, One-arm's nephew arrives at our house to pick up Uncle Vic.

Caroline calls up to him, "Your ride is here!"

Uncle Vic comes downstairs, "You look very handsome, Vic," she says smiling.

"You really do, Uncle Vic," I agree. "Have fun today."

"Bring me back something," says Moe looking up from his game of jacks.

We all go outside to wave good-bye to him as if he's the one getting married. At the church, One-arm's nephew, Charlie says, "What the hell! What's that old junk doing there?"

Uncle Vic looks out the window. There's a discolored and banged up old wreck parked right in front of the church. Charlie parks behind it.

"The bridal car is supposed to park there. I've got to find out whose junk this is and make them move it before my uncle gets here or he'll have a fit. Vic, you go ahead in. I'm going to ask around about this car."

Vic watches as Charlie asks gathering guests and passers-by, "Do you know who owns this car?"

No one does. Charlie stands on the church steps and, in his loudest voice, says, "Who owns this car?"

No one comes forward. Charlie looks inside the locked car. "Fuck! The emergency brake is engaged. Uncle Yiannis is going to kill me!" he says to Vic who chose to stay outside with him. "What am I going to do?"

Without saying a word, Vic walks over to the car, grabs the back bumper and lifts both back tires off the ground. Making it look as easy as pushing a baby carriage, he rolls the car forward to the end of the block where he sets it down, looks back at Charlie and yells, "Okay?"

In awe, many wedding guests ask "Did you see that?" "Who's he?"

Running toward Vic, Charlie laughs. "No wonder my uncle calls you the singing strong man! Thank you so much!" Slapping him on the back, he says, "Go ahead inside. I'll stay here to keep this space open for the bride's car."

Then, to the guests outside the church, Charlie says, "Everybody inside! The bride should be here any minute."

"But, who are you?" One guest asks Vic.

"No one," he says.

Like an announcer, Charlie says, "He's Victor, the singing strong man, our church singer. Now, go inside. All of you, go inside."

Followed by the curious guests, Vic enters the church where he's greeted by another of Yiannis' relatives who shows him to the

loft where there's a chair, a table, a pitcher of ice water and a glass set up for him. As agreed, at the proper time Yiannis turns and gives the signal. Victor sings the Ave Maria so beautifully all heads turn to him.

Later, at the basement reception, Victor is besieged by women young and old. They bring him food from the buffet that tastes better than the leaves they look like and paper cups of something called Ouzo that tastes like black licorice. After a while, Charlie puts a chair in the middle of the room and challenges fellow young men to take turns sitting in it while Victor lifts them in the air. It's all good fun until an unusually large lady sits in the chair, looks at Victor and says, "Do me!"

Try as he might, Victor can't get a grip on the chair legs without getting a face full of the lady's overlapping girth. Yiannis comes to the rescue.

"Excuse me Maria, but it's time for the *kalamatiano*."

Then he gives Maria his hand and escorts her back to her table. Charlie hurries to remove the chair and the entire bridal party joins hands and skips in a circle around the summoned bride and groom.

Afterward, Yiannis asks Charlie to fill Victor with coffee and bring him home.

"This is the best day of my life," says Victor who never tasted licorice that good.

* * *

Chapter 25

“The word ‘happy’ would lose its meaning if it were not balanced by sadness.”

— Carl Jung

It’s Monday morning. I’m at school and I feel sick. Something’s curdling in my stomach making my mouth sweat. I want Mama; even if it’s just to sit by her bed. I sneak out right after turning in my math test. Running in the fresh air quiets my stomach a bit but my disquiet remains. I run for a bit; slow down, take deep breaths then run again. In this way, I cross the Humming Bridge, run alongside the mill yard’s chain-link fence, up the long, sloping hill to the canal-bordering tenements where Uncle Moe lives, cross the intersection at the Medical Arts building and walk briskly past the white-haired Candy Striper at the reception desk.

Not wanting to risk being turned away at the elevator, I take the stairs to Mama’s floor. Three nurses, one on each side and one at the foot of the bed surround her. Their faces are grim. Her breathing is rapid and shallow. The nurse at the foot of the bed sees me and starts walking toward me. A familiar-looking nurse shakes her head and says, “Let her come.”

I run to my mother and grab her hand. “It’s okay, Mama. I’m here.”

Without breaking the raspy, choppy clip of her labored breathing, Mama turns to face me. Dr. Repuccini storms into the

room and says something to the nurse across the bed. Taking the already prepared syringe off the sterile tray on the bedside table, the nurse pierces Mama's skin and pushes the plunger. Within seconds, Mama quiets and closes her eyes.

I follow the Doctor back into the hall. "Will she be alright now?"

In a clinical voice meant only for mature listeners, he says, "Well, she's living on borrowed time, you know."

Stung, I run from him before tears tattoo my fiery cheeks. Seeking the noise muffling staircase, I heave open its heavy door and succumb to body-wracking sobs that move me closer and closer to the edge of the staircase where my numb feet fail me. At the next landing, my body finally stops rolling. I land with a thump. Not unconscious but not fully aware, I don't move. I don't know how long I'm there.

My collapse on the landing cripples my spirit. Slow to get up, I carefully take the rest of the stairs down to the chapel where my Blessed Mother waits. I hope being there is enough because I can't string together the right words in the right order. Thinking about Mama, my thoughts stray to Daddy, then to Moe, next to Uncle Vic and round and around, again and again. I fear that my lack of focus renders my prayer ineffective and it's not long before I give up and go home feeling empty and helpless.

That night, my paper route seems to take forever. I always thought it would go a lot faster without Moe but tonight, because he chose to stay home with Caroline, I realize I'm wrong. I guess I'm used to tucking a folded newspaper under Moe's arm and pointing him to the few street-facing doors on my route; just as Raymond had done with me. When I finally reach my last customer, I notice a sad-looking suitcase sticking out of a trash can, doomed to an inglorious final destination. I decide to bring it home.

Because I'm on my own, I try a new and different way home. I detour onto an unfamiliar street. After a long, winding walk, the concrete sidewalk opens up into a wide, cobblestone cul-de-sac

with old-fashioned, gas-style street lamps. Pulling my wagon over cobblestones is loud and jarring but like any serious explorer, I stay the course. The commerce center looks newly built but it has a colonial feel. I would have been less surprised to see Betsy Ross emerge from one of the brick row houses than I am to see Mrs. Coutu.

According to the Olde English plaque, the building Mrs. Coutu emerges from sells Fastports, whatever they are. I watch unnoticed as she gets in her car, starts it up and drives around the traffic circle then back toward the main street, passing me.

It's hard not to notice a girl pulling a red wagon over an empty sidewalk, but Mrs. Coutu manages to do it. I decide to turn around and head home. Glancing in her rear-view mirror, Adele spies me.

* * *

Seeing Jackie unnerves Adele. *I thought I saw her the other day at the hospital, too; the day the old bastard died. Is the kid stalking me?*

Shrugging it off, Adele stops for a red light at the intersection and is stuck there as Jackie looms larger and larger in her rear-view. Before Jackie can catch up to her, Adele crashes the red light, causing a couple of on-coming cars to squeal to a stop. From the middle of the jam, Dahm steps out of his car. He had been on his way back to Adele's. Noticing she's the culprit behind the wheel, he motions to her to pull over. After waving the traffic on, he pulls his car over too.

By that time, I reach the corner. Seeing me, Dahm opens his trunk and motions for me to put my wagon in it. He doesn't seem to notice the old suitcase or at least he doesn't mention it. Instead, he walks over to Adele's car,

"Glad to see you're feeling better, Adele. What's so important that you can't wait for the light to turn green?"

"Are you a traffic cop now?" she asks.

Not taking the bait, he says, "Sorry to hear about your father-in-law."

“Yeah, thanks.”

“I was on my way to see you. How’s Davey taking it?”

“What’s it to you? Davey’s better off without him. He only started coming around after Dave died, you know.”

“Do you know what he died from?” Dahm asks.

“What the hell do you mean by that? He was murdered, remember? Gunshot to the head; hello.....”

“Not your husband, your father-in-law,” he says lowering his face to hers.

“Oh, do I look like his doctor? Ask the hospital, not me.”

“What did they tell you?” Dahm persists.

“Nothing really, he was old, he got sick and he died. What else is there to know?”

Backing up a bit from the window and straightening out, “That’s what I’m wondering. If anything comes out of the autopsy, I’ll let you know.”

“Autopsy? I didn’t know there was going to be an autopsy.”

Detecting anxiety, Dahm leans in again, “Well, he wasn’t that old and he wasn’t that sick, was he?”

“Sick enough to die,” she says rolling her car window back up and putting it in gear.

“Drive carefully,” he says tapping on her window.

She pretends she doesn’t hear him over the sound of her car’s engine.

While the grown-ups are talking, I lean on the trunk facing them trying to figure out what they’re saying but the traffic is picking up and the street noise makes that impossible. I notice that Mrs. Coutu is a much darker gray than she was the last time I saw her.

When Adele pulls away, the detective and I get into his car and together, we drive home.

“That place down the street is really pretty,” I say.

“You mean the Promenade?” Dahm asks.

“Yeah, I guess so. It has those cute shops and the pretty street lights and all.”

“Do you deliver papers there?”

“No, I just wanted to see what it was like down there. I saw Mrs. Coutu come out of one of those shops.”

“Do you know which one?”

“The sign says Fastports.”

“Passports?” Dahm suggests.

I shrug. “Maybe. What’s a passport?”

“Government issued identification papers that you need to travel outside of the country.”

“Is Mrs. Coutu gonna leave the country?”

“Good question, Jackie.”

* * *

The following day, Dahm visits the Coroner’s office. The sharp smell burns his nose a little. “Have anything for me on the Coutu C.O.D.?”

Looking up from his work, the M.E. says, “Well, death certificate says, MI, myocardial infarction and that would be that except....”

“Except what, Doc?”

“...the charge nurse noted livor mortis.”

“Did you say, rigor mortis, doc?”

Shaking his head, he says, “No, livor mortis; that’s when gravity pools the blood after death. It usually takes about a half hour or so. The charge nurse on the floor that day is a friend of mine so I gave her a call. She swore she got there no more than two minutes after the emergency call button was sounded.”

“Who sounded it?” Dahm asks.

“No way for me to know that.”

“Okay, Doc. Thanks for your help.”

* * *

Dahm's intent on two things: The first is to check with hospital staff to find out who pressed the call button in old man Coutu's room. Second, he wants to ask Adele why she needs a passport.

At the hospital, the charge nurse gives him a list of staff working on that floor on that day.

"Any chance someone from X-ray or the Lab or other department came up to his room?"

Flipping through the chart she'd had Medical Records bring up, she says, "It's not likely. No labs or x-rays were ordered. The only scheduled visit was the respiratory tech to remove the oxygen. But, according to this, the patient died with the oxygen; so, the tech didn't get there until after he died."

Dahm questions the staff. No one on her list remembers seeing anyone in old man's Coutu's room the day he died. Dahm was about to leave when a woman from Housekeeping taps his shoulder and volunteers, "I saw a young girl skulking around that day."

"Skulking around?"

"That's what I call it," she answers with her arms on her hips.

"Where did you see her?" Dahm asks.

"In the corridor outside the dead man's room."

"Not in his room?" Dahm questions the woman's eyes.

"Well no, she was just outside his room," she blinks. "I saw her sneak out the Exit."

"Why do you say she was sneaking?" Dahm asks.

"Because she doesn't belong here," hands back on hips. "She's too young to be running around a hospital all by herself. Why isn't she in school? Where's her mama?"

"What does she look like?" Dahm asks.

"Blonde hair and wearing her big sister's Catholic school girl uniform," the woman accuses.

"Thank you." Dahm says.

On a hunch, he takes the stairs to the Chapel. It's empty.

He picks me up on my way home from school.

“How was your day?” He asks reaching over to push the passenger side door open.

“Same, same,” I reply slamming the door shut.

“I talked to some people at the hospital today who saw you there during school hours,” he says.

“Not today,” I say, looking at him.

“No, not today,” he agrees. “This was Friday.”

“Friday’s collection day,” I deflect.

“Did you see Mrs. Coutu on Friday?”

Head down, I nod again.

“Where?” he asks knowing the answer.

“At the hospital,” I say in a small voice.

“Where, in the hospital, did you see her?”

“She came out of a room a few doors down from Mama’s.”

“Did she see you?” Dahm asks, taking his eyes off the road to look me in the eye.

“No, I was hiding from her and from Father Morissette.”

“Were they together?”

“No, I don’t think he even saw her. She walked real fast to the stairs when he came out of the elevator. He hurried into the room where the emergency was.”

A light bulb came on in my head, “That was Davey’s grandfather’s room, wasn’t it?”

“I think so,” says Dahm.

* * *

Chapter 26

**“I’m always suspicious of people who repent of
other people’s sins.”**

—Jean-Marie Le Pen

After school the next day, I go to my room, change out of my uniform and grab some change from my money drawer. An idea takes hold of me so I sneak into Mama’s room and open her jewelry box. Pocketing my favorite piece, I tell Caroline that I’m going to light a candle at church.

“I’ll be back before papers.”

“Would you like me to come with you?” she asks while checking our pantry.

“No thanks.”

“Can I come?” Moe asks. “I like to light candles.”

Just then, Dennis pulls up. “Oh good, the Detective’s home!” Caroline says. “He’s here to take us food shopping. Do you want to come with us, Jackie? We’ll wait for you while you’re in church and then we can all go.”

“I’d like to stay and pray for a while. You guys go and I’ll meet you back home unless the papers drop before you get back.”

When I’m about 200 yards away from the church, an older, red-haired boy, whom I don’t know but I’ve seen around, is on his bicycle heading toward me. Riding in the gutter close by, he spits at

me. Startled and disgusted, I turn and yell after him “Hey, you spit on me.”

He makes a wide turn then jumps the curb right in front of me. I see that he’s as colorless as an X-ray. *Had I noticed that sooner, I may not have said anything. It’s better to ignore people like him.*

Out of his ugly mouth come the words, “Yeah, I did. Now, why don’t you sit on my face?”

Tongue-tied, I step into the gutter to walk around him but he jumps off his bicycle, lets it fall, then head-butts me. I’m knocked back but not down. Darkening even more, he takes a step toward me and punches me right in the stomach, hard. I’m doubled-over for a minute. When I lift my head back up, hot tears of anger stream down my face. He looks at me with a dirty-looking smirk. I surprise him with a quick kick powered by all the pent-up pain, fear and anger I didn’t know I had in me. My cousin Debbie’s hand-me-down, hard leather, saddle shoes deliver a solid strike to his left shin immediately followed by an even harder kick to his right. He goes down yelping. He brings his knees to his chest and buries his head between them. I kick him again and again in the ribs, lower back, arms. Loud, feral grunts come with each kick. Tightening his fetal curl, he covers his head and whimpers against the salty taste of rage.

Finally, Mrs. Cote, on whose sidewalk we are, runs out of her house. Her strong hands on my shoulders pull me away. Turning to face to her, I say, “Thank you.”

Mrs. Cote, who hadn’t seen the start of the fight, seems confused. She looks from me to the beaten boy and back. In a voice from the pit of my stomach, I look at the kid and say, “You need color.”

Peeling off wet, stringy strands of hair from my face, I notice that my hands smell like fear and tears. Mrs. Cote picks up the bike and holds it out between us. The boy gets up and grabs both handle bars. Without a word, he walks the bike in the opposite direction while I continue on my way to the church.

