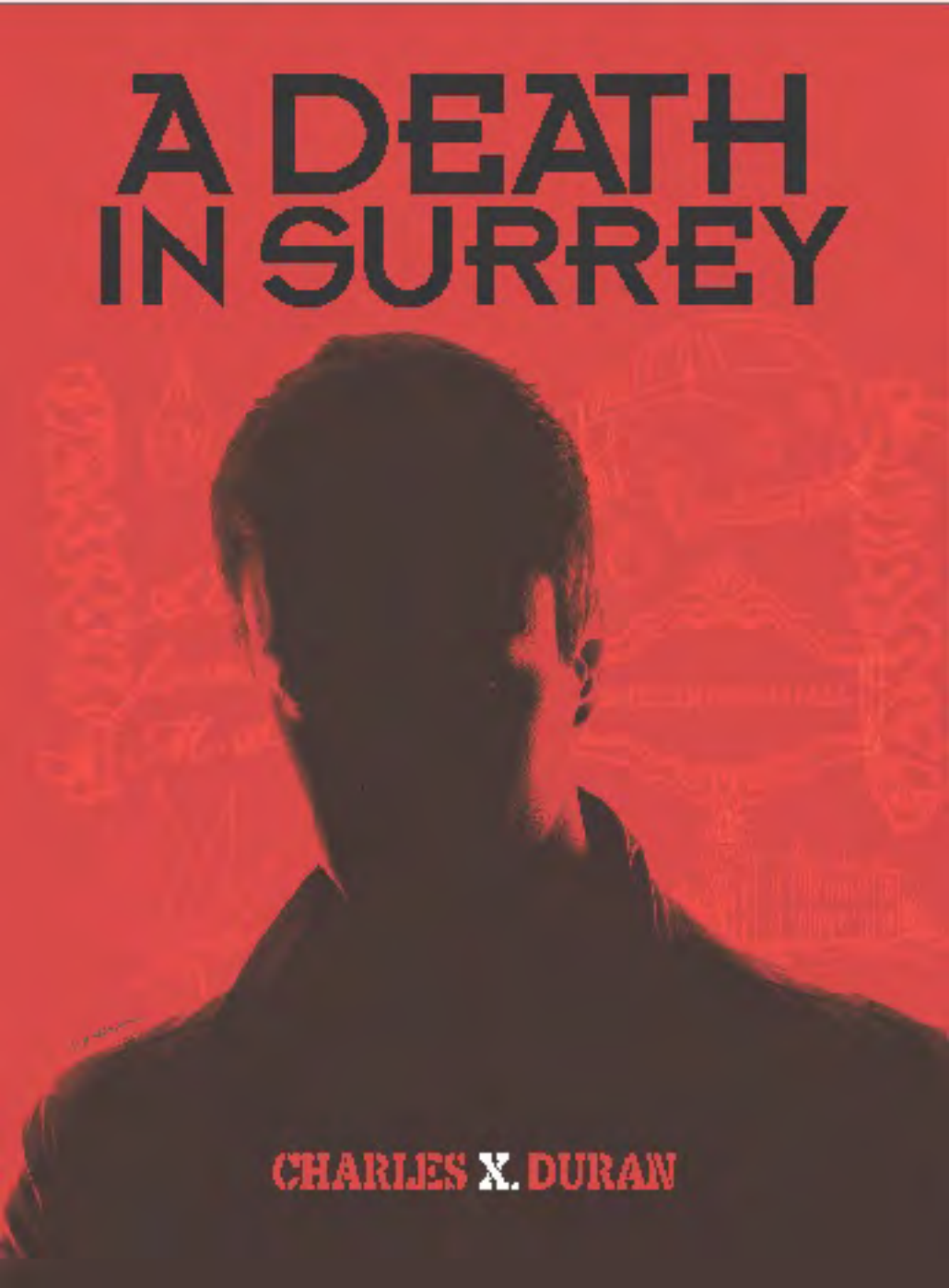
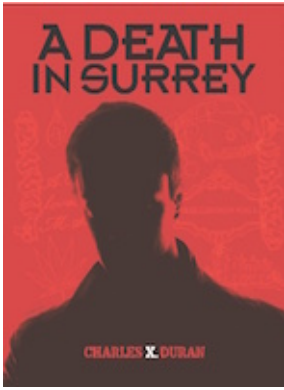


