

A crime scene photograph of a wooden desk. A circular metal lock is broken and lying on the desk surface. A key is inserted into the lock mechanism. The desk is covered with blood splatters. The background shows a patterned rug and a wooden cabinet with drawers.

# The Case of the Locked Drawer

**Larry  
Winebrenner**

*Novelist*



*The victim was found sprawled on a desk in which a locked drawer contained the murder weapon. Who killed the victim? Why was the weapon in the locked drawer? How did the weapon get into the locked drawer?*

*All these questions had to be answered to solve the crime--- and the police hadn't done it in two years. How was Etta to do it using only her telephone and computer--- Mephistopheles?*

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by Larry Winebrenner

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The Case of the Locked Drawer

A Henri Derringer Mystery

by

Larry Winebrenner

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Larry Winebrenner

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## Dedication

Mabel Higgins, beloved librarian at Beall High School in Frostburg, Maryland encouraged me to write. “Dedicate your first book to me,” she requested.

“I promised my mother that my first one would be to her,” I explained.

“Then make the second one mine.” she said.

I felt she firmly believed that one day I'd write books. She was right. My first book, a book on poverty was dedicated to Mother. It was a textbook, used internationally. It is out of print and badly out of date. I hope this one lasts a bit longer, for I want the name of Mabel Higgins to be remembered.

This book is lovingly dedicated to my mentor and dearly loved friend,

Mabel Higgins

Beall High School Librarian

## Chapter One

*What Ceal saw horrified her. He was going to push Etta face forward into the pool. The weight of the chair would hold her under. Ceal thought to charge out the door, shouting at him to stop.*

*That's when she saw the Army .45 tucked in his belt in the small of his back. No need for two dead victims. But what could she do?*

*Skeets grabbed the handles of the chair and rushed forward. Ceal shot out the door, screaming for help. Unknown to her, Dan's posted security guard was across the street watching traffic entering and leaving the premises. He heard her scream, but he was over one hundred yards away.*

*Ceal watched—as if in slow motion—the scene before her. Skeets had the chair, speeding for the pool. Ceal screamed. Skeets's head swung toward her. He let go of one handle, reaching for his gun. Etta grabbed the hand rails on the wheels of the chair. She forced the chair to do a one eighty degree turn. Skeets was flung toward the pool. He dropped the gun. He grabbed the chair with both hands. Slowly the chair tilted over backwards. On top of him. He sank. The chair sank.*

*Ceal saw Etta take one huge gasp of air before her head went under. Skeets, chair, Etta settled on the bottom of the pool. As Ceal dove she saw Skeets thrashing. Etta was lying back in the chair. Almost serene. Almost as if taking a nap. Etta was thinking back to how this all began.*

\* \* \*

The murder weapon was in a locked drawer of the desk over which the murdered man slumped.

Aha! Thought Henri Derringer. Just the kind of case I like.

That's when it began.

Ninety-two year old Henrietta Derringer sat purposefully staring intently at her computer screen. She scanned the search engine page that just came up.

She had typed *open police cases* in the search box. Etta, as she was called, felt a warm glow of satisfaction. She had just

successfully solved a baffling murder. All from her room at Epworth Village Retirement Community in Miami-Dade County, Florida.

In a wheel chair.

Using only her computer, telephone and wits.

Etta stared out the window to rest her eyes.

“Look away from that computer screen ten minutes every hour,” her ophthalmologist had warned her. “Unless you want to go blind.”

Out the window she could see the residents’ greenhouse, a mango tree, the canal separating Epworth Village from Westland Mall, and beyond the greenhouse, the pale green wall of of Building two. The sky was clear. She was happy for the air conditioning that foiled the sun’s glaring heat.

While she could not see them all, there were altogether five apartment buildings. Each had a courtyard. Each was three stories tall. Each had sixty apartments some one bedroom, some two bedroom, some one bath, some two bath.

Etta took her eyes from the window and scanned her own apartment. She and her husband Randy had a two bedroom, two bath apartment on the first floor of the building. There was also a large living room/dining room area, and a kitchenette. This was Henri Derringer’s hidden abode. No one knew that the famous Henri Derringer was a red-headed female nonagenarian living in Florida. She carefully rinsed her hair daily. “To keep it’s original red sheen,” she told her husband, Randy.

Every day she wore a different white Laura Clément Linen Tunic carefully ironed by her blue-veined hands. Some days she wore it with a black washable riding-skirt. Today it was a long denim skirt. Her “working clothes,” as she liked to call them.

Speculations were that Henri Derringer was a criminal justice college student working as a night watchman. Or maybe a retired detective from a police force in Los Angeles. Or the Big Apple. Or some other large city.

Some even believed he was head of Special Security Force for the Derringer Foundation Fund. The email address was “Henri

Derringer” securitychief@derringerfoundationfund.com.

Her pleasure, however, didn’t come from her unknown identity. She had created that fiction only to protect her family.

Etta had often been asked if she were somehow related to the manufacturers of the small pistol. She had no idea, she would reply. It was her name by marriage. Her maiden name was Martin. She was not interested in genealogy, particularly for her husband’s line. She had no desire to research the matter.

It did spark an idea, though.

She decided a few years previously to explore a clue in a sensational murder case. The official investigators were ignoring it. She realized there might be negative repercussions if she stuck her nose in an official investigation.

She might be charged with interfering with a police investigation.

Or, maybe she would suggest something actionable in a question she asked.

Or, maybe she would even get too close to the truth and spur the murderer to shut her up.

Whatever. She decided she needed a shield. That’s when she remembered all the times she had been asked if she were related to that Derringer line. She checked by computer for Derringer, Inc.; Derringer, LLC; Derringer Co.; Derringer Foundation, and every other business form of the name she could think of—including misspellings.

Then she went to a hosting site that hosted the cheap domain names they sold, and provided unlimited email addresses. Just to cover herself, she used information provided by *Consult One* in St. Petersburg, Florida to incorporate the Derringer name.

That done, she established

“Henri Derringer” <securitychief@derringerfoundationfund.com>

as her investigative email address.

In that first case she explored questions she saw authorities had left unanswered. She was not satisfied simply to collect and



read news stories from newspapers, transcripts of radio and television broadcasts, and other publicly available materials.