Entering through a side door, I stop at the stand of votive candles to my left. About half of the bougies are already lit. The

empty church is perfumed by burning wax and self-snuffed candles. Putting one quarter in the coin basket, I take a long match from a metal cone and hold it in the flame of a lit candle. Then, I pick an unlit bougie and set it afire while praying for Daddy. Then I take the shiny piece out of my pocket and place it under an unlit votive candle. For another quarter, I light the votive for Mama.

With my last quarter, I pick a votive in a different section. Lighting it, I ask my Blessed Mother to forgive me for kicking that awful boy. Then I kneel on the hard prie-dieu and say a decade of the rosary. In the middle of the **Our Father**, my thoughts inexplicably turn to Mr. Libby. *Maybe he's reaching out to me from Purgatory. He deserves justice; justice and prayer; everyone does. And my parents, what do they deserve? They deserve life and good health, don't they? And that awful boy, didn't I just give him what he deserves?* Shaking off irreverent anger, I re-focus on my Blessed Mother and softly sing the Ave Maria followed by ten more Hail Marys.

Never have I felt so holy, so full of God's grace as I do now. A kind of warm euphoria seems to levitate me as in my dreams. I quietly leave the church and walk home in the protective armor of the righteous; surely, I am forgiven.

The red-haired boy doesn't tell anyone but it's Bingo night.

* * *

When I get home, I can see that Moe and the Dahms aren't back yet but the Lowell Sun bundle is sitting on the corner. I go inside my house and say 'hello' to Uncle Vic who's rocking by the window. I grab the jack knife from its 'safe place' in the cupboard, a soup bowl that came buried inside Duz Detergent. Outside, I cut the nylon rope my papers are tied with and, instead of putting the knife away, as I usually do, I put it in my pocket. Paper in hand, I go back inside and hand it to Uncle Vic whose new habit is to scan it for any more pictures of Victor the Singing Strongman before refolding it and placing it on the kitchen table.

“I’ll be home soon and Moe and the Dahms should be home before me.”

Uncle Vic nods and continues rocking.

I get to Mrs. Robitaille’s house just as my kindly old customer is leaving for Bingo. After locking her door, the old woman notices that the weather had long ago washed away most of the letters off the welcome sign her husband hung years ago. *I don’t know why I haven’t taken this old thing down yet,*” she thinks. *It just makes me sad to look at it.* As she struggles to untangle the knotted twine from which it hangs, I arrive with her newspaper.

“Hello Mrs. Robitaille, do you need any help?”

“No thank you, dear,” she says, giving up. “I’ll just have to cut down this old sign tomorrow. I don’t want to be late this evening.”

“I can do it.” Then I cut through the cord with my knife. “Where do you want me to put it?”

“Just lay it down on the stoop and I’ll take care of it when I get home. That’s quite a large knife you carry around,” she says.

“Yup.”

Looking across the street I ask, “No one moved into the Boisvert house yet?”

“No, not yet,” she answers. “But a nice young couple looked at it yesterday. I hope they decide to buy it.”

“I do too. It needs some people with color.”

Looking at me searchingly, Mrs. Robitaille hesitates then agrees, “Yes, yes, it does.”

“Well, good luck at Bingo, tonight!”

“How do you know that’s where I’m going?”

“Just a hunch,” I say pointing to her hand-sewn dauber bag.

“Oh, of course, thank you, dear; just leave my paper between the doors. I’ll bring it in when I get home tonight.”

* * *

Later, at Bingo, Mrs. Robitaille's friend, Maureen reacts to the latest gossip. "That sweet looking little girl?"

"She may look sweet but some say she's the Angel of Death," says Debbie.

"That's an awful thing to say," Claire Robitaille admonishes.

"Well, she's a freaky kid, you have to admit that."

Remembering their encounter earlier that evening, Claire admits to herself that the child is a bit odd.

"My sister-in-law works at St. Joe's Hospital and she says the kid visited a man who died a few minutes later," asserts Debbie.

"So what?" Claire asks.

"Here's so what; she had no business being there; it was a school day; she's not even related to the man; and, get this, a detective came by the hospital the next day and asked my sister-in-law about her."

"Well, both her parents are in the hospital so that's probably why she was there," defends Claire.

"Is she the kid whose father died in that awful crash?" Maureen wonders. "I heard she and her brothers are now wards of the state."

"I heard she was there when her grandmother died, too..... Angle of Death," Debbie muses.

"Stop it, Debbie. She's just a kid. Anyway, she's been my papergirl for a long time now and she's always been polite and nice," attests Claire. "And, her father didn't die. I hear he's in bad shape but still alive."

"Well, you know I hate to cast aspersions but I'm pretty sure she's the girl who beat up a boy in front of my house today," says Maureen Cote.

"What boy? Not her little brother?" gasps Claire.

"No, it wasn't her brother. It was that boy Linda Marcotte fosters," says Maureen.

"How old is he?" asks Claire incredulously.

"Seventh or eighth grade," admits Maureen.

“It couldn’t have been Jackie then. She’s only in third or maybe fourth, and she’s a skinny little thing. How could she beat up an 8th grader?”

“I was surprised, too but there he was on the ground in the fetal position, screaming while this little girl was kicking the shit out of him.”

“It’s hard to imagine how she got the jump on a much older boy,” concedes Debbie.

Claire’s mind worriedly goes back to the knife.

“I think she pushed him off his bike,” conjectures Maureen. “I heard God-awful screaming and when I went out there, his bicycle was lying on the sidewalk and he was all curled up trying to protect himself.”

“Was he stabbed?” Claire asks.

“Stabbed? Why would you ask that? I certainly don’t think so! But, I can’t be sure,” Maureen admits.

“Well, was there any blood?” prods Debbie.

“Not that I saw,” replies Maureen

“I’m glad you were there to stop it,” Claire says. “What did the kids have to say for themselves?”

“That part’s also kind of strange. The boy didn’t say anything. He just got up, took his bike and headed home. The girl’s the one who thanked me.”

“She thanked you?” questions Debbie.

“I still don’t think it was my paper girl. It couldn’t be,” Claire says.

“Shh!” The caller’s starting.

* * *

Geeze, the paper’s thick today. It’s taking me forever to deliver. I don’t feel right and it’s already getting dark. The light’s on in my last customer’s kitchen. I see Adele Coutu and Ronnie at the table. Adele slides something that looks like a gun across to Ronnie who puts

his hands up as if being robbed. *Looks like they're playing.* Just then, Davey comes into view and Ronnie quickly grabs and hides the gun under the table.

Davey must be getting some kind of cap gun for his birthday. I walk back to my empty wagon on the sidewalk and start pulling it home. *Is that Detective Dahm's car headed toward me?*

Brightening a bit, I ask, "Did you come out here to pick me up?" Not wanting to disappoint, he says, "Sure thing, Honey."

He'd really been on his way to tell Adele Coutu about the autopsy report. *But, that can wait. The kid looks like she could use a ride. Besides, Adele isn't going anywhere until her passport comes through and when it does, the Fastport people promise to call me first.*

With my wagon loaded into his trunk, Dahm's about to get in when Plouffie emerges from Adele's house.

"Want a ride?" Dahm calls out.

Startled, Plouffie says, "No, no thanks. I'm fine."

"How're Adele and Davey doin'?" Dahm asks.

"Fine, fine everyone's fine."

"Where are you headed?" Dahm persists.

"Um, home, maybe, not sure," Plouffie replies with a nervous chuckle.

"It's a long walk from here to wherever."

With his left hand on his belly, he says, "Yes, well, the walk will do me good."

"Suit yourself," says Dahm who gets in his car and drives away.

Plouffie's suspicious behavior causes Dahm to eye him in the rear-view. *Plouffie keeps his hand on his belly like a pregnant woman is apt to do.* Dahm keeps watching. Plouffie drops his hands to his sides and his shirt bellows out. Using both hands, he immediately slaps the shirt back down around his enormous belly and looks around to see if anyone saw anything.

The detective pulls over.

"Why did we stop?" I ask.

“Because I think Plouffie, I mean Ronnie changed his mind. We’ll sit here and wait for him.”

Looking again in his rearview, Dahm says under his breath, “Well, look at that!”

“Look at what?” I ask.

“I think Ronnie has something to hide.”

“Oh, I bet it’s the cap gun for Davey. Hey, is there a difference between left and right-handed guns?”

“What makes you think Ronnie’s hiding a cap gun?”

“I saw it through the window. Ronnie grabbed it and hid it under the table when Davey came into the kitchen.”

“And no, there’s no such thing as right and left-handed guns; baseball gloves, guitars, golf clubs, yes; but not guns.”

“Oh, that’s good. Davey’s a leftie, you know.”

Dahm turns the car around and stops just before Adele’s house.

“Got anything under that shirt besides muscle, Plouffie?” Dahm asks.

Plouffie’s look of utter and complete desperation almost makes Dahm feel sorry for him. Plouffie looks at Adele’s house, then at Dahm, nods and says, “Mind if I take you up on your offer after all?”

“Just a second,” says Dahm. Opening the passenger side, Dahm says, “Jackie, please let Ronnie get in the front.”

I slowly move from the front to the back then the Detective shuts my door. Putting himself between my window and Plouffie, the Detective makes sure I can’t see or hear them.

“Give me the gun before you blow a hole in your belly.”

Surprised and relieved, Plouffie sheepishly hands it to him. Dahm tucks it away quickly and says, “Tell me everything you know about this gun.”

Plouffie didn’t know much. When he finished talking, they both get back in the car and start for Plouffie’s. Once there, Dahm says, “Stay away from Adele for the next few days.”

“But I work with her,” Plouffie protests.

“Not for the next few days,” Dahm promises.

* * *

Aunt Margie's car is parked in front of the house when we get home.

"Raymond must be here!"

Holding onto the railing, I take the porch steps slowly.

"Come on, slow poke," Dahm teases.

As soon as we enter the kitchen, Caroline says, "At last! We started with some appetizers because I thought Victor was going to pass out from hunger. Sit down, join us. Your Aunt Margie has some wonderful news!"

I hug Raymond but pull away when he hugs back.

"You okay?" Raymond asks.

"Yup, I'm fine. Just can't wait to hear Aunt Margie's good news."

"Your father will be coming home soon," she announces.

"Mama too?" I ask.

"I'm not sure when your Mother will be home but, the Doctor says, as long as things go the way they're going, your father will be discharged in a couple of days. It's a miracle, really. He came out of the coma all of a sudden. The nurse said he asked about his family and his car. His legs are a little weak from being in bed all this time so he agreed to a couple of days of therapy but, that's it. He can't wait to get home to you."

"It is a miracle," I agree. *If only we could get one more.*

"Now let's eat," Caroline says.

Looking at my big brother, I ask, "Are you staying home now, Raymond?"

"He's going to stay with us until the end of the school year," Aunt Margie replies. "It's just easier for everyone that way."

"I miss fishin'," Uncle Vic says.

"I'll try to come home once in a while on week-ends and we'll go," says Raymond.

Uncle Vic smiles and hijacks the mashed potato bowl from Aunt Margie.

“Does this mean you and Mrs. Dahm will be moving out”? I ask the detective.

Caroline answers, “Yes, we’ll move out when your dad comes home.”

Mistaking my discomfort for sadness, she quickly adds, “But we’ll still check in on you guys from time to time and you can come visit us anytime you want.”

I nod and when no one else is looking, I dump my food into Uncle’s Vic’s almost empty plate and put my finger to my lips.

After dinner’s cleared away, Raymond gets some more things from his room and he and Aunt Margie say good-bye.

I make a list of the things Daddy likes: peanuts, coffee, beer, Sunbeam bread for toast and butter. Then I take money out of my drawer and give the list to Caroline.

“The next time you go to DeMoulas, will you please get this stuff for Daddy? And, if it costs more money than this, let me know, I have lots more.”

Caroline’s about to give the money back, but Dahm stops her. “Sure we will, Jackie. Your Dad will appreciate it, I’m sure.”

“Thank you.”

To Moe, I say, “I’m tired. What do you say we go to bed?”

“No”

Caroline says, “You go ahead, Jackie. I’ll put Moe to bed later.”

Normally, I wouldn’t give in. But tonight’s different, “Thank you, goodnight.”

Caroline kisses my forehead and Dahm says, “Goodnight, Honey.”

My room is opposite the staircase which looks as daunting as Everest. Sighing, I go back into the kitchen.

“Don’t forget to kiss Uncle Vic goodnight and tell him I said goodnight too, Okay?”

“Okay,” Moe promises.

I go to bed without brushing my teeth.

* * *

In my first class the following day, I put my head on my desk and that's all I remember.

My classmates look amused when Sister Agnes calls on me. When I don't respond, they snicker. She calls on me again. The kids are squirming with anticipation. Irritated, the nun marches down the aisle to my corner desk and slams her ruler on it. Everyone jumps but me.

"Denise, run to Principal Paul-Michael's office. Tell her to call an ambulance. Now!"

Sister Agnes holds my head in her arms and leads the kids in prayer. Seconds later, the Principal comes running in saying, "Ambulance is on its way. Who should I call?" she asks my teacher.

"Her mother and father are already in the hospital," says Joseph.

Denise adds, "My mother says she's a ward of the state."

Both nuns nod and together, they gently lay me on the floor with Sister Agnes' seat cushion under my head.

* * *

Meanwhile at work, Dahm puts the Ruger .45 into evidence and has ballistics test it against the spent shell found at the crime scene. He records the chain of custody as he currently knows it, Adele Coutu to Ronald Plouffe; then he tags and bags it. The nexus between the victim, Adele, Ronnie is Louise Boisvert.

He calls Fort Devens. Reluctantly, Louise's brother confirms the make and style of the gun he gave his late sister. The D.A., at least, will be happy. In record time, ballistics confirms that the gun Dahm turned in is indeed the murder weapon. He taps Officer Vaillancourt to accompany him to Adele's house to place her under arrest for the murder of her husband, David Coutu.

As they're leaving the station, Sergeant Moody says, "Hold on, Dahm. You're going to want to take this call."

Dahm grabs the phone. "I'll be right there."

To Vaillancourt, he says, "We'll pick up Adele Coutu later. I've got to go."

Dahm races to the hospital. When he gets there, Principal Paul-Michael and Father Morissette are in the Emergency Room waiting area.

"Do we know what happened? Asks Dahm.

Principal Paul-Michael says, "All we know is that she laid her head on her desk during her first class and was unresponsive when Sister Agnes called on her. We called an ambulance immediately and the EMTs rushed her in."

Just then, an Emergency Room nurse comes out and says, "Are any of you a parent or legal guardian?"

Knowing that Ray's recovery voids his temporary custody, Dahm says, "Her parents are both patients here. Her father is in the better position to deal with this. I'll go get him now."

"Hurry," the nurse says.

Dahm takes the stairs two at a time and runs up to Ray's room. "Jackie's in the Emergency Room downstairs and they need your consent."

Saying, "Let's go," Ray allows himself to be wheeled to the elevator by Dahm. On the way, Ray asks, "What happened?"

"I don't know. I left your house before she woke up this morning. The school says she laid her head on her desk and was unresponsive. That's all I know."

Does her mother know?"

"I don't think so," says Dahm wheeling past the priest and the nun. Ray signs permission slips and asks to speak with the emergency room doctor. By then, the family doctor, Repuccini is there.

He tells Ray, "Her situation is grave. She lost a lot of blood from internal bleeding. Did she suffer any blunt trauma in the last day or so?"

Ray looks at Dahm with a mixture of bewilderment, fear and anger. Dahm asks, "Like what, where?"