A DEATH IN SURREY



CHARLES X. DURAN



A DEATH in SURREY: Murder, Mirth, Mystery. A Death in Surrey is all anyone would want under one cover: Drama, suspense, twists, action, great characters, humour. Featuring Michael O'Connor, Albert "Bert" Bertleson & Julie Molloy -with DI Frank Ibbotson of the Yard thrown in for good measure. Follow Michael Carol O'Connor as he tries to unravel the mystery behind the death of a person he has never seen or heard of before. In fact, he doesn't even know if the person is male or female. And O'Connor is no detective, secret agent or even a gumshoe. He was just an ordinary Joe going about his daily activities until suddenly it happened. What is it? you might ask. Good question! Accompanying O'Connor on this strange journey is his good friend and aging millionaire eccentric Sir Albert Bertleson. Also tagging along for the ride is Australian Julie Molloy a London University student studying

psychology. To complicate matters, Albert's ex-wife and her "good-for-nothing" son appear on the scene endeavouring to purchase Albert's ancestral home so they can convert it into an establishment for wayward youth. Of course, Albert is too smart to fall for that load of old toffee. But as dangerous as Albert's ex-wife is, the real danger comes in the form of French bodybuilder and professional strongman Andrea Carte along with Nelli Hoffmann a tall and beautiful German femme fatale. It becomes obvious very early in the piece that Carte and Hoffmann are hiding a dark secret that must be kept dark & hidden at any cost. Albert's ancestral home is, naturally, a deserted country mansion with all the usual hidden doorways and secret passages. And what better place would there be to carry on clandestine illegal activities and skulduggery? Of course, when all the good-guys and villains come together in this labyrinth of dark and eerie passages and cold, clammy, uninviting dungeons there is, of course, the proverbial thunder storm raging outside.

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Charles X. Duran

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First Edition

CHAPTER ONE

11:05 AM: Saturday 16th October 1982

The drought had finally broken. After a week or so of inclement weather and then two days of intermittent sunshine the sky had darkened and it was again raining steadily. Not content with this, a strong, cold, gusting wind had stuck its beak in and was driving the rain in all directions making life *alfresco* very uncomfortable.

O'Connor could attest to this more strongly than most as he was without topcoat, hat, scarf or umbrella. On the other hand, Andrea Carté, who'd had a little more forethought, was wearing a navy-blue anorak complete with hood. Dressed in similar fashion was his tall female companion. The two hurriedly rounded the corner - O'Connor, twenty yards or so astern, followed briskly. They were now standing with several other would-be public-transport travellers, all anxiously peering along the road in his direction. The woman glanced at him, smiled briefly, then resumed her vigil. O'Connor, hands in pockets with shoulders hunched, walked to the rear of the group and also waited, his hair and face glistening with rain. Two Double-

deckers arrived together and the couple raced to the second, clambering aboard, their pursuer following suit.

Taking his companion's arm, Carté headed immediately for the upper deck. O'Connor gripped a chrome bar near the exit as a short, round, female conductor approached.

"How far..?"

O'Connor shrugged. "Ahm, the terminus.... Better make it return..."

They were heading south and after a short time passed Manor Park Road on the right and then a large wooded area which he knew to be Petts Wood.

As they rounded a sharp bend to the right the shopping bag at the feet of an elderly lady tipped and an orange bounced across the floor and disappeared.

"Oops! Sorry," she apologised. "I think one of my oranges has rolled under that seat. Would you mind, dear?"

As O'Connor went to kneel down the bus braked sharply for a sudden stop, nearly throwing him off balance. With the help of another passenger the orange was retrieved but now the bus was off again and to his dismay saw two familiar figures hurrying along the footpath in the same direction as the bus. Moving quickly to the doorway he was

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just in time to see them disappear into the first street on their left.