She found home addresses at whitepages.com and wrote to them from a mail drop in Chicago. When she could obtain email addresses, she corresponded by email.

Etta also derived pleasure from that accomplishment. She was thrilled when she finished what authorities called amateur meddling. She knew that “meddling” solved the case.

Henri Derringer quickly launched another computer based investigation.

Her last case had been “lucky seven.” Now she was after “straight eight.”

Etta hated using the “hunt and peck” system endowed by her crippling arthritis. In her early years at Alfred State Insurance Corp., she had won a typing competition by averaging 123 words a minute with no mistakes. And on that manual Underwood, she reflected.

Underwood! The name leaped right off the page at her. Like a flashing neon sign.

She had just done a quick check on a couple of drive by shootings. That didn't seem promising. Then the name Underwood popped up. The reference line read:

It's been two years today since police declared the Underwood murder an open and shut case. The septic tank business owner . . .

Etta clicked the link and the *Hagersville Herald* online edition story popped up. The story was two weeks old.

If they haven't solved it in two years, it's not likely they solved it in another two weeks thought Etta. This, like the other seven were not high profile cases. That's the way Etta liked them. Not a lot of publicity as she worked. Not unless she generated it. She read:

It's been two years  
today since police  
declared the

Underwood murder  
an open and shut case.  
The septic tank  
business owner was  
murdered in his office  
sometime between  
4:00 P.M. and  
closing. The deceased  
always closed at 5:00  
P.M. sharp. “You  
could set your watch  
by his closing time,”  
said Clyde Stuffe (it’s  
pronounced  
“stuff-fay” insists  
Clyde). He got to the  
parking lot behind the  
office five minutes  
after closing time.

“I was caught by a  
stuck gate at the  
railroad track,”  
explained Mr. Stuffe.  
“I knew Mr.  
Underwood didn’t  
like to close up shop  
until all the trucks  
were in, but you could  
set your watch by his  
closing time. I knew I  
was in trouble. But I  
tried his door just in  
case. That’s when I  
saw the body.”

Now, two years later  
the case still has not  
been solved. Clyde  
Stuffe was cleared of  
any suspicion.

Item—the collection  
for the orphanage was  
missing. It had been  
dropped off by

Augusta Platte at 4:00 P.M. Mrs. Platte saw Underwood place the bank bag containing the cash into the file drawer as always. He always deposited the money on Monday morning.

Item—Mr. Stoffe did not have time to hide the cash. Item—Mr. Stoffe had no powder residue from the .38 revolver on his hands.

Poor dear, thought Etta, as she tried to ease some of the pain in her hands. She rapidly rubbed them together to warm them. She previously tried a gentle massage. That hadn't worked.

She thought further. Poor dear unless the wife killed him. She turned back to the story. There wasn't much here. Words, but little information. The article obviously was a filler in a slow news day.

Still, she read on.

Chester Underwood's gun indeed was the murder weapon.

It was found in a drawer in the desk over which he was slumped. He had been shot at close range with the pistol. All fingerprints had been carefully wiped away.

Mrs. Underwood was suspected for a time because of a \$100,000 insurance policy.

That's when the police claimed they had an open and shut case. Mr. Underwood had a .38 caliber revolver. It was believed she used it to murder her husband for the insurance money.

Clair Underwood was cleared of suspicion at the insistence of Clarence Hedges, former partner of Underwood. He sold his share of the business to Underwood and went into real estate.

He came to town the evening Underwood was shot. He had called the previous day to visit with his old friends and take them to supper.

When he arrived in town, he was devastated to find his old friend had been murdered.

Mr. Hedges insisted that Mrs. Underwood be cleared of suspicion. To begin with, she was deathly afraid of guns. She

would not have a gun in the house. That was the reason, and not for protection, that Chester Underwood kept the gun in his desk drawer at work.

Second, declared Clarence Hedges, he had called Clair Underwood just before 5:00 P.M. to suggest the couple meet him at River Bluff Restaurant since he was running a bit late. She received his call on her home phone. With rush hour traffic, it would be impossible for her to cross the Flint River bridge and get to the office in less than half an hour. Underwood's body had been found by then.

The murder was a tragedy all around. A man was murdered. According to Augusta Platte, over \$35,000 in orphanage money was stolen. And Clair Underwood has been able to keep her husband's business operating only by the sacrificial time Clarence Hedges has been providing to consult with her as she struggles on after

two years.

And no prospects by  
the police for solving  
this crime.

Etta rubbed her hands together. Not to get them warm. This was the kind of case she liked.

“Grandma!” called a voice.

It was MaryAnne. Etta quickly accessed a solitaire game.

## Chapter Two

“Grandma,” came the insistent cry.

“In here child,” Etta answered.

MaryAnne rushed into the room. The blond woman was breathless. Her dark brown eyes surprised you. Such beautiful light blond hair didn’t call for eyes so dark.

She paused for breath. Her full breasts rose and fell beneath her ruffled, Mandarin-collar blouse. Her white bell bottoms and deck shoes gave her a nautical look.

“Grandma! Wonderful news,” she finally spit out. “Those stocks you insisted I invest your money in. It split three ways!!”

Etta didn’t have the heart to tell MaryAnne that she already knew. She’d checked it out earlier that afternoon.

She had insisted MaryAnne invest all Etta’s liquid assets in a particular stock. An email message received from a stockbroker motivated the action. The man called himself “the Other Henry.” Or “O Henry” for short.

To: “Henri Derringer” <chief@derringerfoundatio n.org/security>

From: “O Henry” <CEO@thomasinvestment group.org>

Subject: Advice

Hi Henri my good friend and savior.

I know you will not reveal your identity, nor want any reward or recompense for the gift of life and the removal of guilt you presented me. But I will never forget you or what you did.

Xcdf fddr xlkj uyvq poki  
gexi desl cccx trtr bald uhev  
lpwz i8ux j7yt 33sp bhyt.

If you will allow me, it cannot be considered insider trading.

Your ever grateful friend, O Henry

There seemed to be an encrypted message in the post.. The

cryptogram itself—within the post—was meaningless garbage. It was to mislead any hackers, or others, who might intercept it.