“Abdomen; spleen or liver,” Repuccini says. “Her prognosis would be a lot better if she’d been treated immediately after the injury. She’s getting transfusions now but she’s lost a lot of blood. We’re prepping her for surgery to stop the bleeding but, I have to tell you, this is touch and go. We won’t know anything more until after the surgery.”

“What do you mean, injury?” Dahm asks.

“Some kind of blunt force trauma; a blow or maybe a fall onto something. We’ll know more when we open her up,” Repuccini says.

Ray says, “I need to tell Marguerite.”

“I’ll go with you,” says the priest.

* * *

Dahm goes home to tell Caroline what happened. “Oh my God! Poor Jackie; she’ll be alright, won’t she?”

“We can only hope and pray,” Dahm says. “Do you have any idea what might have happened?”

“Not a clue,” she says sadly. “Except she didn’t want to eat anything for breakfast and she gave Victor her supper last night. I thought she just didn’t like it. Oh my God, why didn’t I make her tell me what was wrong? I failed her. Maybe that’s why God won’t give me any children of my own.”

“For God’s sake, Caroline, this isn’t about us. It’s about Jackie,” Dahm snaps.

Pulled from cartoon viewing in the den by the Dahms’ raised voices, Moe asks, “Is Jackie sick too?”

On bent knee, Dahm asks him, “Did Jackie say she didn’t feel good?”

Thinking, Moe says, “She said she was tired.”

Caroline says, “Yes, she did say that. Did she say anything to you this morning?”

“She wasn’t in bed this morning,” Moe answers.

To Dahm, Caroline says, “Whatever happened must have happened during her paper route.”

Kissing his wife, Dahm says, "I'm sorry I snapped, Caroline. Gotta go."

"Keep us posted, please," Caroline says.

* * *

Driving to Keith Academy to tell Raymond, Dahm is thinking about Jackie. *I never heard her admit to being tired. The child walks miles every day pulling a wagon with either Moe or newspapers in it or both. She doesn't seem to get tired.*

Thinking about yesterday's events, he recalls, *she went to school, she delivered her papers, I picked her up at her last stop, Adele Coutu's house; then we went home, had dinner and she went to bed. What am I missing?*

It occurred to him that it seemed to take her a lot longer than usual to finish her route. *It was already dark when I picked her up. Caroline might be right. Something must have happened while delivering her papers.*

He'd interview every one of her customers, if necessary.

* * *

Raymond's peer status gets a boost when Brother Gerald announces Detective Dahm, LPD wants to speak with him. Curiosity straightens his classmates' spines as he walks past them to the front of the classroom where Dahm guides him out into the hallway. Fearing the worst, Raymond is shocked by the unexpected. He's unable to shed any light on his sister's dire situation but he immediately volunteers to come home to help out in any way he can including doing her route. Dahm drives him to the hospital.

At the entrance, they run into Father Morissette. "Any news?" Dahm asks. The priest shakes his head sadly.

"Do you know where my parents are?" Raymond asks.

"They're both in your mother's room #324," replies the priest. "The doctor told your father that he should stay with her while they wait for news."

“Does my uncle know?” Raymond asks Dahm.

“No, I don’t see how he would. He doesn’t get home until around 3:30 or so.”

“I’m going up to my parent’s room but I’ll leave in time to meet up with him.”

“I have a couple of home visits I’m obliged to make, but when I’m done, I’ll be back,” says the priest.

Dahm says, “As soon as either of you hear anything, please call Caroline.”

After sitting a while with Mama and Daddy in Mama’s hospital room, Raymond says, “If I want to meet Uncle Vic at the mill, I’ll have to leave now.”

“Please do that,” Mama says sadly. “I don’t want him to be alone when he finds out what’s happening.”

Raymond gets to the mill just in time to see many first shift workers climbing out of the mill yard to the Aiken Street sidewalk above. When Uncle Vic looks up, Raymond waves. Uncle Vic’s face lights up. He starts jogging toward his nephew.

“Are we going fishing?” he asks.

“Soon, Uncle Vic, soon but I have some bad news to share with you,” Raymond.

“Ta mama est morte?” he asks in a strangled voice.

“No, no; it’s not Mama; it’s Jackie... she’s in the hospital. It could be bad.”

“Qu’est ce l’arrivée?” Uncle Vic asks in distraught Québécois.

“We don’t know for sure what happened. She got transfusions and she’s being operated on now. All we can do is pray.”

Uncle Vic uncharacteristically hugs Raymond. Surprised, Raymond rigidly pats his back a couple of times before Uncle Vic draws away and asserts, “Elle va bien, elle va bien.”

“From your mouth to God’s ears,” Raymond says.

* * *

Chapter 27

“In order to be a realist you must believe in miracles.”

— H. C. Bailey

With the deeply lined face of a sorrowful pug, Dr. Repuccini enters Marguerite’s room where she and Ray are waiting for news.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“No!” cries Marguerite.

With his arms around his broken wife, Ray keeps his composure long enough to croak out one word, “How?”

“She had an abdominal hernia. Judging from its size, it went undetected for a while. At some point, the exposed intestine ruptured into the abdominal cavity causing sepsis. By the time she was brought in, she had lost too much blood and sepsis had taken hold; her organs started to shut down. We cleaned her out, pumped blood into her and repaired the hernia but it wasn’t to be. I’m so sorry.”

“Do we know what caused the rupture?” Ray asks.

“Well, the hernia itself could have been congenital; and, if it was, simply coughing or sneezing could have caused the breach; in some cases, they’re caused by heavy lifting, though I doubt that in her case. The perforation of the exposed intestine could have been from a blow, or a fall. We just don’t know.”

Marguerite isn't so sure. In a weak and halting voice, she says, "Maybe she wasn't strong enough to take care of Moe. Or, maybe those papers were too heavy for her. Oh, Ray! She was just a little girl. How could we have let this happen to our little girl?"

Repuccini can no longer breathe in the room. Repeating, "I'm sorry," he leaves, marches to the nurse's station and orders diazepam for Ray and sublimaze for Marguerite.

"Their daughter just died on the table," he says to the charge nurse in response to her inquiring look. But, the nurse isn't questioning the order, she's looking at Ray, coming up behind Repuccini.

The Doctor turns to hear Ray ask, "We want to see her. Can you arrange that?"

"Yes. Nurse Turcotte will let you know when and where you can see her."

"Thank you."

* * *

About 30 minutes later, an orderly arrives and maneuvers an empty gurney alongside Marguerite's bed. He and Ray help move her onto it. Ray follows him as he pushes Marguerite down the hall and onto a service elevator where he depresses the *B* button. When the elevator door opens, the orderly drives Marguerite to a curtained area where Jackie's body lies on a second gurney.

Saying, "Let me know when you're ready," the orderly stands sentry just outside the curtain. Seconds later, Father Morrissette arrives, sticks his head in just to let Ray and Marguerite know he's there then joins the orderly, head bowed, hands clasped in prayer. The orderly follows his lead.

Aided by her husband, Marguerite slides her legs to the side, puts her feet on the cold cement floor and bends to kiss her little girl's forehead. Then with her thumb, she makes the sign of the cross across Jackie's cool forehead, crosses herself and rests her head on

Jackie's chest. Ray gently presses his hand on his only daughter's unruly hair and lets silent tears splash down on her peaceful face.

Marguerite surprises him by saying, "Scoot her over a bit and help me lay beside her."

Moving to the other side of the gurney, Ray pulls the draw sheet under Jackie toward him, moving her lifeless body up against the guard rail. Walking quickly back to the other side, Ray picks Marguerite up and gently places her next to their daughter. Marguerite puts her arm around Jackie and Ray drapes himself over them both.

Reacting to muffled sobs, the orderly looks in on them. Overwhelmed by the scene, he quickly retreats.

"I can't bear it," he says to the priest who touches his arm and quietly enters the desperate, suffocating space. He was plunged into a depth of sorrow he'd never, in his 25-year career as a priest, experienced before. But, there's something else there, too. Something that makes him drop to his knees.

* * *

Meanwhile, Dr. Repuccini returns to Marguerite's floor. At the nurse's station, he says, "I think I left my pen light here; took it out thinking it was my fountain pen and I think I left without it."

"Here it is," Nurse Turcotte says.

"Is Marguerite back?" he asks conspiratorially.

"Not yet. Should I call down there?"

"No, no, let them be."

Looking beyond the doctor, the nurse is puzzled as to why the orderly, who took Marguerite downstairs, is back by himself and is now racing toward her desk, arms flailing. Hearing his name called with the urgency of a man on fire, Dr. Repuccini turns to hear the orderly declare, "We need you; we need you!"

Without hesitation, the rather rotund doctor, sprints toward the service elevator which the orderly had detained for him.

“What happened?” the doctor asks.

The anguished orderly replies, “I don’t know.”

Upon reaching the curtained area, Dr. Repuccini looks at the figure in repose on the gurney. Confused, he steps toward the second gurney where Ray is holding Marguerite upright in his arms. Shaking his head, Ray stops him in his tracks by saying, “Check Jackie; check Jackie.”

The orderly, nervous and disoriented, looks to the doctor then to Ray for guidance. With his lifeless-looking wife in his arms, Ray again shouts at the doctor to check on his deceased daughter. Repuccini seems frozen between gurneys. Instinctively returning to his training, the orderly puts his fingers to Jackie’s carotid. Startled, he jerks his hand back as if burned and screams, “I’ve got a pulse. I’ve got a pulse!”

Snapping back into action, Repuccini returns to Jackie’s gurney, puts his stethoscope on her chest, checks her pupils and barks, “Crash cart, now!”

The orderly runs to the ME’s office and hijacks the audio system. Seconds later, the perplexed emergency team is dispatched to the basement. Meanwhile, Ray lays Marguerite back down and Repuccini puts a stethoscope to her chest. Looking up at Ray, the doctor shakes his head sadly from side to side confirming what Ray already knows. Ray kisses his wife’s forehead and covers her cold body with Jackie’s shroud.

Minutes later, the team converges on Jackie. A technician hooks her up to an EKG while a nurse administers an IV. Looking up at Dr. Repuccini, she asks, “ICU?”

Repuccini nods so the team readies Jackie for transfer. Regaining his composure, Father Morissette walks over to the gurney to comfort Ray.

“She asked me to give her the last rites earlier today and so I did,” he says.

Ray dissolves into tears. “She knew.” After a few seconds of intelligible grief, he continues, “She asked me to pray that God take

her instead of Jackie. But Father, I didn't. I couldn't. I just couldn't. I held her until I knew she was gone."

* * *

Downstairs, in the doctor's break room, Dr. Repuccini confronts Jackie's surgeon, "What the fuck happened?"

Outraged, the surgeon shoots back, "Fuck off, Anthony! Get a hold of yourself. What the fuck are you talking about?"

After both doctors step back, they study Jackie's chart together, including a review of the nuns' and EMT statements, the ER doctor's notes. Then both doctors review their own notes. Repuccini checks the time and names of those who called it. Both the surgeon and his surgical team are top rate. Neither doctor can find any clues to the subsequent, extraordinary event.

"Sometimes God takes over," the surgeon says.

Repuccini nods saying, "I'm sorry I blew off half-cocked."

"No worries," the surgeon says.

* * *

Ray signs himself out of the hospital later that day. Far from being celebratory, his recovery and return home is solemn and sad. Caroline, Dennis, Moe, Vic and Raymond listen carefully as he breaks the terrible news with great difficulty. Caroline instinctively tries to put an arm around Moe but Moe slips out of her embrace to lock onto one of Ray's legs. Ray pulls him up in a therapeutic bear hug that lasts for several seconds.

"It's you and me, kid," Daddy whispers.

Uncle Vic seeks solace in Raymond and the two come together clumsily. Rebuffed by Moe, Caroline buries herself in her husband's arms. The soundtrack of sorrow is broken by the squeak of brakes and the routine thud of Jackie's newspapers.

"Where's Jackie?" Moe asks.

Ray gives them a hopeful report but he doesn't elaborate on the awesome details because he himself isn't sure of them. Victor didn't hear anything after Ray said Marguerite's gone. He retreated to his rocking chair with a cold beer.

Raymond says, "I'll do my best with her route. If anyone calls to complain that they didn't get their paper, please get their name and address and I'll go back out."

Caroline says, "Well, let's thank God you're home Ray and that Jackie will be alright."

"She's not out of the woods yet," Ray cautions.

"Why she in the woods?" Moe asks.

"Is she able to talk yet?" Dahm asks.

"No, not yet," Ray says. "She's in ICU; seems this family has a standing reservation there."

Caroline jumps in, "Well, Dennis and I will start packing and, if you don't mind, we'll leave after we have dinner together when Raymond gets back."

"I can't thank you enough for all you've done for my family," Ray says. "Mike Ouelette is coming over tomorrow to talk about the funeral arrangements. I hate to ask after everything you've already done but I'd appreciate if you were here for that."

"Of course," Caroline says. "What time?"

"Around two o'clock," Ray answers.

"I promised Moe I'd take him downtown but we'll be sure to be back by then."

When Raymond gets back from delivering Jackie's papers, he joins them at the dinner table which remains mostly quiet as they digest the awful loss of Marguerite, beloved wife, mother, sister and admired friend.

* * *

Wearing high heels and matching red satin ballroom dresses with toile shawls, Mama and I belt out Christmas carols as we careen

down the frozen food aisle of DeMoulas' supermarket. Standing on its bottom frame and hanging onto the sides of the steel shopping cart, I face Mama as we race the cart through the frozen food section. I marvel at Mama's porcelain skin, her elegant hands and slender fingers. When Mama stops to reach into a freezer case for a quart of chocolate ice cream, I notice her milky ankles and delicate feet. Next, we're across town sitting in the parking lot of Cote's market eating ice cream out of the carton with a shared white, plastic spoon.

"It's almost time for you to go back," says Mama.

"I want to stay here with you."

"That's what you said before you were born."

"I'm still hungry," I say. "Let's fly over to the White Horse."

"Do you know how to get there?" asks Mama.

"Sure I do. Just follow the river."

Flying over the Humming Bridge, we wave hello to Raymond and Uncle Vic who are fishing from Uncle Vic's boat. All smiles, they wave back. But before we get to the White Horse, Mama is caught in a down draft and plunges into the river. I nose-dive into the water after her but I can't find her. Panicked, I'm desperately searching but I can't see and I can't breathe. Thrashing around like a harpooned fish, I'm heartbroken and exhausted. I feel like I'm losing life.

On the surface, distant voices call a code.

* * *

Chapter 28

**“We all make choices, but in the end our
choices make us.”**
— Ken Levine

The following day, Dahm forces himself to re-focus on Adele Coutu. His pre-dawn stop is the Cameo diner.

“Plouffie, Adele won’t be in today. Can you get a key to her house?”

“Yes. I know where she hides it but is she okay?”

“I want you to take care of Davey. He comes here after school, right?”

“Right,” Plouffie confirms.

“So, bring him home when you’re done here. I’ll have DCF follow-up with you.”

“Can’t I just care for him myself until Adele comes back?”

“If you can get Adele to sign over temporary custody.”

“She already did.”

“She did?” asks Dahm surprised.

“Yeah, she said just in case something happens to her, she wants to know that Davey will be in good hands.”

The people at Fastport did say Adele only applied for a passport for herself.

Dahm thanks Plouffie then drives to the station to pick up Vaillancourt.

“Let me do all the talking,” Dahm warns Vaillancourt. “Even if you think I’m being a little unorthodox. Got it?”

“Got it,” Vaillancourt agrees.

Adele Coutu answers the door with her hair in curlers. “A little early for a social call, ain’t it?”

Dahm replies, “You’re under arrest for the murder of David Coutu.”