Muttering under his breath, he alighted at the next stop and retraced the route at a steady jog, soon reaching the street in question. They were nowhere in sight but about halfway along on the left was the lighted sign of a fish and chip shop.

“Could I be lucky?”

Lucky? No. It was obvious that the establishment’s warm and cosy atmosphere, along with its inviting aroma, had not enticed his odd looking couple to enter.

To one side there was enough room for a few tables and chairs. O’Connor joined two other waiting customers. A young girl behind the counter looked up and smiled. She was fifteen or sixteen with large brown eyes and shiny black hair. Busy at the fryer was an old, stocky guy with white hair and dressed in a red and white striped apron.

“What would you like, sir?” the girl asked with a broad Scottish accent.

“Just a coffee, please.... White ... one sugar.”

“Take away? ... or would you like to sit at one of our tables and dry off a bit?”

O’Connor looked down at himself with embarrassment, “I do look a bit like a drowned rat, don’t I?”

“I thought you might have swum the Thames to get here,” she replied with a laugh.

“Some fool left home without his hat or coat this morning,” he replied, shaking his head.

“You go and sit yourself down ... I’ll bring it over.”

He removed his jacket, hung it over the back of one of the chairs, mopping his face, hair and neck with a handkerchief. Removing his shoes and socks and placing them on the servery to dry would have been a nice option. But that probably wouldn’t have gone over too well with the customers or that tough looking old guy behind the counter.

The girl came across as the two customers left, passing another two on their way in.

“Here we go,” she said cheerfully, placing a large white cafeteria type cup and saucer on the table with a clunk. “You sure you wouldn’t like something to eat?”

“No, I’m fine, thanks ...

“Ahm ... before you go.... You don’t happen to know a couple that live around here do you? He’s medium height, broad-shoulders and thickset. She’s four or five inches taller with spiky blonde hair...”

“You a copper?” she asked bluntly.

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“No, no” O’Connor laughed, thinking desperately. “It’s just that they ... well, that is she ... she left her purse on the bus.”

“Wasn’t her address in it?”

This kid’s quick, O’Connor realised. “Ahm, no. No, it wasn’t ... I saw them turn up this way ... from the bus.”

“You’re pretty keen ... chasing after them in this rain. You should’ve just handed it in.”

“I know, I know. I thought I’d catch them up but when I got to the corner they’d disappeared.”

“Small one, was it?”

“Small one?”

“The purse.”

“Oh ... yes, sort of.”

“I don’t like him,” she said simply.

“Who? ... The guy?”

“Yeah. He’s a creep.”

“One of your regulars?”

“I’ve seen him off and on over the past few weeks. I only work the weekends to give Mum a break. He’s a real weirdo. She seems okay but he gives me the creeps.”

“What happened?”

“When?”

“When he gave you the creeps.”

“He tried to pick me up one day after work.”

“In his car, you mean?”

“Right.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing much ... just, ‘Do you want a lift’ or something like that.”

“What is it about him that gives you the creeps?”

“I don’t know, really. I don’t like his eyes.... And his lips are too fat.”

“You mightn’t believe this but I had a feeling about him too. It’s got nothing to do with his eyes or his fat lips. In fact, I didn’t notice that he had fat lips. I don’t think it has anything to do with his physical appearance at all.... The thing is...”

“Yes?” she said in anticipation, sitting staring at him with her big brown eyes and hands cupping her chin.

“Can I be honest with you?” he asked finally.

“Pop says, ‘Honesty’s the best policy’.”

“A very wise gentleman.... Well, the thing is, she didn’t leave her purse on the bus.”

“How did you get it, then? ... You never stole it?” she whispered, looking concerned.

“No, I never ... I mean, I didn’t!” he replied indignantly.

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“How did you get it, then?”

“I haven’t got it! There never was a purse.... The thing is...”

“Most women have purses ... or at least...”

“Please! Forget about the purse! I just made up that story when you asked me why I wanted to find her.... Look, just like you, I felt there was something creepy about him and on the spur of the moment decided to see where he was going.”

“You did? Wow! That’s nifty.”