There was a hidden meaning, however.

*O Henry* had offered to make investments back when Etta had cleared him of murder. She refused, explaining she did not want to risk having her identity discovered.

As far as *O Henry* was concerned, Henri was not a she. Henri was a he. Henri Derringer was chief of security for the Derringer Foundation Fund. And he was totally insulated from the world.

Except for the very limited few he gave his email address to.

*O Henry* told Henri Derringer, “Some day I will have a really promising investment opportunity. One that will knock your socks off.

“I’ll contact you then. I’ll mention insider trading somewhere in the message.”

The broker must have known that term would raise a red flag for Henri Derringer.

So he explained, “The opportunity will have nothing to do with actual insider trading. The phrase is only a code for immediate action.

“When that happens, when you receive that message, you must act quickly. Even before the Exchange opens next business day. I’ll alert my staff that I’m expecting a message from *O Henry*.

“Have any trusted representative contact my office. The representative must say there is a message from *O Henry*. When the representative speaks to me personally, have him or her say, ‘Henri wants you to invest . . . ‘ and indicate a sum.

“I will cover any amount specified. *Any* amount. The actual funds can be transferred from your bank to me later. The important matter is speed.”

Etta hadn’t even remembered that promise until the recent email post had arrived. Earlier on the day the email message had arrived, she had listened attentively to *MaryAnne* complain about



her stocks taking a nosedive.

As MaryAnne headed out the door after that comfort session, Etta had opened a current email post.

“MaryAnne!” she cried. “Come back. I was so busy listening to you I forgot a crucial errand I need you to run.”

MaryAnne came back in. She gave MaryAnne instructions for making the investment. She made it sound like the clandestine arrangement it was. But she hinted at a former lover.

“Does Grandpa know about . . .” MaryAnne started.

“Your Grandpa knows everything,” Etta said.

That was just yesterday. Now MaryAnne had returned.

She said, “I hope you don’t mind, Grandma. But that red eye flight to New York excited me. I invested some of my money, too.”

“Much?”

“Everything I had invested earlier. I asked O Henry if I could make an investment, too.

“Do you know Henri Derringer?” he asked.

“I told him I was sorry, but I didn’t.

“Who sent you?” he asked.”

Etta looked with alarm. “Did you tell him you were my granddaughter?”

MaryAnne laughed. “I played it just like you said. He asked me if I were a Derringer. I pretended I didn’t know what he was talking about. I said I was a Greene. If he was testing me, I’m sure I passed with flying colors—”

“I’m sure you did pass with flying colors,” said Etta.

“Then he said yes, I could invest. I told him about my stocks. Grandma, he’s a beautiful man. I don’t mean handsome. That, too, with his coal black hair closely cut, and dark, dark brown eyes . . .”

Etta glanced at MaryAnn when the young woman said, “dark, dark brown eyes,” there was more than description there.

“ . . . and bulging muscles,” MaryAnn continued. “He listened to me. Really listened. Like you do, Grandma.”

Etta smiled inwardly.

“He said he would sell my stocks for top dollar and invest the funds in the same stocks as yours, but in my name. He looked carefully at the certificates I handed him. He nodded his approval.”

MaryAnn stole a glance at Etta.

“I could tell it was approval,” she explained. “By the way he nodded. How he hummed. I wasn’t sure whether he was checking the investments or making sure my name was Greene.”

She hesitated, but Etta knew she wanted to say more.

“When he found out about my travel agency, he even said he’d pass along some business my way”

“You can trust him with your future investments. He’ll never steer you wrong. And you can depend on his travel business. But if he, or any of his associates ever ask how you know the person you made the investment for, always insist it was a one time errand arranged through a third party who would not tell you who he is.”

“He?”

“Another little part of the intrigue, honey,” said Etta. “I’ll explain it all some day.” She could see that MaryAnne doubted she would live long enough to explain it. She added, “Or I’ll leave a written explanation if I die first.”

“Oh, Grandma, you’re not going to die,” exclaimed MaryAnne.

“Ever?”

“Ever.”

Etta wondered if she should take MaryAnne into her confidence. Afterall, it was MaryAnne that insisted Etta and Randy sell their condo and move to Epworth Village Retirement

Community.

Etta had resisted MaryAnne's previous attempts to get them to move. Then Randy had that heart attack. It was minor, but it was sufficient to make Etta realize she needed a secure place for Randy.

MaryAnne had stormed into the hospital.

"I'm not taking no for an answer any more," she declared. "I've found an oasis of love for you to move to. With Grandpa's railroad retirement, your pension and social security, you'll have plenty to cover your expenses. You can sell your condo and invest that money. If you run short of cash, I'll provide it. But you're not going to live alone any more."

"O.K." said Etta.

"O.K.?" said a startled MaryAnne, the wind knocked out of her sails. "O.K.? Without even knowing where you're going?"

"If you picked it out, honey, I'm sure it will be fine."

MaryAnne sat down.

"This must have been worse for Grandpa than I thought," she said.

"Don't look so dejected," Etta told her. "Randy's going to be just fine. But it has been a wake up call. I'm glad you found a good place for us."

"It's not just good, Grandma. It's great."

As Etta reflected on this, she decided to take MaryAnne into her confidence. Maybe she could even do some leg work.

"MaryAnne, come sit by me," said Etta.

"Need some help with your solitaire?" she asked.

"No, I want to tell you something. You must promise you won't try to stop me. Or meddle."

"Oh, Grandma," said MaryAnne. "You're not planning to leave Epworth Village, are you? I thought you liked it here." "I love it here. No. I'm going to reveal an activity that has become

very important to me. Very exciting for me.”

Randy walked into the room.

“So you’ve decided to tell her, eh?” he said.

“Hi Grandpa,” said MaryAnne. “I thought you were taking a nap. Tell me what?”

Etta began by asking if MaryAnne had heard of the work of Henri Derringer, chief security officer for the Derringer Foundation Fund.

“Sure, Grandma. TV had a special on him last week. Very mysterious. Think we’re related to him?”

“More than you know, child. More than you know,” answered Etta.

She reviewed the cases one by one.

“Grandma, you sure know a lot about these cases,” said MaryAnne.