To Vaillancourt, he says, “Cuff her and read her her rights.”

Over Vaillancourt’s recitation, Adele shrieks, “Wait, wait! It wasn’t my fault. He made me so angry. I just went crazy. I didn’t mean for him to die. How did I know he’d have a heart attack?”

With a silencing glance at Vaillancourt, Dahm plays along, “What did he do that made you so angry?”

“It’s what he said,” she replies. “And, I’d rather not get into it.”

“Put her in the car,” Dahm says.

“Can I at least brush out my hair?”

“You’ll have plenty of time for that downtown.”

On the way to the station, Dahm puzzles out the scenario. *She practically confessed to having had a hand in her father-in-law’s death, which, I’m convinced she did; but that would be hard to prove. On the other hand, she had ample motive to kill her unfaithful husband and I have a witness who can testify that she was in possession of the weapon that killed him; a slam dunk. Just one problem, I don’t think she did it.*

At the station, Dahm decides to put Adele on ice for a while. In the meantime, he calls the hospital to check on Jackie and is told there is no change. He sits back in his chair and sighs deeply. His gut tells him that whatever happened to Jackie was no accident but he can’t know for sure without talking to her. Meanwhile, he’d best focus on the case at hand. After strategically arranging the case files on his desk, he gets Adele and escorts her back to his work station.

“Have a seat,” he says. “I didn’t mean to keep you waiting this long. I don’t know if you know this, but your paper girl, Jackie had emergency surgery yesterday and I was just on the line with the hospital.”

"I'm sorry to hear that," Adele says. "What's wrong with her?"

"They don't really know. She passed out at school. Doctor says she had internal bleeding. All we can do now is pray."

"Poor kid," says Adele.

"I need a coffee, want one?"

Adele nods and Dahm leaves. At first, she looks around nervously. There are a few empty desks and the only other people in the station seem to be up front. She can't help but see the paperwork on his desk. Under the heading "Coutu Case File" she sees the hospital notes on the old man's condition.

"...patient vitals, good. Discontinue O2."

The next sheet looks like the Detective's own notes. Reading to herself, Adele catches her breath at the words, "presence of livor mortis indicates call button pushed approx 30 mins after death.... Who pushed it? Witness says A.C."

Dahm returns with two coffees. Adele points at his note in the file and says, "I'm A.C. ain't I?"

Handing her a cup and closing the file, he says, "Says it all, doesn't it? Your confession plus your father-in-law's health issues will make a plea deal palatable to the D. A. The fact that you're a widow with a young child doesn't hurt either."

Conspiratorially, Dahm continues. "He was a miserable old coot, wasn't he?"

Nodding, Adele says, "Shouldn't I have a lawyer?"

Dahm shrugs his shoulders. "Do you have one?"

"No, not really."

"If you can't afford one, we'll provide one for you."

"You know I can afford one," she says. "Will you tell them I didn't mean it?"

"Sure, I will; be sure to write that down, here," Dahm says giving her a pad and a pen.

"Write it all down. What happened; how it happened. That you didn't mean to kill him."

"I didn't," she says.

Dahm calls Vaillancourt's extension. "Come be a witness that Adele didn't mean it."

Seconds later, Vaillancourt is standing by Dahm's desk and the two men watch Adele spew venom and regret all over the note pad.

"Sign and date it," Dahm says.

Adele signs it, "Sincerely sorry, Adele Coutu, widowed mother of a six-year old boy."

Looking up at Dahm like a school girl expecting teacher's praise, Dahm gives it.

"Good job."

"What happens now?" she asks.

"You'll be transferred to County where you'll await your day in court."

"What about bail? I've got money," Adele says.

"It depends on what charges the D.A. decides to bring. I guess you can sit tight here until he decides. Anything I can get for you in the meantime?"

"A hairbrush and a TV. I don't want to miss my shows."

"We'll see what we can do," Dahm says. "Oh and stop worrying about Davey. Plouffie is going to take him home."

Adele nods as if relieved.

"Before I go, just tell me where you got the gun that killed your husband."

Shocked, Adele says, "What gun?"

"The gun you gave Plouffie to get rid of."

"Wait a minute," Adele says, "That was the gun that killed Dave? Well, it wasn't my gun, that's for sure. It belonged to my father-in-law. Did he kill Dave?"

"When did your father-in-law give you the gun?"

"He didn't. I found it in the suitcase he left at my house. I gave it to Plouffie because I didn't want a gun in my house, with Davey there and all."

After a moment of silent reflection, she says, "Oh my God! I can't believe I let him stay with us after he killed Dave."

“Where’s the suitcase now?” Dahm asks.

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Maybe nothing,” Dahm admits.

Shrugging, Adele says, “The dump, I guess. I threw it in the garbage can.”

“Vaillancourt, make Adele comfortable. Make sure she has a brush and turn the TV so she can see it.”

“You know I didn’t kill him,” Adele says.

“You mean you didn’t kill your husband, not your father-in-law, right?”

“Right.”

* * *

Chapter 29

“Show me a hero and I’ll write you a tragedy.”
— F. Scott Fitzgerald

Meanwhile it’s collection day at St. Louis-de-France church. While emptying the contribution boxes and the votive banks, Father Morissette notices that one of the votives is sitting crookedly in its wrought iron holder. Still lit, he fears the melting wax will spill out. He blows it out then tries to seat it properly but something under it prevents that. Lifting the red glass votive, he finds a metal bird pin. Dropping it on top of the collected change, he replaces the votive and re-lights it.

In the sacristy, he puts the money in the strong-box and says a prayer for the realization of the hopes and dreams of his parishioners. Wondering if he should put the bird pin in the box as well, he decides against it. Mulling over whether or not he should put it in the ‘Lost and Found’ bin, he decides against that, too. It was after all, most probably meant as an offering. *Tonight, I’ll ask the Monsignor what to do with it.* Pocketing it, he promptly forgets about it.

* * *

Acting on his sister Margie’s suggestion, Ray is at home going through his late wife’s jewelry box. Lifting the brass bird out, he sees that it’s trailed by a tiny empty chain. He searches the two-tiered, velvet-lined box for the second bird. He had given the pin to

Marguerite on their first anniversary. Margie said she'd have wanted to wear the set at her wake but he can't find the second bird. *God damn it! Why can't I find the other bird? They're a pair! They belong together! Where the fuck is it?*

The singular sound of his old-fashioned mechanical turn-bell signals the return of Caroline and Moe from their downtown shopping trip. Ray had hoped that the occasion of Moe's first suit would be happy. Shaking off the gloom of profound sadness, Ray walks to the kitchen to get the door. It's not Moe and Caroline. It's Father Morissette.

"Just dropped by to see how you're doing, Ray," says the priest. "And, to see if I can do anything to help you."

"Thanks, Father; my sister and Caroline Dahm are taking care of most of the arrangements."

"Yes, Caroline called the rectory yesterday to arrange for the funeral mass. I'll be saying it."

"Good, thanks; Marguerite would like that."

"Any news on Jackie?"

"I guess the good news is that her condition hasn't changed. She's still in a coma but that should help her body recover."

"I'll take Raymond, Moe and Vic to see her tonight, you know, to talk to her; let her know we're with her."

"I'm planning on doing the same this afternoon," Father Morissette says.

"Thanks, Father, I appreciate that."

"Wish there was something else I could do," the priest says.

"Well, you could ask St. Anthony to help me find something. My sister told me to be sure to bring it to Ouellette's funeral home this afternoon but I can't find it."

"What's that?" asks the priest.

Ray says, "Have a seat. I'll show you."

Ray returns with Marguerite's jewelry box. Opening it, he begins poking through the costume jewelry accumulated throughout his wife's life. The only 'real' jewelry she owned were her wedding and

engagement rings. The piece he's looking for is just gold-plated, but she loved it. In desperation, Ray dumps the contents of the jewelry box onto the kitchen table and looks helplessly at the priest.

"Take a look," Ray pleads. "It's got to be here. I'm hoping it's in plain sight and I just can't see it."

From his pocket, Ray pulls out half the piece. Showing it to the priest he says, "See, there are supposed to be two birds attached by this chain. I can't find the mate. I pulled out the drawer the jewelry box was in, I checked the floor around it; look, I even tore the velvet lining out of the box itself. Where the hell, sorry Father; I just don't know where else to look."

Like a magician's incredulous mark, the priest reaches into his pocket and produces the missing piece.

"Where?" Ray asks.

"Under a votive candle; I found it this morning. Honestly, I forgot I had it."

"She's still calling the shots," Ray says.

"You mean He," corrects the Priest.

"No, I mean Marguerite. As sick as she was, she made this family work. I don't know how to make it work without her."

"Pray with me, Ray," says the Priest putting his arm around Ray's slumped shoulders.

* * *

Chapter 30

**“Innocence does not find near so much
protection as guilt.”**

— Francois de La Rochefoucauld

Driving to the Old Folks home, Dahm thinks the likelihood that the old man killed his own son is getting stronger every day. Like on his first visit, the Detective finds the old guys at a poker table in the foyer.

“Good morning, Gents.”

“Hey, Dick Tracy’s here,” Walt says.

“Great day to take your money,” says Bill. “Pull up a chair.”

“Sorry, no time for that today.”

“Then to what do we owe this pleasure?” asks Bill.

“I’m afraid I have bad news for you about one of your own. Dave Coutu is dead. His daughter-in-law is being charged with his murder.”

“Oh my God,” says Walt, “that ungrateful bitch!”

“Watch yourself, Walt!” says Rick.

“After what he did for her?” Persists Walt.

“What did he do for her?” asks Dahm.

Cutting in, Rick says, “Well, he helped take care of his grandson, didn’t he? Ain’t that right, Walt?”

Chastened, Walt agrees.

“Do anyone of you know where Dave got a gun?” Dahm asks.

“Did he get shot, too?” asks Walt.

“No; he had a heart attack.”

“So why are you charging his daughter-in-law?” asks Rick.

“She attacked him while he was in a hospital bed; bringing on the heart attack. It’s 2nd degree murder.”

Silence around the table.

“A little help here, fellas, please,” says Dahm.

“So, who says Dave owned a gun?” asks Rick.

“That’s been established,” says Dahm.

“Well, if you say he had one, he probably won it in a poker game,” back-tracks Walt.

“From his son?” asks Dahm.

“Could be; but not here; at some other game, maybe,” says Walt nervously.

“What is it you’re not telling me?” asks Dahm.

“That we’d like to get back to our poker game if it’s all the same to you,” says Rick.

“It is,” says Dahm throwing his card on the table and adding, “If any of you has anything to add, give me a call. Sorry for your loss.”

* * *

On the way to back to the station, Dahm can’t stop thinking that the old guys are hiding something. *Of the group, only Walt appears to want to help. Maybe Dave Sr. confessed to Walt or maybe Walt was there when father shot son. But that wouldn’t explain what they were doing at the murder scene in the first place. I hope that Walt’s conscience dimes him. In the meantime, I’ll have to dig deeper. Concentrate on the gun. Chain of custody so far is PFC Pete; Louise Boisvert; Dave Sr.; Adele; and finally Plouffie. So far, I ruled out the Private, Louise and Plouffie; funny that Jackie helped rule out Plouffie what seems like a lifetime ago. Anyway, that leaves Dave Sr. and Adele. I’m not convinced that Adele is guilty or that Dave Sr. is innocent. I need more. But, for now, I’ll head over to the Cameo and then home. Gonna be rough. Have to explain to*

Davey that his mother won't be coming home for a while. I want to see the boy's reaction when he learns that Plouffie will be taking care of him. Then, after that, Caroline and I are going to visit Jackie before we head over to Ouellette's Funeral Home for Marguerite's wake.

Thinking this day can't get any sadder, Dahm is too late to notice the squirrel. He pulls into a Texaco station a few yards away to call the wildlife boys to clean it up. While at the station, the attendant fills his car, checks the oil and washes the windshield. At the check-out, Dahm decides to get one of those promotional Texaco fire chief helmets for Davey.

When he gets to the Cameo, Davey is sitting in the last booth tracing letters for homework. Sliding a package down the bench, Dahm sits opposite Davey and motions for Plouffie to join them. Unable to fit in the booth, Plouffie stands and listens as Dahm explains.

"Your mom made a mistake that she's sorry for. She has to spend some time in jail because of it; kind of like a grown-up time-out. In the meantime, she asked Plouffie to take care of you; make sure you get to school on time, make you lunch and dinner; check your homework; everything your Mom did. I'll come around and check on the two of you every once in a while, too."

Nodding without speaking, Davey glances up at Plouffie a few times. Then he gets up on his knees to peak over the table at the package next to Dahm.

"What's that?" he asks.

"It's an official fire chief hat."

"Is it for me?"

"It sure is," says Dahm handing it over the table to the boy who grabs it and puts it on his head.

"Look, it has speaker and a handset, too," Plouffie says.

Taking it off, Davey inspects the speaker behind the "T" in Texaco and holds the handset to his mouth. That's when Dahm realizes the boy is a leftie. For some unfathomable reason, that seems significant.

“Can we visit her?” Plouffie asks.

“Sure; plan on coming in tomorrow afternoon and I’ll have DCF there. They’ll help make sure you get access to the insurance money to take care of Davey.”

* * *

Chapter 31

**“The unnatural and the strange have a
perfume of their own.”
— Fernando Pessoa**

Mama and I are riding the elevator at Bon Marché. Mama is letting me push the UP buttons to all six floors then back down again. Our fun is interrupted by adults talking in the background. They keep calling me. Are they saying to stop? I ignore them because Mama says it's alright. “It's alright isn't it, Mama?” Mama doesn't answer. I turn to ask her again but she's not there. Where did she go? How did she get off without me? What do these annoying people want? Why don't they just mind their own business?

After a while, the talking stops and so does the elevator. The door won't open. None of the buttons work. The light goes out. I'm alone and stuck between floors.

* * *

On the ride from the hospital to the funeral home, Caroline says, “The nurse made it sound like we almost lost her this afternoon.”
“She's a tough kid. She'll fight her way back,” Dahm says.
“Do you think she can hear us?”
“I don't know.”

The wake is worse than expected. Ray, Raymond and Vic look lost. Moe looks bored and uncomfortable in his new suit. He brightens up a bit when he sees Caroline who tells him he looks so handsome. Then she takes his hand and leads him downstairs for a Coke. Ray's sister, Margie is playing the role of hostess; greeting people, thanking them for coming; acknowledging how beautiful Marguerite looks to which she recounts the miraculous story of the love bird pin on her beautiful dress. From all corners of the room, Dahm hears Jackie's name in whispers. He can't wait to get out of there.

"I'll leave the car here for you and have a patrol car pick me up. I need to get back to the station," Dahm says to Caroline.

"I'm surprised you stayed as long you did," Caroline says. "Try not to be too late, tonight?"

"I'll try," he promises.

Vaillancourt picks him up. "A guy named Walt called for you."

"Did he leave a number?"

"Yup, left it on your desk. He says he'll try to be the one to answer the phone when you call back but, if someone else answers, don't tell them who you are. Just ask for him."

"Got it; thanks."

At the station, Dahm finds the message on his desk and returns the call. Walt answers.

"What have you got for me?" asks Dahm.

"I really don't know," admits Walt. "But, Dave said something to me that stuck."

"What was that?"

"He said, 'I finally did a good thing for my boy. Too bad he'll never know.' Does that mean anything to you?"

"Maybe; if you think of anything else, please call me again."

Next, he checks in on Adele. "How's it going?"

"How do ya' think?" She asks angrily. "How much longer do I have to be in this shithole?"