Two youths hurried in out of the rain laughing and jostling each other, heading for the counter.

“Don’t worry about me, Maureen, you just take your time,” the old guy in the apron called out.

She waved and laughed. “Thanks, Pop.”

“I don’t want to get you into trouble,” O’Connor apologised.

“That’s granddad. He’s okay ... just being sarcy. He knows I pull my weight.... That was a pretty cool thing you did; following that guy.... Besides being a creep he looks fairly tough.... What’s your name, by the way?”

“O’Connor, Michael O’Connor.”

“You married?”

“No, I’m not,” he replied. “Why do you ask?”

“You remind me of William Holden. He probably would have done the same as you; following some guy around who looked like a creepy weirdo.”

“The actor, you mean? I thought he’d died. Thanks a lot. He must be in a right old state about now,” O’Connor jested.

“When he was about your age, silly,” she laughed. “He was a real hunk. I love some of those old movies, don’t you? Did you ever see *Born Yesterday*? I’ve got it on video.... Come to think of it, that creep you’re looking for, he looks a lot like Broderick Crawford. Do you know him? He was in *Born Yesterday* with William Holden and Judy Holliday. He was a real sleaze ... although I wouldn’t say he was creepy.”

“You wouldn’t have seen William Holden driving around trying to pick up young girls.”

“That’s for sure.”

“What sort of car does he drive?”

“Who? William Holden?”

O’Connor laughed, “you know what I mean.”

“It wasn’t a car,” she said seriously. “It was a van of some sort.”

“What colour?”

“How’s that going to help?”

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“It could be parked outside his house.”

“Oh, I know where they live.”

“You do?” O’Connor said with an ironic smile.
“Where?”

“Well, I don’t know for sure but I think they have rooms at that old boarding house up the road. That’s to the left when you leave here and then left again. It’s called *The Bishop’s Crook*. That night he tried to pick me up I’d just left the shop and after I knocked him back he drove on and turned left. When I got to the corner his van was parked opposite the boarding house. We live down to the right in the same street.... Mum went all paranoid when I told her and won’t let me walk home at night alone anymore.”

“I don’t blame her.... And you’ve seen the same van there at other times?”

“Yeah. Off and on.”

“You say he gives you the creeps. Was it just that he seemed creepy or did he actually do or say anything inappropriate?”

“How do you mean?”

“Other than offer you a lift he didn’t do or say anything creepy?”

“No, not really. I just don’t like him. He makes my flesh crawl.”

He finished his coffee, stood up and slipped on his still sodden jacket. “Thanks for your time, Maureen. I won’t hold you up any longer,” and handed her a ten pound note. “Keep the change. Buy yourself something nice.”

“Thanks heaps.... Hey!” she called as he opened the door. “Let me know what happens, will you?”

Thankfully the rain had eased off a little but it was still very windy and cold. He turned left and walked a short distance to a T-junction. To the right a cul-de-sac where Maureen had said she lived. To the left the road swept sharply in a curve to the right and disappeared.

Around the bend and on the right stood an old timber building desperately in need of some repair and a paint job. On a large sign just inside the fence line were the words: *The Bishop’s Crook, Bromley* with a telephone number. The van was nowhere to be seen. Adjacent to the property was a narrow lane-way, too narrow for a vehicle. But there was a driveway alongside the building which lead to the rear. As he approached the gate he could see, on the porch next to the front door, a hat and coat rack displaying two familiar looking anoraks.

“*Right, what am I supposed to do now?*” O’Connor pondered.

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...