Then, as Etta began the O Henry case, a look of astonished disbelief washed over MaryAnne’s face.

“Oh my God!” said MaryAnne. “*You* are Henri Derringer.”

“The same,” admitted Etta.

It was obvious MaryAnne didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, strangle or hug, ask or deny. Etta resolved the issue by drawing her granddaughter into her arms.

“I love you so much,” she said, “I just couldn’t keep it from you any longer. But you understand the necessity of absolute secrecy. Especially since I’m starting another case today.”

Neither of them knew how baffling, complicated and dangerous this case was going to be.

## Chapter Three

MaryAnn left to check on her agency and to get some much needed sleep.

She was gone. Etta began the Underwood case. She began it the way she began every case.

She made a list of information she would need. Resources to provide the information. Stray thoughts that didn't fit any category. Like the orange striped alley cat the Fergusons had adopted in the third case she solved. "Miscellaneous" was always her longest list.

She began her list as items came to mind. She would organize them later.

- Details of the murder
- Every person that showed up at the murder scene
- Motives—real and possible
- Time schedule of every person connected to the case
- Possible 'mistaken identity' victim(s)
- Newspapers Radio and television transcripts
- Available public records
- Hackers I know
- "Back door" accesses I've discovered
- Chicago Derringer Foundation Fund mail drop
- Email addresses of all principals

Etta looked at the list. Then she added

MaryAnne

She had relentlessly driven MaryAnne to go to work. Once her granddaughter found out a new case was about to be launched, she was "rarin' to go."

"Honey, you have to care for your business," she had told her granddaughter. "What if O Henry throws some business your way today. How's that snippet of a girl fresh out of high school going to handle it?"

"Grandma, Cindy Gonzalez has been with me two years, now. Working after school. She's not as old as you, but she is capable," MaryAnn said somewhat more sharply than she intended.

Then, to take some of the sting out of her words, she added, “Besides, I gave O Henry the consortium’s New York address so he couldn’t trace you to the Miami area. Everything is done by computer these days. I told Terry in New York to handle business for me in that area as if my office were there.”

Smart girl, thought Etta. “Still,” she said, “go in to work. I have to get organized. I won’t need your help for a few days. I’ll let you know when I do.”

“O.K., Grandma,” yawned MaryAnne. “I’ll stop by the office. Then get some shut eye.”

Etta began her research by ordering current newspapers from Hagersville and surrounding communities. Although Atlanta wasn’t in the immediate area, the major papers there often covered state news. She included newspapers from there as well.

She also ordered all files on Underwood from archives of all papers in Hagersville and surrounding cities. She used the Chicago mail drop to order them. She asked for files for the past three years.

Next, she looked up Clair’s and Stufe’s phone numbers at [www.whitepages.com](http://www.whitepages.com). She pondered checking Augusta Platte’s info, too. I’ll get it later, she thought. I’ll stick with the principals for now. With this information she called.

“Hello, Ms. Underwood. I’m calling from AOL to see if you’re satisfied with our service.”

“AOL? I don’t use AOL.” Clair answered. “I use our company ISP.” “I’m sorry, ma’am. I didn’t mean to disturb you. As our apology, we’ll send you free any best seller from the past year. Send an email to [books1234567@aol.com](mailto:books1234567@aol.com) with ‘free book’ in the subject line. We will send you a list of 100 to choose from.”

Etta always picked up free six month trial disks from AOL. They were ubiquitous. She would establish an account to collect information when she began a new case. If Clair sent an email of any kind to that address, an autoresponder would collect her email address and send a thank you note with a list of 100 books and an order blank.

Much to her dismay, she heard, “I’m not interested in your books. Good day.”

*Think fast*, Etta told herself

“Not even one entitled *The Unsolved Underwood Murder?*” she fairly shouted into the phone.

There was a brief pause. Then a cold voice demanded, “What kind of sick joke is this?”

“Please don’t be mad, ma’am,” said Etta in her best school girl voice. “I’m a poor college student working as a research assistant for the Derringer Foundation Fund. The security department here believes it has come across a fact overlooked by the police in their investigation two years ago. They assigned me to obtain your email address so they could contact you before turning it over to the police.”

“If you were so desperate for my email address, why didn’t you look on our web site,” demanded the cold voice. And there was a resounding CLICK!

*I’ll bet she’s the killer* thought Etta.

Her next call to the Stufe residence was more successful. “Yes,” said the voice that could only be Shirley Stufe. “We’re very satisfied.”

“I don’t seem to have your email address in my files here,” said Etta. “I can’t believe it. I was going to send you free tickets to the movies, but . . . .”

“That’s O.K. I can give you mine and my husbands. Do we both get tickets?”

“Sure as shootin’, honey,” said Etta. “Two tickets for each email address.” “How about my husband’s work email?”

“Is it an AOL address?” asked Etta.

“No. It’s his work email,” said Shirley sadly.

“Hey, you’ve been so nice, why not. Don’t tell my boss and I’ll send tickets for that, too.”

After recording the addresses and hanging up, Etta had an idea. Shirley obviously wasn’t the brightest bulb in the chandelier. Maybe she could be useful. She hit the redial button.

“Hey, Mrs. Stuffle,” bubbled Etta. “I forgot all about our latest promotion. I guess you can tell I’m new on the job, forgetting to bring your email and all.”

“No, I hadn’t noticed,” said Shirley. She sounded like she had. “What’s the promotion?”

“I’m not supposed to tell you this part,” Etta said confidentially. “AOL wants to get as many customers as possible. So here’s what they’re going to do. They’re going to give two theater tickets in your name to each person whose email address you provide. And you’ll also get two tickets yourself for each of them.”

“You mean I’ll get two tickets for every email address I give you?” said Shirley.

Etta received almost every email address she needed. She even got Clair’s. And it was AOL!

When Shirley gave her Clair’s address, Etta asked, “She works for the company your husband works for, doesn’t she?”

“Ha!” exploded Shirley. “She owns the company he works for.”

“A woman owns a septic tank business? That sounds more like a man’s job.”

“That’s what Clarence keeps telling her. Her husband died a couple years back.” Etta became gossipy.

“Clarence? Her boyfriend?”