“You’ll be transferred soon. But first, Plouffie will visit you here tomorrow; DCF, too. You’ll want to cooperate with them to give Plouffie access to the insurance money to take care of Davey. Want to have a lawyer there?”

“Definitely; you know what they say. Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice double shame on you.”

* * *

Chapter 32

“Good can exist without evil, whereas evil cannot exist without good.”

— Thomas Aquinas

The next morning, Dahm is awakened by the motion of Caroline leaving their bed. Pretending to be asleep, he sees his beloved kneeling by the bed, silently reading the words printed on the back of a religious prayer card.

“O glorious Saint Gerard, powerful intercessor before God, and wonder worker of our day, I call upon you and seek your help. You, who always fulfilled God’s will on earth, help me to do God’s holy will. Intercede with the Giver of life, from whom all parenthood proceeds, that I may conceive and raise children who will please God in this life, and be heirs to the kingdom of heaven. Amen.”

While praying, Caroline is conflicted about which Gerard she should be addressing. Her late brother whom her living brother, Jack believes to be a saint? Or, the Gerard commemorated on this prayer card? She turns it over to see the image of St. Gerard Majella, of Naples, Italy, the patron saint of happy childbirths. *Hopefully, one or the other or both will intercede in my behalf.*

Dahm sits up. “Good morning, Sweetheart.”

“Good morning,” Caroline says getting up off her knees. “I have an appointment with my gynecologist today.”

Knowing how important these appointments are to his wife, Dahm nods but says nothing. He had forgotten all about it. *All we ever get from him are platitudes and even higher bills. I promised Ray I'd look after Moe today. I'll have to babysit the boy myself.*

After coffee, Dahm kisses Caroline good-bye and drives to Ray's house. Moe comes bounding down the porch stairs with a pastry in his hand and strawberry jam on his face.

"Wanna bite?" he offers.

"What is that?" asks Dahm.

"Pop-Tart," answers Moe. "Yummy."

The breakfast pastry gives Dahm an idea. "Let's go see what Mrs. Robitaille is doing today."

"Okay," says Moe looking forward to playing with the Matchbox cars again.

As he'd hoped, the kindly old lady is happy to see them and even happier to keep Moe for a while. Dahm is on his way out the door when Mrs. Robitaille stops him.

"How's his sister doing?" she asks.

"Same but we're hopeful," Dahm says.

"That poor family; they've had more than their share, haven't they?" I certainly don't want to add to their troubles but I heard something disturbing at Bingo the other night."

"What is it?" asks Dahm.

"Well, it sounded ridiculous to me at the time but considering Jackie's current situation, I thought I should mention it."

"Yes, please do."

"One of my friends told me she saw Jackie beating the stuffing out of a boy."

"What boy?" asks Dahm.

"I don't remember his name but she said he was Linda Marcotte's foster."

"Who told you this?"

"One of my Bingo friends, Maureen. She said she heard a commotion outside her house that sounded like kids fighting. So she

ran out and saw the boy on the ground, with Jackie, well, she didn't say it was Jackie for sure, but anyway, she said this younger, smaller girl was kicking the boy who was all curled up on the ground."

"When did she say this happened?"

"Wednesday, Bingo night."

"Thank you, Mrs. Robitaille. I'm sure it was just kids being kids but I'll look into it.

What's your friend, Maureen's last name?"

"Cote."

"Thanks for babysitting Moe. I'll be back in a few hours."

"No problem, take your time; it's nice to have a child in the house."

* * *

Dahm drives over to 'sad Beaulieu' where the directory says Roger and Linda Marcotte live. It's half-right. It's been a year since Roger has seen the inside of the place. *The more things change, the more they stay the same*, Dahm thinks. The sad looking house is next door to the foster home he'd lived in for a while. The missing front window is covered with plastic over layered newspaper. Dahm rings the disconnected bell, waits a respectful minute or so then pounds on the door.

It opens to reveal three children of diminishing height and increasing stickiness.

"Hello," he says. "Is your mom home?"

The younger two nod but their spokesperson says, "She's not our mom."

Then they all run off, the oldest calling, "Linda!"

Spewing smoke like a dystopian piper, Linda Marcotte leads her miniature, undisciplined army back toward the front door. "Who are you?" she demands.

"Detective Dennis Dahm LPD, Ma'am," showing her his badge.

"DCF send you?"

"No, Ma'am. Do you have a red-haired boy under your care? Between 10 and 12 years old?"

“Maybe;”

“Either you do or you don’t, Mrs. Marcotte.”

“Yeah, yeah, I do.”

“Is he at home?”

“Sure he is. Didn’t they tell you it’s a Teacher Work Day?”

“I’m not here about truancy,” Dahm says.

“Well, what did Stephen do this time?”

“That’s what I’d like to ask him. May I see him?”

“Yeah, he’s upstairs in time-out; first door on the right.”

At Stephen’s door, Dahm knocks, unlocks an outside hook-and-eye latch, calls out Stephen’s name and lets himself in the small room. Four thin, coverless twin mattresses seem to float like flotsam in a stagnant pond of dirty clothes, crumpled up paper and dust bunnies. Dahm navigates his way to the undressed, open window. Looking as gray as the clouds above, Stephen is standing on the porch roof, back pressed up against the house’s unpainted clapboard siding.

“Hi Stephen, my name is Detective Dahm. I’d like you to come back inside before it starts raining.”

“What for?”

“Come in and I’ll tell ‘ya,” answers Dahm stepping back from the open window.

After a few minutes, curiosity and cold get the better of him and Stephen climbs back in. The boy’s shock of unruly red hair brings the only color to the room. Dahm wonders if the boy is ill.

“I’d like to talk to you about a girl named Jackie.”

“What about her?” he asks darkly.

“I have a witness who says you had a fight with her.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Stephen says.

“Well, I do. So, listen up. She’s in the hospital right now fighting for her life. What do you have to say about that?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Stephen says, “I hear Karma’s a bitch. She get hit by a car or something?”

“Doctors think she was punched or kicked.”

“Why, does she look like this?”

Lifting his dingy shirt to his prepubescent chin, Stephen reveals ugly bruises on his ribs and lower back.

“Who did this?” Dahm asks incredulously.

“Your girl, Jackie.”

“Why?”

“For nothing, that’s why.”

“So you hit her back?”

“No, I laid on the ground trying to protect myself.”

“Why didn’t you just run away?”

“Because I fell off my bike. Finally, a woman came out and pulled her off me. I picked up my bike and walked it back here.”

“Is that your bike I saw on the porch? That a Schwinn Varsity?”

“Yeah.”

“Pretty nice bike; where did you get it?”

“Linda”

“What did you do to Jackie that pissed her off so much?”

“Nothin; she’s just crazy.”

“Let me get a good look at you, Stephen. Are you alright? Take a deep breath. Does it hurt? Can you raise your arms over your head? Maybe we should take you to the E.R.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. It doesn’t hurt anymore,” Stephen says backing off.

“Did you know Jackie before this happened?”

“Just by sight; she’s stuck up.”

“What do you mean stuck up?”

“You know, she thinks she’s better than me.”

Where did this happen?” Dahm asks.

“On Ennell Street.”

Dahm is torn between wanting to kick his ass and putting a comforting arm around his shoulders. He does neither.

* * *

Chapter 33

**“The true mystery of the world is the visible,
not the invisible.”
— Oscar Wilde**

Mama and I are happily twirling around on bar stools. On the counter in front of us are numerous perfume bottles, compacts, rouges, eye liners, mirrors and Coca Colas. Mama hops off and, holding my chin between her thumb and index finger, expertly applies make-up on me. Now, Mama is twirling me around and telling me that I look like a movie star. I grab the counter to stop myself, take a long sip from my soda and, when I twirl back around to face Mama again, she’s gone but Pappy’s there.

He says, “Come on, Jackie, I’ll give you a ride home.” The next thing I see is the Bancroft-Libby awning over the front door of his funeral parlor.

“Where’s Mr. Libby?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” Pappy says, “Poor old guy, he didn’t deserve to be murdered in the alley like that.”

“Who killed him?”

“I don’t know.”

* * *

Because that handsome Detective asked her to, Jackie's ICU nurse is noting her young patient's cryptic and possibly meaningless words. Today she writes, "Gray? (Maybe) Ray? Libby or Liberty?"

Oh well maybe these unconscious utterances will make sense to that handsome detective, she thinks. In any event, she's glad she'll have something to tell him on his next visit.

A few minutes later, Dr. Repuccini breezes in, reads Jackie's chart and confers with the nurse.

"Labs are good. GCS score 11; good; let's continue to wean her off heavy meds. She should be coming around soon. Call me when she does."

* * *

Chapter 34

**“Miracles are not contrary to nature, but only
contrary to what we know about nature.”**

— St. Augustine

A couple of days later, as soon as Dahm gets to the station, Sarge tells him, “A guy named Ray just called.”
“Got a number?” Dahm asks.

“Yup; said he’d be there for the next 20 minutes or so.”

Ray just finished stocking the shelves at Hannaford Supermarket when Sam, the grocery manager, hands him the phone.

“Great news, Dennis, Jackie’s awake!”

“That is great news, Ray.”

“Need another favor,” Ray continues.

“What can I do?” asks Dahm.

“Jackie’s eating jello and asking for her notebooks, believe it or not. She says they’re in a suitcase under her bed. Are you and Moe at the house now?”

“No, I’m at the station. Mrs. Robitaille’s looking after Moe. I can swing by your house right now to pick up the suitcase.”

“She just wants one of the notebooks inside. It’s black and white and has #43 written on the cover. She says there are several of them in the suitcase, mostly numbered, but the only one she wants is #43. Can you just grab it and bring it over to her? Hate to ask but I’m in New Hampshire right now.”

Dahm smiles remembering the first time he met Jackie, she showed him one of her composition books. He briefly wonders if she's been trailing someone else.

"Glad to do it. Really great news about Jackie."

"Sure is. Listen, she doesn't know about her mother yet. If she asks for her, I've told the nurse to just put her off. I want to tell her in person. I'm going over there with her two brothers and Vic tonight."

"Understood."

"Thanks again, Dennis."

* * *

Dahm lets himself in Ray's house and goes straight to Jackie's little alcove room. Lifting the bedspread, he slides out the old suitcase and opens it. Ray's right. It's filled with Composition Notebooks. He looks at the covers. Most notebooks are titled, *Life so far* and numbered, 39, 40, 42, etc. One unnumbered one says, *The color of people*. Curious, he opens it. Jackie made three columns on every page; the headings read: Name, Color, and Notes. His name jumps out. "Dennis Dahm"; "Orange"; Good Detective, Great Friend." *That's funny*, he thinks. *Why am I orange? I don't think I even own anything orange.*

He reads several other names; some familiar; some not. "Pappy Bancroft; Maroon; good man; dead people." *Well, that's a little alarming*, thinks Dahm.

"Leo Boisvert; Dark Gray; bad man, Bâtard".

He reads a few more names then closes the book. He needs to find the book she wants and get it over to her. He sorts through them and finds #43. It reads like a diary and it looks like she just started it. *This is the one*. Squaring up all the others, he notices that the suitcase's black satin lining is ripped revealing the corner of a piece of paper.

He pulls the paper out. It's a Guest Check. He's about to dismiss it as just a souvenir when he notices the writing on it doesn't

look like a check. He reads it, eyebrows raising with each word. *This has got to be Old man Coutu's suitcase! Jackie must have picked it from Adele's garbage. This changes everything!*

He pockets the note, takes out Jackie's current notebook, closes the suitcase and pushes it back under her bed.

* * *

At the hospital, Dahm learns that Jackie has been moved from ICU to DOU.

"What does that mean?" He asks.

"It stands for Definitive Observation Unit; it's a step down from ICU. It's great news. It means she's stabilized," says a nurse.

Dahm seems happy to find me sitting up watching TV. "Hey, sleeping beauty! Glad to see you finally woke up!"

Walking over to kiss my forehead, he says, "I brought your notebook; and, here's a pen."

"Thank you so much."

"How are you feeling?"

Holding back tears, I say, "I miss Mama. I wanted to stay with her but she wouldn't let me."

The hair on Dahm's arms stands straight up. *She knows? Who told her?* He leans over to hug her. Holding her head to his chest, he gently pushes her hair away from her face. Looking around, he notices a box of tissues on her bedside table. He grabs a couple and offers them to her. She touches one to her eyes and wipes her nose with the other. Between snuffles, she says,

"Don't be too mad at him. It's not really his fault. Mean people wore out all his color."

"Mad at who?"

"The kid with the red hair; he's like a colored chalk drawing on a sidewalk. After getting walked on and rained on day after day, his color wore off."

"Are you talking about the boy you fought with?"

“Yes; I kicked him hard a few times. I’m sorry for that.”

“Why did you do it?”

Shrugging, I admit, “I lost myself. He spit on me and said something mean and stupid. Then he head butted me and punched me in the stomach. I just went kinda’ crazy.”

He punched her in the stomach!

Suppressing his anger, Dahm asks, “Was he riding a bike?”

“Yup.”

“Do you happen to know what kind of bike?”

“Yeah, a yellow Sting Ray with a banana seat. Can you ask my daddy to bring Moe to visit me sometime?”

“Sure I will, Honey. I think they’re planning on coming tonight. In the meantime, concentrate on getting well, promise?”

“Promise.”

“Oh, before I go, one more question. Where did you get the suitcase you keep your notebooks in?”

“One of my customers put it in the garbage.”

“Which customer?”

“Mrs. Coutu.”

Driving back to Centralville, Dahm has a lot on his mind. *She’s a complex, almost mystical kid. Thank God she came back; wow, I just realized I think about her recovery as ‘coming back’; freaky. And what about the boy? Is he criminally responsible for what happened to her? Hard to prove since she wasn’t admitted into the hospital until the following day. Who’s to say it was his punch and not a congenital defect that put her there? Besides, Jackie did make him pay.*

I’ll have to deal with Adele Coutu. But first, I’ll look into Stephen’s bicycles; both high-end. Where does a kid like that get, not one but two, bicycles?” Bicycle theft is low priority because it’s usually case-by-case. There’s got to be something more here.

He decides to swing back to the Marcotte house on ‘sad Beaulieu’ before picking Moe up from Mrs. Robitaille’s. *When Ray gets home from work, I’ll drop Moe off and go to county to deal with Adele.*

At the Marcotte house, Dahm notices a pick-up had backed into the narrow alley between them and their neighbor. He decides to pull over on Lilley and watch, unnoticed through his rear-view mirror. A man in a Red Sox cap, standing in the truck bed, seems to be arranging some kind of cargo. Walking his Schwinn, Stephen briefly comes into view between the house and the truck. The man reaches down to take the bike from Stephen and loads it onto the truck. After a few minutes, Stephen re-emerges walking a yellow Sting Ray. That too, is loaded onto the truck. Dahm makes a note of the license tag, MA 233-017. Stephen is helping the man tie a tarp over the truck bed concealing the payload.

Stephen and the unidentified man get into the truck and drive away. Dahm decides to follow them. Cross town....Rogers Street.... now he's turning into Shedd Park. Dahm is finally able to read the peeled writing on the driver's door, ***Billerica Bike***.

The man drops Stephen off and drives away to reveal a grid bike stand with several parked bicycles. *What are you up to, Stephen?* Dahm thinks. He watches as the boy appears to walk directly to a particular bike. Fiddling with the lock for just a few minutes, Stephen is successful in extricating it. He hops on and rides the bike to the other side of the park where **Billerica Bike** is waiting. Dahm holds back. He follows the truck back to the Marcotte house. Stephen goes directly into the house. Dahm chooses to stay with the truck. He follows it to an industrial area on Faulkner Street where ***Billerica Bike*** is running out of a warehouse bay. The truck parks in the delivery lane behind the shop.

