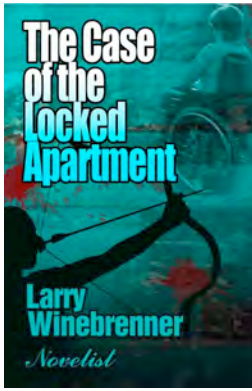


The Case of the Locked Apartment

Larry
Winebrenner

Novelist



Who is the man involved in the woman's accidental death? And how did he escape the locked, guarded room? The police detective on the case believes that, no matter how improbable it seems, it had to be suicide. Etta---pseudonym Henri Derringer---agrees. But her young friend, Ceal, doesn't believe her good friend did herself in. When another death takes place, the police detective believes Ceal. Then, when Etta apparently was the target of an arrow-shot, even she began to believe Ceal. Soon, it became apparent that the guilty party was a very dangerous threat. It took all Henri Derringer's talent to uncover the whole plot.

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Larry Winebrenner
2012
First Edition

Dedication

The patient angel, rarely recognized,
organizes my life, makes appointments,
takes me to doctors' appointments,
and puts up with my mercurial moods
is, of course my wife.

I planned to recognize
her and mention her ministrations
as my dedication of this book.

But since I've dedicated a
book to her already, it
seems fitting to dedicate
this one to others.

In love and affection
I dedicate this book to
MY FIVE CHILDREN
Ceal, Murray, Charles, Paul, and Karen
born to me by my wife
Joyce Opal Embry Winebrenner.

Chapter One

Etta Derringer rolled her wheelchair impatiently across the living room of her apartment at Epworth Village Retirement Community in South Florida. Her husband, Randy, had read the storm warnings early and headed out to the dining room lounge in hopes of connecting with a buddy or two and maybe getting a sniff or two of the roast pork and fried apples on the noon menu..

But she wasn't put out with him.

“Mephistopheles! You are one miserable, stupid machine,” she almost snarled. “I ask for a few simple open cases to choose from . . .” Etta came as close to sputtering as possible without going over the edge.

“I'm a tool, a device, an instrument, a comp—”

“You're a machine if I want to call you a machine, you miserable piece of junk,” she spat.

“Is that a new name you want to call—”

“No! Shut up.”

Why was the internationally famous Henri Derringer arguing with a computer she asked herself. For though she was ninety-two years old and wheelchair bound, she had solved eight crimes across the nation that stumped police authorities. For a variety of reasons she worked under the name Henri Derringer.

Them with their fancy-dancy crime labs, computer networks, and seemingly unlimited staffing power were unable to do what Henri Derringer, ahem, Etta that is, did with a computer, a telephone and her wits.

Until her granddaughter's moneybags husband sent Mephistopheles as a gift. And Mephistopheles could do anything if you just knew how to ask him.

The present assignment was a case in point. She had said, "Mephistopheles, find me a few simple open cases I can choose from for my next case." A *few* to Mephistopheles was 89,734. *Simple* was a conglomeration of bicycle thefts, truancy, egging cars and breaking windows. It was frustrating.

She turned attention once more to Mephistopheles.

"Let's try this again, Mephistopheles," she muttered.

Unknown to her, there was a murder taking place right there at Epworth Village that would involve her and almost cost her her life.

Chapter Two

The man sat in the dimly lit apartment. Patiently. He had only one errand. That was with the woman this apartment belonged to. She owed him. Big.

And she was going to pay.

He viewed the apartment while waiting. She would be here soon. To use the toilet. To wash her hands. To pop a breath-freshener candy into her mouth. To check her makeup and hair. Everything had to be just right, even if it were simply for the noon meal.

The Persian carpet looked brand new, but he knew it was more than a hundred years old. She bought it two years ago. It had first been laid in her villa in Switzerland. She brought it when she returned to the U.S. and had it laid in her living room. Her living room, for crying out loud. This Mohtashem Kashan carpet she bought from Sotheby's for almost a hundred grand, and she laid it in a high traffic area. What did she care? It was his money.

Maybe she thought keeping sunlight out of the apartment would prevent its colors from fading. That's why all the windows had dark green shades behind the luxurious draperies. Three windows, two on the living room side of the door, one on the side where he was sitting.

But no sun should fade this carpet, he thought. It was hand-woven in central Persia, as he conjectured earlier, more than one hundred years ago.

He was no expert on carpets. But he had an insatiable interest in antiques. He had run across an article on carpets while searching the Internet for something else. He recalled that his buddy, Sam Brown, had a veritable greed for Middle Eastern and Oriental carpets. Who would have guessed back then he would view the vivid colors, run his palm across the fine weaving. It was intoxicating.