“Doesn’t he wish. He’s her husband—uh—former husband’s former partner. Ha. Ha. Lots of formers there, huh? But you know what I mean.”

“I’m not sure,” confided Etta. “You mean he’s trying to get back into her business?”

“Among other things, if you know what I mean.”

Etta knew what Shirley was suggesting. “But he’s not successful,” Etta offered.

“Not her business. Not her pants. She’s not like her



husband was. He pawed me every time I went to the office.”

“No! Why’d you go?” asked Etta.

“I had to go by every day to pick up Clyde. He didn’t get his truck back at the same time every night. I’d go in a little early. So he wouldn’t have to wait. That’s when Chester, I mean, Mr. Underwood would make advances.”

“Did you tell him to stop?”

“Of course I did,” said Shirley indignantly.

“And he didn’t?”

“He was Clyde’s boss. He could do anything he wanted.”

Etta wanted to ask Anything? But, instead, she asked, “Did you tell Mr. Stufe?”

“Clyde? He’d’ve started a fight and got fired. He’s as sweet a guy as you’d ever want. But if he lost his job . . . There ain’t nothin’ else he can do. No. No way was I goin’ to tell ‘im.”

Etta wanted to ask her more. Like, “Where were you the day he was murdered?” But she felt she might plug the line with too much interrogation. Instead she whispered, “Here comes my boss. Nice talking to you.” Then more formally, “Why thank you Mrs. Stufe! I’ll call another time in case you have more names. Be sure to fill out our order form and we’ll send your tickets right away. Good-bye now.”

Randy walked into the room with a glass of calamondinade for her.

“What tickets?” he asked.

“Just a pay-off,” she said. “I’m glad we joined that promotions club that gives free tickets.”

Randy gave her the refreshing citrus drink. It was their favorite. Most of the residents in the community didn’t enjoy the delights of the small, pungent citrus that grew just outside the Derringer’s apartment building. It was especially good when spiked with a cup of pure cranberry juice to a gallon of ade. She accepted it gratefully and took a sip.

“Perfect. As always,” she said.

“You were on the phone a long time,” he observed. “Did you get the email?”

“That and a lot more.”

Randy sipped his drink and waited. He didn’t need to ask. She would tell him.

“I happened to hit a lonely wife who wanted to talk. And brag. I think. She gave me all the email addresses I can use at this point. A real treasure trove. At four tickets a throw.”

Randy whistled. “I see what you mean about the promotion club,” he said.

“But it was worth it,” she went on. “The woman I talked to was the wife of the man who found the victim. She had contempt for the widow and thought her dead husband’s former partner was trying to get back into the picture.”

“Business and monkey business, I’ll bet,” he said. “Is he in business? How healthy is it?”

“Just what I’m going to find out. But Shirley—”

“Your informant? Wife of the man who found the victim?”

“Right. She wanted me to know the dead man found her desirable. I think she enjoyed, if not invited, the advances. I suspect they even enjoyed a little adultery.”

“Sex. Just say sex, Etta.”

“Don’t be vulgar,” said Etta. “But if this were a regular thing, a daily dallying, as it were—”

“Now who’s vulgar?” laughed Randy.

Etta blushed.

“That’s not naughty. And you know it. You’re just trying to get me flustered.”

Randy laughed. “What else did your adulteress tell you?”

“If you’re not going to take this seriously—”

“O.K. You’re Henri Derringer. I don’t need to know.” She flashed him a look of anger. He added, “But I’ll behave myself.” Etta considered her husband with love, frustration and admiration. They had been married 77 years. She loved him as much now that his widows peak reached to the nape of his neck as she did when his head was covered with a mat of red hair. He was as much Henri Derringer as she was. He asked her questions. He clarified information. He read reports. He sparked insights.

She hated it when they had these little spats. But he always knew what to say or do to soothe it over.

“Well, I was going to speculate whether she was there the night he was shot. And, if so, where was she? And if not, why not? Did she do it? Did she see who did it? If so, why hadn’t she come forward?”

“As always, you have a lot of questions. I can suggest a couple of answers to why she didn’t come forward. One, her husband did it. Two, she did it. Three, she didn’t want her husband know she was . . .” he searched for the least offensive way to put it “ . . . having an affair with the boss.”

“Or she was afraid she was in danger. If it got out she witnessed the murder,” Etta concluded, “there might be another murder.”

Randy shifted in his arm chair. He drained his glass and wondered how Etta could sit in that wheelchair hours on end.

“So, you have a coupla suspects—Shirley and her husband.”

“Clyde,” said Etta. “And I’m not so sure about Clarence Hedges. I’m going to check out his financial status. Nor am I ready to let Clair Underwood off the hook.”

“I thought she was the reason you chose the case.”

“Well, partly. But mostly because it was an unsolved case I thought I had a chance to solve,” said Etta. “Well, no time like the present to go online and see if I can get a lead on Clarence Hedges.” Just as she said that, the telephone rang.

“This is Nancy at the front desk,” came the response to

Etta's "Hello." Nancy continued, "There's a Mr. O'Henry down here who would like to speak to you."

#### Chapter Four

Etta covered the mouthpiece and handed the phone to Randy.

"It's O Henry," she told him. "You talk to him. Tell him you don't know any O Henry."

"Why don't you talk to him?"

"It should be a man. Here," she said, handing him the phone.

"Hello," said Randy.

He listened a moment.

"I'm sorry, sir. We don't know anyone named O Henry. And there's no Henri here," Randy said into the mouthpiece. He pronounced Henry, Awnnray. Etta almost giggled. Randy listened a bit.

"I see no reason to meet you," he said decisively.

"Let him come up," Etta whispered.

Randy listened a moment, then said, "If you insist on coming up, ask Nancy to have Ceal show you the way. She knows where our apartment is. She's been like a second daughter to us. But, I must say, I think this is terribly rude of you." He hung up the phone with no further ado.

"You were marvelous," Etta told him. "Now I'd better call MaryAnne in case she doesn't know he's in town. He's tracked us through her, I'll wager."

"You never bet," he told her as he handed her the phone. She gently touched his hand as she took the phone. It was still like a little electric shock every time they touched.