Dahm parks up the side street and walks quickly back to the corner. Lighting a cigarette, he stands against a telephone pole keeping the truck in his line of sight. He watches as the driver comes out of the back entrance, pulls the tarp off the truck, unties the bikes and brings them into the shop, one at a time, eight in all, including the Schwinn and the banana seat bike.

* * *

Back at the station, Dahm makes a few phone calls. He'll have a city-wide report of bicycle theft complaints in a couple of days. In the meantime, he asks Sarge's help in getting a warrant for the shop in Billerica. *By the end of next week, I should have this operation all tied up in a bow*, he thinks.

Over the next few days, he coordinates LPD and BPD efforts to make sure everyone involved is rolled up; that the victims' are properly notified and their property returned. It's inconceivable that Linda Marcotte isn't aware of the criminal enterprise going on right under her nose. He'll make sure Stephen and the other kids are removed from her 'care'.

* * *

Chapter 35

“Justice is merely incidental to law and order.”
—J. Edgar Hoover

Driving to Framingham’s South Middlesex Correctional Center (SMCC), where Adele Coutu is serving a minimum of seven years, Dahm considers the amazing manner in which the closing piece of evidence he’d brought with him came into his possession. *Jackie has been a central figure in all of the cases I’ve worked so far this year...remarkable.*

Adele looks hard but healthy and not at all pleased to see him.

“If I’d known you were coming, I wouldn’t have baked a cake anyway,” she says.

“Hello, Adele. How are you holding up?”

“What do you care?” she asks. “You’re the reason I’m in here.”

“I have some news about your late husband.”

“Oh, are you going to trick me into confessing that I killed him, too?”

“No, I know it wasn’t you.”

“So, you figured out who did?”

“You had the answer all along, Adele. As a matter of fact, you threw it away.”

“You’re talking in riddles, Batman. I don’t like riddles.”

Dahm shows her a copy of the Guest Check.

Adele says, “It looks like a page out of my Cameo server pad.”

“Read it,” Dahm says.

Adele’s face seems to lengthen as she reads. “What the fuck?”
Where did you get this?”

“In your late father-in-law’s suitcase; you know, the one you
threw in the garbage.”

Shoving the note back at him, her entire person seems to shrink
at the many repercussions this note could bring.

“What happens now?” she asks.

Surprised at her reaction, Dahm says, “Nothing much changes.
I just thought you’d want to know.”

“So you won’t tell them?” she asks.

“Tell who, what?”

“The insurance company; you won’t tell them?”

“They don’t need to know, Adele.”

Inexplicably, Adele sighs and says, “Thank you.”

The reason for her expressed gratitude dawns on him. “Adele,
after two years, insurance companies are obliged by law to pay up
regardless of the manner of death. Your own father took out that
policy years ago.”

Wide-eyed, she says, “You mean, I’d get the money even if they
knew that Dave killed himself?”

The detective nods.

“Oh my God; you mean...I didn’t have to? Wait, does this
mean Dave shot himself with his father’s gun?”

“We think your husband got the gun from Louise Boisvert.”

“That slut?” But then a light seems to go on in Adele’s head.
“And his stupid father took the ring and the gun to make it look like
a murder?”

Nodding, Dahm says, “Thought you’d want to know the truth.”

“Sure you did, you son-of-a-bitch, sure you did.”

Leaving, he turns and says, “Oh, in case you’re wondering,
Davey and Plouffie are doing fine.”

* * *

On the way back to Lowell, Dahm thinks about the tragic case of David Coutu. *Everything at the crime scene pointed to murder; shot point blank in the temple through the open driver's side window, at a stop sign; no gun; no ring; truck motor on, tank out of gas.*

And, there was no shortage of suspects; a malcontent mistress, a scornful spouse and brutishly bullied Plouffie whom Leo Boisvert, Dave's rival, fingered to get me off the trail of his wife, Louise whom he falsely suspected and who, in turn, falsely suspected him.

What a dumpster fire.

Still, the old poker guys said Dave left the game the last night of his life totally defeated; indebted to and humiliated by his father. Another fact occurs to Dahm. He was a lefty! That fits the crime scene. He shot himself in the left temple, his bent elbow breaching the driver's open window. We all assumed the shooter stood outside the truck and shot in. Lesson learned.

Dahm continues to think through the details. *No suicide note, except for one belatedly written by the old man, who happened on the idling truck, took the gun and the ring and left his dead son alone, in the middle of the street, in the middle of the night. And, the old man, motivated by ignorance and greed, figured it was the one good thing he'd ever done for his desperate, dead son.*

To top it all off, Adele, his widowed daughter-in-law, also motivated by ignorance, smothered the old man when he told her Dave committed suicide. Sad; stupid, sad and stupid and tragic.

I'll check on Davey and Plouffie every once in a while, he vows.

Exiting the Lowell Connector, Dahm remembers that this is the scene of the accident that almost claimed Ray's life. *Seems like everywhere I go and everything I do is somehow connected to Jackie, including my new case, the bicycle theft ring.*

* * *

Months later, after coordinating efforts with the Middlesex County DA's office, the LPD, the BPD, DCF, and, most importantly,

his wife Caroline, Dahm's task force locks up the players in the bicycle theft ring. And DCF places Stephen, one of the conscripted minors, in his and Caroline's custody.

Sitting at the kitchen table with her, he says, "With God's help, we'll meld into a family."

"From your mouth to God's ears", she replies, hopeful but anxious. Handing him the newspaper, she says, "Look at this, Dennis. Who wouldn't want a hero for a dad?"

Dennis reads the story aloud:

"Bike Theft Ring Busted"

by Suzanne Cormier

"Phillip Michael Reardon, 47, was convicted of being the leader of a bike theft ring he ran out of his Billerica bike shop in a commercial district just north of the city. Experiencing financial troubles and racking up considerable debt, Reardon brought together a scrappy gang of bike thieves worthy of an Elmore Leonard novel.

Here's how the operation worked: A middleman, Howard Patrick McDowd, who was homeless at the time, scoped out bikes at Lowell's Shedd Park. He then passed the intel on to Mr. Reardon whose lawyer said he was dealing with a heroin addiction. Reardon's sister, Linda Lucille Marcotte of Lowell would send her foster kids out with Mr. Reardon to steal the bikes.

Marcotte and Reardon were also convicted with solicitation and contributing to the delinquency of minors for allegedly schooling them in the dark art of lock picking. Some of the contraband bikes were also stolen locally and stored in Mrs. Marcotte's basement to be picked up by Reardon and sold out of Billerica Bike.

Reardon, Marcotte and McDowd were found guilty of criminal conspiracy in the theft of more than one hundred bicycles.

Assistant District Attorney for Middlesex County, Michael O'Rourke said, "The message has to go out loud and clear that those involved in this professional criminal organization for the theft of bicycles will receive deterrent sentences."

Through our own reporting, the Lowell Sun has confirmed that Detective Dennis Dahm of the Lowell Police Department led the two-city task force in this successful effort."

"I'll have to thank Sue for that tip of the hat," Dennis says. "Ready to pick up Stephen?"

"Yes, I'm a little scared but I'm ready," Caroline replies. "Hope Stephen is."

Hope we're able to put a little color back in him, thinks Dahm.

* * *

Almost a year later, on a clear Saturday afternoon, I get a call from Caroline.

"Hi Jackie, how's everything?"

"Fine thank you. How are you?"

"We're all fine too. Is everyone home?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Raymond and Uncle Vic are fishing and Daddy and Moe are at a high school football game. Can I take a message for them?"

Making an ad hoc decision, Caroline presents the invitation as if it were always meant only for her. "Actually, you're the one I wanted to talk to. Do you remember my brother Jack and his wife, Joan?"

"Yes"

"Remember when Joan invited us to New York?"

"Yes," I say twirling the coiled telephone wire around my finger.

"Well, me, Detective Dahm and Stephen are going next weekend and we'd like you to come with us. Would you like that?"

Silence.....

“We’ll go up the Empire State building, maybe see the Statue of Liberty, maybe even take in a Broadway play! What do you think?”

“Thanks for the invitation but; well, I haven’t really talked to Stephen since you and the Detective adopted him. I’m not sure how he feels about me.”

“He’s a changed boy, Jackie; shy and quiet and grateful, I think. But, if you’re not comfortable...”

“Of course, I’d like to go with you. I’ll have to check with Raymond to see if he’ll deliver my route. But, I’m sure he’ll say yes. Thank you so much. I’ve wanted to go to New York my whole life!”

Caroline chuckles. “Well, I’m so glad you want to come. Have your father call me when he gets home. I need to hear him say it’s okay for you to come with us. Okay?”

“Yes, definitely okay; I’ll have him call you and thanks again, Mrs. Dahm.”

* * *

Chapter 36

“Children remind us to treasure the smallest of gifts, even in the most difficult of times.”

— Allen Klein

“3D folk art! Charming!” Paul says. “Who’s the artist?”

Pointing to the artist’s signature, Larry says, “Whoever, ‘Jackie’ is. I acquired them from an old friend of mine named Blanche. Did you ever meet her? She lived on the second floor when Tom and I lived on the third floor of that funeral home in Lawrence.”

“I remember that place. It was a great space but I don’t know if I could live above a funeral home. I think it would freak me out.”

“You know, something did happen, years ago that I never told anyone about.”

“Ooh, I love a good ghost story. Do tell.”

“Well, I heard that one of our landlord’s dead customers was Oliver Hardy and that his body was being shipped to Hollywood or something the next morning. It was after midnight and my friend, Richard and I had been drinking all night. We were both drunk as shit and we decided it would be a good idea to sneak downstairs to see his body.”

“I think I was there that night. Oh, man; I don’t know if I’d ever be drunk enough to do that.”

“Well, we were and, you know me, I wasn’t satisfied to just see him lying there, I had to shake his hand.”

“Shut up!”

“Yep. I shook his hand and I guess I broke his arm or something.”

“Oh my God! What do you mean?”

“We heard a pretty loud crack; I guess rigor mortis or something, I don’t know; anyway, Richard and I beat it out of there like two bats out of hell.”

“What a story!”

“I’ve never told it to anyone before.”

“Was it really Oliver Hardy?”

“Yes, it was; but Oliver wasn’t his real name. It was Noel or Novel or something like that. I don’t remember but Blanche told me it was him. What the hell, the guy was already dead so what does it matter if I broke his arm?”

“It doesn’t, I guess,” Paul agrees. “It’s desecration or something like that, though; isn’t it?”

Annoyed, Larry continues, “Anyway, when our landlord, the funeral director died, we tenants, had to move. Blanche, the woman who lived downstairs from us, flew to California to live with her brother. She told me I could have anything in her apartment I wanted. She had a lot of lovely things and believe me, I took them. I sold most of the stuff. But, these, these two pieces really spoke to me. Look at the eyes. I can’t figure out if the artist put those campy props near them to direct or deflect from the power of them.”

“You know, now that you mention it, the eyes are kinda freaky-lookin’; but not really in a bad way. In a kinda’ ethereal way, don’t you think?”

“That’s why I kept them,” agrees Larry.

“Love the box frames too; glass and rose gold, right?” asks Paul.

“Right; they scream Blanche; she was a grand old dame.”

“Are you going to show them?”

“I’m thinking about it. I billed it as a Cleve Gray exhibition but I never promised Cleve exclusivity. What do you think? Should I include a couple of unknowns?”

“Why not? It’s your gallery,” replies Paul.

“It is, isn’t it?” giggles Larry. “Who’d have believed that li’l ole me would someday grow up to have my own New York City art gallery?”

“Who believes that li’l ole you grew up? Did you know Cleve before you moved to New York?”

“Oh yes; we go way back. I actually met him when we were both students at Phillips; Phillips Academy in Andover. Of course his talent was his ticket to fame.”

“What was yours?” Paul teases.

“My inheritance, silly,” replies Larry. “Now help me open the rest of these packages, will you?”

Taking out his buck knife, Paul says “Sure.”

“Oh, the man’s dangerous,” teases Larry. “A regular Mack the Knife; don’t cut yourself.”

“I’ve had this buck knife since I was a boy scout. It’s never done me wrong,” answers Paul.

* * *

Chapter 37

**‘From the end spring new beginnings.’
— Pliny the Elder**

After hours of driving and a few pit stops, the conversation between me and Stephen, at first driven by Mrs. Dahm, has gone from polite to awkward to silent. With my head resting on the window, I’m just about asleep when the Detective announces that we’ll be there in less than thirty minutes. ‘There’ is “Uncle Jack and Aunt Joan’s” Chelsea home. Snapping to attention, I look out my window and am surprised to see that the streets in this big city are narrower than the ones in Lowell.

“Uncle Jack’s house was built in 1910,” Caroline says.

Looking out the window, I see a big, red brick house with glass-paneled, black double doors defended by a surrounding black, wrought-iron fence.

“Welcome!” says Joan throwing open the doors to reveal a 20-foot staircase at which apex is a skylight, carved out of the lath and plaster firmament that frames a bright beacon summoning us upward. It isn’t what I expected. Joan tells us that the house is a full-floor, 2,600 sq. ft. apartment. It has only two bedrooms but both are so large that Joan divided the second one using strategically placed 6-foot potted plants. A tree-lined corridor branches out into three mini maze entrances to three separate sleeping areas cleverly providing her guests with privacy and access to the upstairs bathroom.

Leading them through the creative ‘roomscape’, Joan says, “Here’s your and Dennis’ bed; Stephen, you sleep on this side of the indoor garden and Jackie, you sleep here.”

“This is fantastic, Joan! What an idea!” Caroline says.

“I have to admit it was Jack’s idea. He’s the creative one.”

“What was it that Arthur Conan Doyle said, something about ideas interpreting nature? This is a brilliant interpretation. Thank you so much!”

“It’s our pleasure. Now, set your things down; freshen up a bit if you want to and when you’re ready, we’ll all go down to the Village where Jack and a couple of his friends are waiting for us at the Café Reggio.”

“Sounds great, Joan. Thank you,” says Caroline.

I run to the window to take in the view. Looking out onto a roof-top patterned quilt, I imagine running from building to building under the cover of darkness like Cat Woman.

“Everything okay, you two?” Dahm asks.

“Great, everything’s great, Detective,” I say.

“Remember, Caroline and I will be sleeping in the clearing just beyond this tree line,” he teases. “You guys need anything, just holler.”

“You’re so weird,” says Stephen.

“Are you guys ready?” asks Caroline.

* * *

With no time to explore the house, Joan herds us onto the bluestone slate sidewalks that lead us to Uncle Jack’s favorite coffee shop.

As is my custom, I’m the last one under the beautiful, stained glass transom of the dark and smoky place. When our entourage veers left toward Uncle Jack’s table, a gleaming, steaming and hissing monstrosity, topped with Winged Victory, is revealed. An older gentleman, working its controls and levers, is reverently administering demitasses like a priest offering the Eucharist to a

line of eager, yet unworthy communicants. Transfixed, I just stand there until Uncle Jack approaches and says,

“Ah, a fellow worshipper of the two-seeded *caffea*.”

I don't know what he's talking about but I allow him to shepherd me to a group of small, round, marble-topped tables that are grouped together like lily pads. Joan encourages Stephen, morose as always, to sit between her and Caroline while Jack ushers me to the iron-backed chair between him and a grayish man named Bill who seems disinterested.