He tore his eyes away from the magnificent art to look for other prize items. Ah, there was a vase from WalMart. And a rather common dining room table and chairs. That must have set her back at least two or three hundred bucks. The pictures on the walls were Costco specials he rather imagined. Like so many nouveau riche, she placed her finest diamonds in a pigpen.

Not that he was rich himself. His father was a worker in a cigar factory. He himself was a printer. A damn fine one, too. But he did have taste. He loved antiques. And he knew how to provide proper settings for fine possessions, just as he knew how to prepare for this meeting.

He had “borrowed” the key which would go unnoticed.

He was certain no one saw him enter, no nosy faces in windows.

He had carefully, with handkerchief in hand, unplugged the phone so there would be no incoming calls.

And he had studied her routine to make sure they would be uninterrupted.

His reverie was broken by the sound of the key in the door. He wasn't hiding, but he doubted she would see him until he made his presence known.

She slipped in the door as if preventing someone from seeing her enter. There was no one. This was her manner. He had watched her enter her apartment in this manner dozens of times as he was preparing for this moment.

She locked the door on the inside with her key, then dropped it into her handbag. She tossed her bag carelessly on the couch. She carried a cane like a baton. She didn't need to use it. She probably thought it a kind of status symbol for the elderly. She had just placed her Louis Vuitton shod foot on the carpet when she saw him.

“You!”

“Hello, Gwen,” he said to Gwendolyn Mountainshine.

“Get out of here or I’ll call security,” she literally growled.

He laughed. Not only was he between her and the phone. It was unplugged. She strode toward him holding her cane in a semi-threatening way. He skirted her and got between her and the door. But he was still far enough in the room to stand near the couch with overstuffed soft cushions. He was tempted to sit, nonchalantly. But that would place him at a disadvantage looking up at her.

“Get out of here!” she repeated.

“Without my cut?”

“Your cut? You were paid,” she spat.

“A lousy hundred grand. That hardly refurbished my shop,” he said.

“I don’t care about your shop,”

He flushed.

“Gwen, I found the paper that couldn’t be detected as unofficial without lab work. I created ink that was identical to the mint’s. I engraved the plates and used a counter to add the numbers in sequence. I ran the copies. I passed some at the bank ready to claim I’d been scammed if detected as phony, and even the bank couldn’t determine on the spot they were counterfeit. I did all that Gwen. And I ran off and cut \$300,000,000 in four dominations all by myself. You call a hundred grand fair for that?”

“You’re a peon. A piece worker. You got what you were worth—a good wage for a good job. Now, get out of here.”

She twisted the top of her cane slightly and pulled on the handle enough to expose a sword.

“You can’t scare me with that toy,” he said sarcastically. “Give me my share. True, you were able to market it in Switzerland. So I’ll be fair. Not a half of the original three hundred. Say half of what you sold it for. I heard twenty-five mil.”

“Eighteen,” she snarled. “If you want more money, just print it. You’re good at it. You can have as much as you want.”

“Ha! As soon as that counterfeit cash began to show up, the T-boys were in my shop. They took my presses apart looking for a smear of that ink. They knew it took presses like mine to create work that fine. The ink’s what they knew would trip the worker.

“I didn’t even try to clean them when I was through. They ended in the gulf stream. But the equipment I replaced it with isn’t brand new. That would be a tip off. I put together what I needed from a couple of estate sales. That’s what the hundred grand went for. Now figure out how you’re going to transfer nine mil to me.”

“You’re not getting a cent,” she said as she drew the sword completely from the cane.

The man grabbed one of the cushions from the couch to protect himself.

“Get out,” she said as she stabbed at him.

He held the cushion in front of him. The sword pierced the cushion maybe three inches. He pushed the cushion up to deflect the blade away from his chest. The sudden move made Gwendolyn Mountainshine stumble back. She let go of the sword and grabbed the

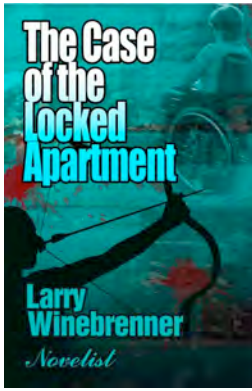
cushion to steady herself. The man released the cushion and stepped away from her.

As if in slow motion he saw what was happening, but was frozen into inaction. She overcompensated for her backward imbalance. He no longer held the cushion. She fell forward on the cushion. The hilt of the sword swung down and lodged on the floor. Her motion forced the blade through the material in the cushion and deep into her heart.

“Gwen,” he muttered. “I didn’t mean for you to die. Don’t die.”

It was too late. He took the keys from his pocket to flee.

“Are you ready for lunch, Gwen?” said a sweet voice on the other side of the door accompanied by a gentle knock.



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