She took the phone back to her "office." She enjoyed the perfume of roses as she entered. There was always a vase of roses there. Randy picked them from bushes on the ten acre section that held Epworth Village Retirement Community. She loved the smell

of roses.

Her office was the second bedroom of their apartment. Her computer and filing cabinet were there. So was Randy's coin collection, books, and fishing flies. He hadn't been fishing for over two years. She decided she would ask MaryAnne to book him a fly fishing trip some time. But she had other business now.

"Hello. Travel and Unravel. Cindy speaking," came the friendly voice at the other end of the line.

"Cindy, this is Etta. Did a Mr. Thomas come by there today?"

"Today? We booked a nice Caribbean cruise for two for his office. But no. No one has come in by that name."

"Cindy. Is MaryAnne there?"

"She's catching forty winks on a couch in the back," said Cindy.

"Get her on the phone immediately," ordered Etta.

A few seconds later a sleepy voice said, "Hello, Grandma."

Cindy must have sprinted.

"Are you awake? O Henry is here at Epworth."

"I'm awake now," came a startled voice. "What's he doing there?"

"Looking for Henri Derringer is my guess. Somehow he must have tracked you down. Anyhow, if he mentions you, we'll send him to see you. We don't know you, but we've heard of your agency and wonderful service. Send him to Chicago where your orders had come from. And tell Cindy not to spill the beans about our relationship. By the way, she answered my call perfectly."

Etta hung up just in time to hear the doorbell. She gave them enough time for introductions. Then she entered using the voice of a querulous old woman.

"Did anybody get the door. The door bell rang. Did anybody answer it." Ceal was standing next to O Henry and gave her a shocked look. When she had a chance to do so, unobserved,

Etta gave Ceal a wink. At the moment she switched her tone to a syrupy sweet, “Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt you men and your business.”

“No. No dear,” said Randy. “Come meet a man looking for a Derringer.” He chuckled. “I mean a person named Derringer, not the gun. The number of times I’ve been asked . . .”

He trailed off to Never-Never Land.

“Yes, yes, dear,” Etta said soothingly, as if to a confused child. She saw Ceal almost break out in a loud guffaw, but she controlled herself.

“This is Mr. Daniel Thomas,” said Randy, seeming to reenter the real world. “He’s looking for an Andrew Derringer.”

“Henri Derringer,” corrected Mr. Thomas.

If they had ever guessed the embarrassment they would have later, explaining this behavior to Daniel Thomas, they might never have done it. Daniel Thomas was to play a very important role in their future.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Thomas. We don’t know any Henri Derringer. How did you get our names?” asked Etta.

“I did some business with a Ms. Greene. She was an agent for Henri Derringer. She claimed she didn’t know him personally. But, the transaction was rather large, and I’m afraid I didn’t believe her. I traced her here to Miami even though she gave me a New York address for her travel agency.”

“Did she cheat you?” asked Etta in a shocked tone.

“Oh no. Nothing like that. It’s just that I thought she knew more than she was telling. So I flew down here and looked up Derringer in the phone book. There was just one other. No one there seemed to want to talk, so I decided to visit you. I’m sorry I disturbed you.”

“Not at all. Not at all,” chirped Etta, thinking, I could teach him a thing or two about getting folks to talk. “We don’t get much company. Come sit a spell. Randy, go get Mr. Thomas a glass of calamondinade. Oh, you’ll love it.”

“No thank you. I think I’ve imposed enough on you. I want

to look some more for Henri Derringer.”

“I’m sorry we can’t help. And I’m glad that travel agency girl . . .”

“MaryAnne Greene,” said Ceal helpfully.

“Yes, that’s it. MaryAnne Greene. I’m glad she didn’t do anything dishonest. I’ve heard about her. Folks say she’s so nice. And always over-delivers, whatever that means. Why are you trying to do this the long way. Why don’t you go to this MaryAnne Greene woman. Wheedle it out of her. Tell her there was a mistake in the transaction or something. That’s what I’d do.”

It was obvious that it was not something Daniel Thomas would do. He just smiled and said, “I think I’ll take your advice and call on her.”

“Sorry if this is a dead end for you. Hope you had a round trip ticket.”

“No problem,” said Daniel Thomas. “I have my own jet.” He turned to leave.

Ceal said, “I’ll be back in a minute, Mr. And Mrs. Derringer. Soon’s I walk Mr. Thomas to his car.”

“No need,” he said. “I know the way.”

“Company policy,” said Ceal.

In less than ten minutes, Ceal was back.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

“None of your damned business,” said Randy.

“Don’t be so crude,” his wife said. Then to Ceal, “Pardon his French. He meant, ‘None of your bees wax’.”

“I know,” said Ceal. She knew they were kidding her. “So what’s going on? You disown your granddaughter?”

“We suspect he’s a con man. We want to get him away from Epworth Village. Too many possible victims here.”

“You can say that again,” said Ceal.

“Too many possible victims here,” repeated Etta.

“O.K., how does MaryAnne fit in?” asked Ceal, ignoring the repetition.

“I called her and told her we were sending him over, to send him on a wild goose chase.”

“You were pretty slick doing that,” said Ceal. “Well, I was just curious. Gotta go tend to the Village Corner.”

“It’s always hi-bye with you,” complained Etta.

“Not always,” said Ceal. “I stop by now and then. But I have to get back to the store.”

“I know, honey,” Etta told her. “If you spent any more time with me I’d feel obligated to name my next child after you. And what if he were a boy?”

Ceal laughed. “Don’t worry,” she said as she went out the door. “Your name isn’t Sarah.”

“But you’re an angel,” answered Etta. Ceal didn’t hear her. She was already gone. And she was glad to see Ceal go. Etta had work to do.

Henrietta Derringer’s job with Alfred State Insurance Corporation had been in Wisconsin. Still, her experience there enabled her to bypass search engines and go directly to sites that gave vital fiscal information on companies great and small. She examined Georgia Real Estate businesses and rapidly found Clarence Hedges’ information.

He hadn’t really gone on the rocks. But he did hold more speculative property than was wise. A sudden rise in taxes, a demand that a note be paid during cash flow shortfall, a drop in property values in the area, any number of unforeseen events could spell disaster.