The Detective barely recognizes his brother-in-law Jack's newly adopted style of speech. It appears to him that Jack and gray Bill have a bond of affection and affectation. A gum-chewing waitress scribbles what Joan says and shortly after, one cup of marshmallow-topped hot chocolate is placed on top of a book in front of Stephen and another on top of Bill's newspaper, near-enough to me to raise my hopes.

The Detective asks, “What's good here?”

Without hesitation, Joan replies, “cannolis”.

“Cannolis and hot chocolate? Wow,” says Caroline. “I'm pretty sure that's what St. Peter serves the angels for lunch.”

“Cannolis and cappuccinis all around, then,” says Jack. “Because I fear this may be the closest thing to a celestial dining experience some of us may ever have.”

“Poets are damned... but see with the eyes of Angels,” says Bill.

Wondering what the heck they're talking about, all I can think is that *Cappuccino reminds me of Repuccini which reminds me of Mama and makes me wonder what she thinks of my New York adventure*.

While the grown-ups talk, I look around the cramped room. On the walls, are enormous paintings. One depicts three men and one woman wearing Shakespearean clothing. The woman, the only one sitting, seems to have her hand raised to stop the man in the middle who is being held by men on either side of him. Is the man in the middle a good guy being banished by an evil woman? Is she a good woman being protected from a bad man? It's impossible to tell

by their expressions. *No painting I've ever seen, no matter how fancy, has ever captured their subjects' true colors.*

"So, are you going to join us or not?" asks Jack.

"Where?" answers Caroline.

"Oh, I haven't mentioned it to them yet," interrupts Joan. "Two of Jack's old Phillips Academy buddies invited us all to an art show tonight. One of them, his name's Larry owns the gallery and is featuring the works of another, an artist named Cleve. Jack promised him we'd come. I offered that perhaps you'd all like to go. The gallery itself, the Salmagundi Museum, is a tourist attraction and it's not far from here. What do you say?"

"Sure," says Caroline, "sounds great."

Dennis shoots his wife a look that questions her definition of great. Stephen had tuned out as soon as the heavenly cannoli was served. Wearing a marshmallow mustache, I nod happily.

"I like going anywhere I've never been."

"Ah, the blind courage of youth," says Jack.

When we get to the gallery, the owner opens his arms wide to encompass both Jack and Bill. He looks somewhat familiar to me but I can't place him. *Where in the world would I have ever met someone like him?*

The troika remains bundled until Joan's hand on Jack's shoulder unravels their knot.

"Oh, Joan, I'm no competition for you," jokes Larry. "But Bill, on the other hand is up for grabs!"

"Always," laughs Bill.

"Allow me to introduce you," says Jack. "Caroline, the depository of all the family beauty, is my sister. This imposing gentleman, Dennis is her detective husband. This strapping young man is their son, Stephen. And, this intriguing young woman is their friend, Jackie."

"Very nice to meet you all. Feel free to roam this glorious museum. But, please come back to this hall in an hour; that's when

I'll be introducing Cleve, our fellow Philipps alumni and featured artist."

"Looking forward to meeting him," says Caroline. "I don't recall meeting him when I visited you at school, Jack."

"I don't think you did," agrees Jack. "He's a real artist who didn't have much time for dilettanti like me and Larry."

Stephen and I are glad to break away from this gibberish.

"What's a dilettanti?" Stephen asks.

"Beats me. Sometimes I think they're not even speaking English," I admit.

"Studying a site map, Stephen says, "Let's go to the cafeteria. Caroline gave me some money."

Inclined to reject his offer, I look at him and am struck by what looks like a feeble flame struggling for air. How had I not noticed this before? Or is he standing under another ubiquitous New York sky light?

Looking up, I'm happy to see that the glow seems to be coming from Stephen himself. Suddenly, my lingering misgivings about him begin to evaporate.

"Let's go."

Heading to the club dining room in the basement, we walk through an adjoining pub with antique pool tables. The room is empty.

Stephen says, "Wanna play?"

"Sure."

After grabbing a cue stick, I admire ornately carved table legs.

"Do you know how to play?" asks Stephen.

"No, do you?"

"Yup; before he went to jail, my dad, not Dennis, my real dad, used to take me to a place called Cappie's. He taught me. I got pretty good. Sometimes, he'd have me play against a grown-up for money. Most of the time, I won. Don't worry, I'll teach you."

We played until I learned the rules by breaking them.

“The white ball is called a cue ball. If you pocket it, that’s a scratch,” Stephen says which, to me, is no explanation at all. So I proceed to hit it into a corner hole.

“Why’d you do that?” Stephen asks.

“Well, isn’t that the point?”

After Stephen drops the rest of the balls into the holes, without ever giving me a turn, we go to the cafeteria where we each have a Coke.

Looking at Stephen’s site map, I say, “Let’s go take a quick look at all the rooms before it’s time to go back to the gallery.”

I fall in love with the library. It’s proudly musty and looks as long as the distance between Ludlam and Aiken Streets. Busts of long gone men look down their noses as they sit atop curios and bookshelves that line the dusty old room.

“Come on,” says Stephen running through a white-columned, double-chandeliered parlor with two intricately carved, white fireplaces. Brass urns, horses, angels and urchins adorn the mantels. As an homage to Aunt Blanche, I pick out D, D, D, E, F# (*Row, Row, Row Your Boat*) on the grand piano in the middle of the formal room.

“At least you’re better at piano than pool,” Stephen says.

“Maybe I can challenge people to piano duels for money,” I joke.

When a group of people enter the room, we run through the grand hallway, to the first landing of a wide, dark-wood staircase where a tall grandfather clock reminds us to hurry. At the top of the stairs, we make our way through the crowd. Taking our places beside Caroline and Dennis, we listen quietly as Larry introduces the featured artist, a man whose name, to my ears, is incongruent with his colorful person.

Mr. Cleve Gray thanks his friend, Larry and talks about his art. When he’s done, he invites questions. Uncle Jack’s is the first hand up.

“What do you recommend as the optimal viewing state for your art?”

“Thank you for the question. A well-lit room, such as this lovely gallery with its glass ceiling is optimal. In a less grandiose setting, I recommend any space with abundant natural light.”

“No, I mean in what state should the viewer be to fully appreciate your work?”

The dawn of realization makes Cleve’s face cross. *Damn you, Jack. We’re not a couple of clowning underclassmen here*, he thinks.

Larry jumps in, “If I may suggest, the viewer should be in a prosperous state so as to acquire one or more such marvelous pieces.”

Jack claps and the rest of the audience laughs. To me, the exchange is as baffling as the art itself. I attribute my lack of appreciation to a personal deficiency. When finally all the questions are asked and answered, Larry invites his patrons to follow him to the Wing of the Unknown, as he calls it. There, to my relief, are paintings of identifiable objects and subjects. Hoping to find a portrait of a living, colorful person, I browse the walls and curiously, the doors too for upon each of the closed, white double doors, hangs several smaller paintings.

Audibly catching my breath, I spot two shadow-boxed, glass-framed 3-D art pieces.

“Oh wow!” I say a lot louder than I intended.

Several people, including the Detective, react. “What’s wow-ing you?” He asks.

“That’s my Aunt Blanche and Pappy,” I say pointing to the two beautifully framed pieces.

“You know, I heard that’s the proof of good art; when it reminds you of a person or a place,” the Detective says.

“No, no, you don’t understand. That **is** my Aunt and Pappy. I drew those pictures of them when I stayed with them the summer Moe was born.”

Cocking his head, Dahm walks up to the pieces to take a close look at the signatures at the bottom of each drawing.

“Jackie,” he reads aloud. “Is that really you?”

“Yup”

“Let’s go talk to Larry,” he says.

After briefing Caroline and Jack, the Detective discreetly asks Larry if they can possibly speak privately.

“It won’t take long but it’s important,” he says.

“You’re going to want to hear them out, Larry,” Jack urges.

Larry ushers them to a small cubicle at the end of the great hall. “Okay, you have my undivided attention,” he says, “for two minutes.”

The Detective starts, “The two pieces back there, the ones in a glass frames...”

“Yes, I know which ones you mean. What about them?”

“Meet the artist,” he says placing his hand on my shoulder.

Larry shrieks and that’s when I finally place him. “I’ll be the laughing stock of the art world if this gets out,” he says. “I thought Jackie was some poor starving folk artist with pure, undiscovered talent.”

“You’re not wrong,” says Jack. “Unless, she’s not hungry; are you hungry, Jackie?”

Dismissing Jack, Larry says, “Let’s make a deal. Don’t tell anyone about this and let me keep them up until the end of the day.”

“What’s in it for her?” asks Jack.

“If they sell, you get 100% of the proceeds. If they don’t, I’ll give them back to you. Do we have a deal?”

“Two questions first; why did Aunt Blanche give them to you and who framed them like this, you or her?”

“I lived upstairs from your Aunt in Lawrence. We all had to move when Mr. Bancroft died. Your Aunt told me to take whatever I wanted. She said she’d rather I had her things than leave them for a stranger. These were hanging above her piano, framed just like this.”

Pleased, I say, “Just one more question...”

“Shoot, but hurry, please. I have to get back to my show.”

“It was you with that dead man, wasn’t it?”

Larry turns white. The others look at both of us. *Another secret*, the Detective thinks.

“I, I don’t know what you mean,” stammers Larry who remembers Dennis was introduced to him as a detective. *What does he know about this? Is there a statute of limitations?*

“Yes, you do. Just think about the Bancroft/Libby funeral home...”

Larry shrieks again.

“I’m sure it’s you. It was very dark but I recognize your voice. It was definitely you.”

Larry freaks out. *It was dark when me and Libby were arguing in that alley.* Trying to keep a calm exterior, Larry says, “Enough of this nonsense. I’m going back into the great hall. I’ll take your pieces down and give them back to you now so you can be on your way.”

Jack says, “Larry, no need for that. Why don’t you bring them around to my place tonight? Bring Cleve too; Bill will be there as well. We can talk about the living and the dead.”

This time, Larry keeps his disquiet in check. *Do they all know?* He worries. “No; I’m taking them down now. Do with them what you want, but make this little girl stop the crazy talk.”

Now Dahm’s detecting radar is fully activated. He follows Larry to the area where Jackie’s pictures are hanging. Larry gives them to Dahm and tries to turn away from him. Dahm casually touches his arm, slowing him down.

“Sorry about this, Larry. But, I’ll tell you one thing, Jackie’s not crazy. As a matter of fact, she’s helped me solve several crimes. She’s got this kind of sixth sense about people.”

Larry flinches. “You’ll have to excuse me,” he says turning his back on Dahm and walking toward the crowd gathered around Cleve.

On their way out of the museum, Dahm pulls Jack aside and says, “I can’t have these kids around drugs, Jack. It’s your house and all so if that’s a problem, we can get a hotel.”

“Nonsense, Joan’s got our place all set up” Jack says. “Besides, that’s what Hurley’s is for. If we get restless, we’ll go there.”

Having walked back to Jack’s house, the detective walks over to his parked car, opens the trunk and places Jackie’s artwork in it.

* * *

Back at the museum, Larry is relieved when it’s finally time to close. “I’ve got some private business to attend to,” he says to Paul. Closing the door of his office, he says, “I won’t be long.”

“Sure,” says Paul dropping himself into an over-sized chair. “I’ll wait here. Wake me if I fall asleep.”

Several minutes later, Larry emerges from the office.

Paul says, “Why so glum, chum? I thought you and Cleve did pretty well.”

“What would you say to a little vacation?” Larry asks.

“When, where?”

“Some place warm and sunny with no extradition agreement.”

Raising an eyebrow, Paul asks, “Why? And why now?”

“Do you want to come or would you rather stay here and play twenty questions?”

“I want to go.”

“Go home and pack. I’ll have a car pick you up in two hours. As if coming to his senses, he says, “on second thought, how old would you say that little brat is?”

“What little brat?”

“The brat that came with Jack and Joan.”

“Oh, I hardly noticed her; too busy looking at her hunky father.”

“He’s not her father; anyway, how old would you guess she is? Not more than ten, twelve?”

“I think that’s right.”

“Then, nevermind. We’re not going anywhere. At least, not tonight.”

“Not even out for dinner?” Paul asks disappointedly.

“How would you like to go to Minetti’s?”

“Delightful”

“I have to make another call first,” says Larry.

Paul overhears Larry speaking to his real estate agent: “Pull the listing. The place is not for sale.”

After a few minutes of silence, Larry says, “I know, I know, if I do sell it, it’s yours. I promise.”

* * *

Back at Jack’s and Joan’s place, all the grown-ups, except Caroline, smoke and drink wine or scotch. Joan makes a cheese sandwich and gives half to me and the other half to Stephen.

In a room full of mismatched, low angular furniture, I feel like the round hassock with the tasseled skirt. That’s where I set my half-sandwich. Joan offers me a glass of milk. The gray man, Bill whose last name, Burroughs matches his donkey-like looks, devours my sandwich. No one except me and Stephen notice even though he makes no attempt to hide it in his mouth while talking; he has, apparently written a book about eating lunch naked. *Gross!*

Stephen, whose color is deepening, offers me a bite of his. Just then Donkey Bill, with whetted appetite, proclaims, “To Minetta’s, on me!”

We all file out of the townhouse to walk, in twos, on the fractured sidewalks of the narrow streets. Caged tree trunks every twenty feet or so contain giraffe-like trees that strain to kiss in the sky between buildings.

The men marshal the group with Caroline and Joan following and me and Stephen bringing up the rear. The city excites me and I think about splintering from the group to explore it on my own. The Detective seems to sense that because he stops to allow Jack, Donkey Bill and the women to pass.

“What do you think of the city, kids?” He asks.

Stephen shrugs. I say, “Big and crowded; I love it.”

As if reading my mind, Dahm says, “Tomorrow, we’ll take in the sights.”

“Can’t wait.”

“What exactly were you and Larry talking about?” he asks.

“It’s a pretty long story,” I say.

“I’d like to hear it sometime.”

* * *

Minetta’s neon sign and its wonderful aroma of herbs, garlic, and tomato sauce greet us even before we enter the corner tavern. Just outside its doors, Donkey Bill greets a man named Allen whom Jack then introduces to us as Irwin. So, I don’t know what his name is but it doesn’t matter because he doesn’t listen to ours.

“Where are you staying?” Donkey Bill asks him.

“Is there anywhere else but the Chelsea?” he answers.

“Indeed not,” Donkey Bill says ushering him into the restaurant as the rest of our large party follows. Upon entering, the first thing I notice is the black and white, diamond-patterned tile floor. The eight of us are seated in a red leather booth that snakes against the dark-paneled wall and curls across the back corner. While Caroline and the Detective look at the menus, my eyes feast on the hand-drawn murals of the country that inspired them.

The Montenegrin manager, Taka rushes over to greet us. “Dobrodošli, ući.”

Taking Joan aside, he says, “Your friend, Larry thought you might be coming here for dinner. He asked me to give you a message. He wants you to be his conduit to his real estate guy. He’s putting his museum up for sale.”

“What? There must be some mistake, Taka. We were just there this afternoon. He never said a word about selling it.”

“I don’t know. That’s his message. He said he’ll call you soon.” Handing her a piece of paper, he adds, “Here’s the name of his agent. I wrote it down so I don’t forget.”

“Did he say where he was going or how long he’d be away?”

“No, Miss Joan; that’s all he said. He’ll be in touch with you soon, that’s all he said.”

Just then, Larry and Paul enter Minetta’s.

“There he is,” says Taka. “You talk to him.”

“Put a chair at the end of our booth and we’ll all scoot over a bit to make room for the two of them,” says Joan.