Alfred State Insurance Corporation would never insure this business. Especially if the principal were spending undue amount of time working in another business without remuneration.

Clarence Hedges’ business taken care of, Etta had a wild idea. She entered Daniel Thomas’ name in a few search boxes. She was able to identify him from among numerous “Daniel Thomas”



hits because of the work she formerly had done for him.

No wonder he could guarantee her pitiful \$300,000 savings investment. His personal worth was well over a fifty billion dollars. With that kind of resource, she's surprised he hadn't identified her long since. She thought she'd better warn MaryAnne who she was dealing with. No. MaryAnne was quite capable of taking care of herself. Little did she know what was in store for her granddaughter.

She put that aside and looked at the Underwood septic business. It wasn't the largest or strongest business in Hagersville, but her old insurance firm would have been happy to sell coverage to it. She noticed a spike in business the month after the murder, then a drastic drop. Two months after the murder the business began an uphill climb that continued to the present. Was that Clarence Hedges' influence, she wondered. Just how much Shirley told her was fact and how much jealous fabrication? Etta had learned to be careful about hearsay. She might have to learn it all over again.

## Chapter Five

Later that night MaryAnne sauntered in with a mysterious aura about her. At first Etta wasn't sure she wasn't a bit high. Her mind seemed fixed on something else as she greeted her grandparents.

“Hi grandma, Hi grandpa. I figured you'd both still be up wondering what I did with that bloodhound you sicced on me.”

“Are you all right?” asked Etta. “Randy, get her a cup of coffee.”

“Oh, grandma,” MaryAnne said, coming a bit more alive. “I'm O.K.” To Randy she said, “Make that calamondinade instead of coffee, Grandpa. I'm still trying to sort things out in my head.”

“Was that man discourteous?” Etta asked suspiciously.

MaryAnne giggled.

“Goodness no,” said MaryAnne. “I kissed him goodnight and left him stranded at five corners.

Randy almost dropped the tray he was carrying. Etta had an audible intake of breath.

“Maybe you'd better start at the beginning,” said Etta.

Randy's hand shook as he set the tray down and passed the glasses of drink around. Etta hadn't told him of Daniel's wealth. Still, he knew the man was no slouch financially. What startled him was his granddaughter's announcement that she had kissed him. That she had kissed a man at first meeting. He and Etta had long discussed their granddaughter's abhorrence of men. They even broached the subject of homosexuality. Not broached with her. With each other.

MaryAnne told them what transpired at her office on Biscayne Boulevard. Daniel Thomas entered the office. He was greeted by Cindy.

“Welcome to Travel and Unravel. How may I serve you today.”

“Is Ms. Greene in?”

“She’s resting, sir. She made a round trip to New York yesterday. If you’d like to come back later—”

“I have to fly back to New York tonight. Her business was with me yesterday. I need to see her.”

“Oh, you’re Mr. Thomas. We have all your tickets ready. Would you like to take them with you?” Cindy asked.

“That would be fine. But that’s not what I need to talk about. What do you know about her business yesterday?”

“Nothing? A man delivered an envelope addressed to her. He wouldn’t let me take it. He said he had to deliver it to her personally and she was the one that had to sign for it. He didn’t look like a delivery man to me. He wore a suit. When did you ever see a messenger boy wear a suit to deliver a letter?”

“Would you please see if Ms. Greene will talk to me?” Thomas asked.

“Well, it is close to closing. I’ll go see.”

MaryAnne came walking out, a bit ruffled, yawning. When she saw Daniel Thomas, she straightened up, brushed her hair with her fingers and tried to pat a few wrinkles from her bell bottoms and blouse. When Cindy had gone to fetch MaryAnn, she said, “He smells good.” MaryAnne had replied, “He wears an expensive cologne. I caught a whiff of it in his office yesterday.”

“Oh, hi Mr. Thomas,” she greeted. “When Cindy said Thomas I never dreamed it was you.”

“I’m on a pretty tight schedule,” he told her. “Will you permit me to take you to supper and talk for a few minutes? Or is there a Mr. Greene you have to get home to?”

“No Mr. Greene. But I don’t think I’m very well dressed to go out to dinner.”

“No problem. Last time I was in Miami, I went to a marvelous Greek restaurant on Coral Way. Nobody there seemed to be dressed up. I’ll take off my coat and tie if it’ll make you feel better,” he coaxed.

“I’ll go to dinner with you,” Cindy said.

Daniel Thomas smiled and started to say something.

“I think he wants to talk to me about business,” said MaryAnne.

“Oh, it’s nothing confidential,” Daniel assured her. “You can go if you like, Cindy.”

MaryAnne’s look made Cindy say, “Maybe another time. I have a hot date tonight. You two go on and I’ll close up.”

“A very efficient employee,” observed Daniel when they were outside. He put the envelopes with the tickets in his inside coat pocket.

“Yes. Seventeen going on thirty-five,” said MaryAnne. “I can drive if you like. I know where Mykonos Restaurant is. But I’ll hate you for life. Their baklava is to die for.”

He laughed.

*This is going to be fun* thought MaryAnne.

Daniel didn’t talk during the meal. He was relishing the lamb shank too much to talk. MaryAnne had moussaka. They each ordered a small Greek salad. When the salads came MaryAnne remembered they should have ordered one salad and an extra plate for sharing.

Daniel seemed to read her mind.

“You know, we could ask for a plate and share one of these and you could take the other home,” he suggested.

“Have you ever taken a salad home in a take-out container? The beautiful, mouth-watering dish in the restaurant becomes a garbage heap of wilted lettuce, mashed olives, and smeared Gouda.

“You make it sound inedible,” he laughed.

“Oh, it tastes good, but you have to wear a blindfold to eat it,” she giggled.

As they nibbled at baklava, just one shared, and drank black Turkish coffee, she brought up the topic he wanted to discuss. She looked at him across the table. He had coal black hair closely cut, and dark, dark brown eyes, to match hers, she thought.

His tie and coat were in her car, his collar unbuttoned. He wore no undershirt. A tuft of black chest hair peeped bashfully from the top of his shirt. Silk, she decided. She judged him to be forty to forty-five; ten to fifteen years older than she was. Now, where did that come from?

“You want to know how I got the assignment to deliver the message to you, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I hope you haven’t suffered any losses because of what I did,” she said.

“No. In fact, if I had lost my entire fortune, it wouldn’t matter. What you have to understand is that Henri Derringer not only cleared my name in the murder of my wife, he also brought the killer to justice.”

“Your wife was murdered?” asked MaryAnne. “Oh how awful. And to be blamed for the murder of the one you loved . . . .”

“Don’t get sentimental,” he said a bit harshly. “There was no love left there. She was playing musical beds with some of my best friends. That’s one of the reasons I was suspected of murdering her.”

“Oh, but you were in love with her. She couldn’t have hurt you if you hadn’t loved her.”

“Who are you? Dr. Phil?”

“No. I’m a real live person who knows pain when I see it. I know pain from personal experience. Let me tell you my sordid story.

“When I was three, some robbers broke into our house. I heard them shouting at my parents—‘Show us where the money is or we’ll shoot you.’ I was afraid and hid in my favorite hiding place, a shelf high up in my closet. Then I heard gun shots. Then the door of my room flew open. ‘I’ll bet they hid it in here. They kept glancing at this door,’ one of them said. Then, ‘Hey! This is a kid’s room. Find ‘im. If he saw us he can finger us.’ “I didn’t know what ‘finger’ meant, but I knew I was dead if they found me. They overturned my bed, dumped the toys out of my toy box, pulled all my dresses off the closet pole. Even yanked all my dresser drawers

out, as if I could hide there. I almost died of fright. Luckily, the one who cleared out the closet didn't look up."

"Did you get a look at him?" "I kept my eyes tightly closed with my hands over my eyes. I thought if I can't see them, they can't see me. I heard the police later. They had been called by neighbors who heard the shots. They talked about what happened. They wondered if my parents were involved with drugs. They speculated about everything but what really happened.

One said, 'where's the kid?' they looked for me, but not very hard. My grandma found me the next day. I had fallen asleep on the shelf, but she found me. My grandparents raised me."

By then, they were holding each other's hands across the table. The coffee was cold, but the waiter wisely did not offer to warm it up. Baklava was unfinished.

"I'm sorry about your wife," she said.

"I'd like to meet your grandparents," he said.

"Some day," she told him and gently unclasped his hand.

"What I was going to say," he said, seeming to come to his senses, "is that I owe my very life to Henri Derringer. He would not accept payment. I told him some day I'd give him a lead on a very great opportunity and would guarantee it so he wouldn't lose anything. When this matter came up, I thought this would be the best investment he could ever make. He'll quadruple his money in a year."

"He'll be a millionaire," said MaryAnne in awe.

"I could make him more than that, if he'd let me," Daniel said almost bitterly. It was obvious he didn't like being unable to do just as he liked.

"I sent him the message. He responded. I thought I might finally see him face to face."

She pulled off a flake of the baklava and let it rest on her tongue.

"Maybe you should observe his wishes and leave him alone," she suggested.

“Maybeso,” he said. “But I could do so much to help him. I have resources. Not just money. Contacts. Manpower”

“Fine. I’ll tell him the next time I see him.”

His head jerked up. She laughed.

“I’m sorry. I just thought I should yank your chain for your sexism.”

“Sexism?” he asked.

“Manpower,” she said.

He laughed. “I deserved that. Staffing power.”

“Hey, you’re not a bad guy,” she said.

“And you’re not a bad gal,” he returned. “You’re the first woman I’ve dated since my wife died.”

“This is a date?” she asked. Then, before he could answer, she said, “See. You did love your wife.”

“Yes,” he said. “You’ve made me realize that. It’s freeing, somehow. Let me take you on a real date.”

She didn’t say anything. She got up to leave. He got up, too. He grabbed the bill from the table, glanced at the total, tossed it back with a fifty dollar bill. He rushed out after her. He caught up.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” he said. “I was not being fresh. I genuinely enjoyed myself tonight. I would like to experience that again. Your honesty. Your . . . .”

“You didn’t upset me, Daniel. I thoroughly enjoyed myself. I’d like more than anything to go out with you again. But I have to sort some things out. I’ve never had very good relationships with the male gender. I realize that I have never told another man what I told you tonight. Not even Grandpa. I don’t know why I told you.

“I’ve never trusted any male figure all my life. Can you accept that? Can you understand that? Please don’t rush me. If you still want to go out sometime in the future, ask. I may be ready.

“Now, about that assignment, my instructions were to

memorize what I was supposed to do. Then burn the letter. I wasn't told why *I* was chosen. I was simply given the assignment, a round trip ticket to New York and five hundred dollars for fee and expenses."

"You made that trip for only five hundred dollars?" he asked incredulously.

"You're wealthy. Probably a multi-millionaire. You don't understand. You saw the stocks I had. They had been on a downhill slide for months. Five hundred dollars looked pretty good to me for a day's work."

He placed his hand on her shoulder. His attitude, not his lips, said, "I'm sorry."

*Sorry for what?* she wondered.

"Anyway," she continued, "the only clue I might give you is the stationary the instructions were on. It was watermarked Derringer Foundation Fund. No other identification. I looked it up on the Internet. It's based in—"

"—Chicago," Daniel finished.

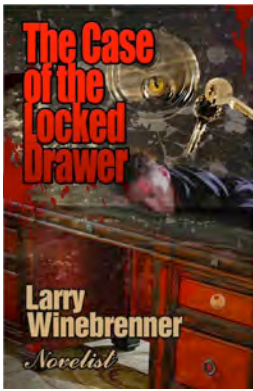
She took his tie and coat from the car. She handed them to him.

"Please don't think me too rude," she said. "You can get a cab easily from here." She kissed him on the cheek, got into her Honda Accord, and drove away.

"Grandma," MaryAnne said. "I think he likes me."

"I think you like him, too," said Etta. It was said a little sadly.





*The victim was found sprawled on a desk in which a locked drawer contained the murder weapon. Who killed the victim? Why was the weapon in the locked drawer? How did the weapon get into the locked drawer?*

*All these questions had to be answered to solve the crime--- and the police hadn't done it in two years. How was Etta to do it using only her telephone and computer--- Mephistopheles?*

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