“You got it,” says Taka happy to be relieved of service as a go-between.

“Hey guys, glad you could join us. Where’s Cleve?” asks Jack.

“Carnegie Hill in a patron’s lap,” says Larry.

“Why are you selling the museum?” asks Joan.

“Oh, I’m not.”

“But, Taka said...”

“Changed my mind,” says Larry.

“We’re artists,” Jack says. “We’re unpredictable. That’s part of our charm. Besides, Larry’s always been a nut job.”

Under my breath, I say, “Wow!”

“What’s that?” asks Dahm who’s studying me while mulling Larry’s erratic decisions.

“Nothing,” I say. *Paul’s light dims when he gets close to Larry.*

Two waiters place two large bowls of spaghetti and meatballs on our table.

“Minetta family style,” says Jack. “Keep the bowls brimmed.”

Joan and Caroline sloppily fill and pass pasta plates around putting everyone at ease; everyone except Larry who seems to be staring at me.

Dahm notices. “So small world, isn’t it, Larry?”

“Small table, small people, big bowls,” says Donkey Bill.

Paul laughs for no obvious reason.

Nodding, Larry says, “Apparently my friend, Blanche is Jackie’s aunt.”

“Great aunt,” I say.

“Great friend,” agrees Larry.

After a while, Larry asks, "So, Blanche is your mother's sister?"
 "Grandmother's," I say.

Raising his glass of wine, he says, "So that means you're not old enough to drink then; are you?"

"She's not even old enough to know it's life's greatest milestone," says Jack.

Relief loosens Larry. *It isn't mathematically possible. She's far too young to have seen me in the alley with Libby.*

I say, "It was you, wasn't it?"

"What?" asks Larry in a voice that doesn't seem like his, even to him.

"You were the one with the dead guy," I say.

"Lucien and now you?" Allen exclaims.

"You shut up!" say Jack and Larry at the same time; Jack to Allen and Larry to me.

The detective says, "Take a step back, all of you. Either tell all of us what's underlying this little mind game or drop it."

"I vote we drop it," says Joan.

"Me too," says Caroline.

"Not me," whispers Stephen who slouches into his seat at the detective's admonishing look.

Jack says, "Good idea; next subject: marinara: art or literature?" Then he slurps a disappearing strand of spaghetti.

"It's music," I say.

"An Italian symphony," agrees Jack with a wink, "piccolo pasta." Then he loudly slurps another noodle.

"A bit beneath you, P'tit Jean," says Donkey Bill. "But I'll drink to it."

"To Nu-hara!" toasts Jack.

"Ah, noodle harassment!" returns Donkey Bill. "One of many Oriental culinary contributions."

Jack and Donkey Bill drink deeply and slam their glasses down.

"I'm disinclined to raise my glass to the unfamiliar," says Allen or Irwin.

In response, Jack raises his glass again offering another toast, “Santé!”

Most everyone repeats Santé and sips from their glasses; even me and Stephen.

After slamming his glass on the table even more loudly, Jack asks, “Anyone here ever had a near death experience?”

“Does someone else’s death count?” asks Irwin or Allen.

Larry’s face darkens.

“It did to Lucien,” says Donkey Bill.

“Lucien again?” complains Caroline.

Jack flashes angrily, “Enjambment terrible.”

From the clueless looks around the table, I’m guessing I’m not the only one who has no idea what Uncle Jack means.

Lowering his head to mine, the Detective whispers to me, “Jackie, I need a yes or no. Do you suspect Larry of a crime?”

I shake my head. “I’m not sure if it’s a crime.”

Wiping his mouth with his napkin, the Detective pushes back his chair and says, “Will you excuse us for a moment, Jackie needs some air and I’m going to take her outside.”

Once outside, the Detective says, “Okay, what do you know about Larry that’s making him so nervous?”

“I know that he and a friend of his snuck into Pappy’s funeral parlor, opened a casket and Larry shook the dead man’s hand.”

The detective took a minute or two. “The man was already dead?”

“Yup,”

“And Larry shook his hand and that’s it?”

“Yup; I put the dead man’s hand back inside the casket and shut the cover after they ran out.”

“And what were you doing there?”

Blushing, I admit, “I snuck down there after them. They didn’t know I was there. I watched the whole thing. When I dropped my knife...”

“What were you doing with a knife?”

With deepening shame, I admit, “I took it from Aunt Blanche’s kitchen and when I dropped it, Larry and his friend screamed and ran back upstairs. So, I guess they trespassed and disturbed the dead. But, I guess I did too. Does that make us criminals?”

The detective says, “I’ll let it go.”

Relieved, I say, “I’m so glad I finally told someone about that night. I’ve felt bad about it ever since.”

“You said Larry and a friend. Was the friend Paul?”

“No, it was someone else.”

“You said Larry is dark; do you mean ‘bad guy’ dark?”

I nod. “I don’t like him very much.”

“Me neither,” says the Detective convinced that Larry is guilty of much more than an irreverent prank. “Hey, do you still have that file on Mr. Libby that Miss Cormier gave you?”

“Yes....but not with me. You don’t think Larry killed Mr. Libby, do you?”

Dahm answers, “I don’t know.” *But, I’m going to find out.* “No more about this for now. Let’s just go back inside and finish our meal.”

When the detective and I get back to our table, Joan says, “Oh good. Now that we’re all here, let’s pick a cheery subject.”

“Existential story, anyone?” persists Jack. “Let’s go ‘round the table.”

Everyone shakes their heads except me. The detective senses that Larry’s ease is again broken. *Jackie still makes him anxious.*

“We don’t really die, you know,” I say.

Larry emits a bird-like squawk that goes unnoticed to all but the Detective.

“No? Well, hear that, Joan? That’s cheery. Tell us more, Jackie,” Jack says.

Before I can continue, Jack groans. His sister, Caroline kicked him under the table.

Donkey Bill says, “Mahatma Gandhi warns, ‘The pursuit of truth does not permit violence on one’s opponent.’”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Dahm. I don’t mind.” Continuing, I say, “When we’re born, we come out of our mother’s bodies and when we die, we come out of our own. Most of the time, it’s painful. We’re pushed and squeezed and forced out of the only life we’ve ever known. We don’t want to leave but we have no choice. When we die, the same thing happens. We don’t want to leave but we have no choice. We’re delivered, either way.”

No one says anything. Feeling a little embarrassed, I blush.

Stephen whispers, “Your face looks like a tomato.”

“May I be excused? I have to use the Ladies’ Room.”

The Detective stands to let me pass. I feel his protective eyes on me as I make my way to the bathroom.

When Jackie’s out of sight, Dahm turns to Larry and says, “How well did you know Mr. Libby?”

Looking stunned, Larry shifts his eyes to his plate, stabs a meatball with his fork as though it were trespassing and finally says, “I didn’t.”

“Libby owned the building you lived in, didn’t he?” the Detective persists.

“My understanding is that Mr. Bancroft owned it. Besides, Mr. Libby was already dead when I moved into the top floor apartment.”

“Of course, he was,” says Dahm causing Larry to flinch again as if slapped. “Anyway, I thought you knew him.”

“No.”

Disregarding Larry’s answer, Dahm continues, “I hear they’re re-opening his murder case; hot new lead.”

Dahm stares at Larry through the silence until Larry’s friend, Paul breaks it:

“Not to justify his murder or anything but he was a stone-cold homophobe, wasn’t he, Larry?”

Looking at Larry’s darkening face, Paul gets nervous. To his dinner plate, he says, “Oh, I don’t know why I say half the things I say. Don’t mind me.”

“Ah, a hater of men who love men,” says Donkey Bill. “May he rest in his just desserts.”

“Speaking of dessert, who wants some?” asks Joan.

Stephen is disappointed when no one seems interested.

Caroline says, “I’m stuffed and ready to call it a day. It’s been a long one.”

Her detective husband says, “I’m ready too. I’ve got to work tomorrow.”

“Work? We’re supposed to be on vacation, Dennis,” complains Caroline. “I promised the kids we’d do some sightseeing.”

“And we will,” he assures. “I hear the 6th precinct is quite picturesque. Anyway, I just have to go down there to pick up a file I asked the Lawrence PD to overnight.”

“Lawrence? I thought you lived in Lowell,” says Larry.

“Murder knows no jurisdiction or statute of limitation,” Dahm says studying Larry whose empty water glass suddenly slides a good six inches across the lacquered table unaided.

Paul says, “Did you see that? That was cool. Your glass moved all by itself.”

Larry pushes his seat back and says, “Come on, Paul; it’s time to go.”

As Larry and Paul say their good-byes, I emerge from the ladies room and head back to our table. When I cross in front of the kitchen, its swinging door is kicked open and a server, carrying a large round tray on his shoulder, breezes by me. For a few seconds before the door swings closed, I stand there exposed to the bustling kitchen. The dishwasher is staring at me. I’m astonished when I recognize him. When I return to my table, the Detective stands to let me back in the booth.

“You missed a feat of magic,” Jack says. “Larry’s glass moved across the table scaring him into leaving us.”

Surprising myself, I say, “Murderers are afraid of ghosts.”

Appalled, Caroline says, “Jackie!”

“Murderers and Aunties too, apparently,” adds Donkey Bill.

“You too, Bill?” jokes Jack.

What do they mean? What auntsies?

“Don’t pay them any mind,” says Joan. “Really enjoyed the show today, Larry.”

“Yes, thanks for inviting us,” Caroline adds.

Staring at me, Larry says, “Yes, well. It’s good-bye then.”

Dahm says, “See you tomorrow, Larry.”

“Not likely,” Larry replies.

The detective just smiles. When Larry and Paul finally leave, I whisper in Dahm’s ear, “The man who beat up Uncle Vic works here. I saw him washing dishes.”

“Leo Boisvert?” Dahm asks.

Nodding, I say, “Or as Uncle Vic calls him, the *bâtard*.”

“Well what do you know? Birds of a feather flock to Minetta’s together.”

Soon, Donkey Bill signals one of the waiters who is standing nearby. “Check please.”

The waiter nods and heads to the little office desk tucked just inside the kitchen where he quickly tallies the bill. There, Leo the dishwasher approaches him, “Hope that 10-top tips big. Who are they, anyway? High muckamucks?” he asks.

“Yeah, they’re the beat writers and artists, regulars mostly,” says the waiter. “Usually tip pretty good.”

After delivering the check to the booth, the waiter notices Leo is staring out the door’s rectangular, vinyl window. He wonders if Leo’s staring at him but is quickly disabused of that notion when he returns and Leo remains transfixed. *That little shit ruined my life*, thinks Leo.

Thanks and good-byes dutifully exchanged by all, we head to our respective roofs. When they’re settled in for the night, Caroline whispers to Dennis, “What an interesting day.”

“Certainly was,” Dahm agrees.

* * *

Chapter 38

“Nothing is more wretched than the mind of a man conscious of guilt.”

— Plautus

Early the next morning, the phone breaks the quiet. Joan leaps out of bed and runs into the hall to answer it.

“What? Oh, no! How awful! Hold on, I’ll get Jack.”

“Jack, wake-up, wake-up. Bill’s on the phone. Something terrible’s happened.”

Fighting to break through the fog of chemically induced sleep and alcohol, Jack rubs his fists into his eyes. “What, what?”

“Bill’s on the phone.”

“Tell him to call back.”

“You better take the call, Jack. It’s about Larry.”

Putting his arms through the bathrobe Caroline is holding up for him, Jack heads for the hall tightening the cloth belt around his waist.

“Yeah?”

That’s all he says for several minutes. Finding the second to bottom step, he lowers himself onto it. Behind him, Dennis descends the stairs slowly and quietly. He suspects his brother-in-law is hearing bad news. After Jack cradles the phone, he looks over his shoulder at Dennis and says, “Can’t believe it. That was Bill. Larry killed Paul.”

In the detective's mind, connections are clicking; none of them good. He and Joan listen quietly as Jack recounts what Bill told him.

"After Larry and Paul left Minetta's, they went to the West End Bar and got themselves skunked. Apparently, they were arguing and were asked to leave. From there, they went to Riverside Park where the argument escalated into violence. Larry told Bill that he stabbed Paul in the heart with Paul's own knife. When he realized that he had killed Paul, Larry panicked and rolled Paul's body down the hill into the Hudson. Then Larry walked over to Bill's, rang his doorbell and told him what he'd done. Bill called the cops and when they arrived, Larry went with them without a fight. Bill just got home from the station. He says the police are out looking for Paul's body." After reflecting on Lucien for a minute, Jack adds, "It's a tragic case of déjà vu."

Dennis runs back upstairs saying, "I'm gonna get dressed and go down to the station. Will you tell Caroline I'll be back as soon as I can?"

"Of course," says Joan.

* * *

At the station, Dennis flashes his badge and asks to see the case detective. After several minutes, a big man in a light blue suit, white open-collared shirt and loosened dark tie approaches Dennis who offers his hand. The big man hesitates a minute, then shakes it.

"I'm a busy man, so let's make this quick," he says.

"Appreciate that; your perp is a person of interest in a cold case in Massachusetts. I have reason to believe he's involved in the murder of a man named Libby."

"Did you say, Libby? He's been repeating that name. I thought it was some kind of a nickname for the floater he launched into the Hudson this morning."

Dennis clarifies, “Your vic’s Paul Arsenaault; our vic’s Francis Libby. Your perp and Paul were close. Libby owned the building the perp lived in several years ago.”

“Well, what do you know? We got ourselves a twofer. Guy’s a big time mess. Brought him in reeking of booze and vomit, covered in blood, most likely his vic’s. Thought he was a bum but turns out he owns a highfalutin art gallery in the village.”

“Yeah, my wife and I actually attended a show there last night. That’s when we met him and the vic. We were introduced by the guy who brought him in.”

“Bill? Yeah, we cut him loose. Well, we got our perp dead to rights; found the murder weapon right where he told us we would. Divers pulled out the body a little while ago. Figured it was a crime of passion; high of heel, you know. I just couldn’t figure out where Libby fit in. Follow me. He’s still in Interrogation One. You can have at him.”

“Thank you, Detective,” says Dennis.

Upon entering the room, Dennis stays silent while Larry erupts, “I didn’t mean to kill him. But the way that girl talked to me. It was too much. It was just too much! She’s a ghoul; a ghoul! Libby deserved it. Libby deserved it! I told Paul to keep his mouth shut but he kept talking about what that awful girl said. She knows; somehow, she knows and because of her, Paul had to die; had to shut him up. Libby deserved it. Libby deserved it and so does that little bitch.”

The NYPD case detective listening in on the other side of the two-way mirror thought the little bitch Larry was referring to was Paul. Detective Dahm had a feeling Larry was actually referring to Jackie. He decided to call Caroline to let her know he’d be at the Kerouac’s soon and they’d go sightseeing, as promised.

“Ask Jackie to come to the phone for a minute. I have some good news for her,” Dennis says to his wife.

“What do you mean, Dennis? Isn’t she with you?” Caroline shouts.

“No. As far as I know, she was sleeping when I left. Is Stephen gone too?”

“No, he’s here. He’s been sulking all morning because you didn’t take him too.”

“When did you notice she was gone?” Dennis asks.

“When I woke up about eight, everyone was gone except for me and Stephen.”

“Well then maybe Jackie’s with your brother and Joan.”

“Yes, that must be it,” Caroline says. “Maybe out to breakfast. Maybe I should go out and walk around to nearby coffee shops.”

“No, stay there in case they come back. I’m on my way now,” Dennis says, “Don’t worry.”

Meanwhile, Dennis is worried, very worried indeed.

THE END

Our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalk again; we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life.”

— Jack Kerouac