This guy O'Connor, as it happens, is a powerful and athletic sort of cove. His hair is short and dark but even now, still in this relatively early stage of his life, the forehead is a lot higher than it was just a year or so ago. He accepts this phenomenon as inevitable since his father and grandfather had craniums as hairless and as smooth as melons. However, there *is* a theory floating round that male patent baldness is passed down through the maternal side. But this didn't seem to make sense to O'Connor as his mother's father had hair covering his head, upper lip, jaw line and upper chest area similar to a mammoth's. Young O'Connor had formed this graphic comparison in his second year of primary school when the class had been shown pictures of extinct, prehistoric animals. And it took him quite some time to figure out, if they were extinct, how they'd managed to get the pictures. From that day, and for several more years, the young lad experienced nightmares that his kindly and loving grandfather was some sort of descendant of these primordial monsters. And he had spent many hours trying to either prove or disprove this theory - but was never able to catch the old gentleman without his shirt *or* his pants. After his venerable grandfather had checked in with St Peter, young O'Connor plucked up

courage and revealed his concerns to his mother who, after laughing heartily for several seconds, immediately pulled out the family album which displayed early and cracked photos of her father - a Polish immigrant - in his bathing suit on the shores of the Baltic thereby dispelling immediately the young boy's fears.

However, unlike Samson, this hair loss did not seem to be effecting O'Connor's physical prowess as he was currently employed at Bertleson's Gym in Maidstone as the head fitness and martial arts trainer ... and O'Connor was well qualified for the position: In his late teens, after earning a university degree in physical fitness and nutrition, he had become obsessed with the not so popular or glamorous sports of bodybuilding and powerlifting. In this field he proved to be very successful; gaining muscular body-weight easily and being far superior in strength to many other lads - and even some adults - of his own weight and more.

However, just before his twenty-first birthday his focus had changed dramatically after he was involved in an incident outside the Queens Arms, Plumstead. He just happened to be passing by when the door burst open and a couple stumbled into his path. She was young and skinny with a shaved head and a ring through her nose; her male

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companion was also young and skinny but with long purple hair and a ring through his lower lip - with another strategically place through an eyebrow.

“Get off,” she yelled, trying to break the grip the skinny youth had on her wrist.

“Shut up you stupid tart,” he responded, slapping her sharply across the face.

“Hey, cut that out,” O’Connor objected, trying to step between the two.

“What’s your problem, lame-brain?” the obviously drunken youth challenged, and took a wild swing at his large antagonist.

O’Connor blocked the hay-maker easily, shoving the lad back with a hand to the chest which caused the youth to catch his heel, sitting him sharply on his rear-end.

“What’d you do that for?” the girl protested, and kicked O’Connor violently in the shin.

“Take it easy,” he growled, hopping back in pain. “I was trying to help...”

“Well, in future, mind your own bleeding business,” she retorted, and stepping swiftly forward brought her skinny, bony knee up with tremendous force between his legs.

The very next day O'Connor signed up for the self-defence courses being offered at the local civic centre. Again his natural physical attributes came to the fore and in a few months he was good enough to be taking lessons from Ken Walden the British martial arts and self-defence champion.

It might be advantageous, at this point, to mention that this proved to be doubly important for O'Connor as it led to his friendship with a certain Sir Albert Bertleson, a business acquaintance of Walden's. Albert was an eccentric old character who looked more like a shopping-cart person than a filthy rich mogul and who preferred to be called 'Albert', 'Bert', 'Old Bert' or even 'hey, you' rather than 'Sir Albert'. Albert had been a keen and successful athlete in his own day and even now, despite advancing years, still ran the London Marathon annually. Of course, when the position of head trainer had become vacant at Albert's gym he had to look no further than Michael O'Connor, the fitness freak and accredited dietician.

The aforementioned episode which involved O'Connor wandering the streets of Bromley in torrential rain had transpired because of an incident that had suddenly occurred, or, one might say, suddenly manifested itself, to

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the private and sacred inner-sanctum of the O'Connor psyche. Although he'd had a similar experience some years ago nothing remotely like it had occurred since then. Just as before, there were no warning or telltale signs of the incident about to take place. To analyse the experience one would have to say that it wasn't anything extremely dramatic or worrying and he could have just as easily levered it out of his mind and forgotten it - maybe.

And now, as O'Connor looks back on the incident, he can't really fathom why he didn't do just that but opted instead to go to all that inconvenience and discomfort for no apparent reason - none that readily sprang to mind, anyway. He had always considered himself to be a rather pragmatic person inclined to listen to uncomplicated and objective theories or explanations for some of the more controversial topics which seem to capture the imagination of many people. For example, he *does* believe in UFOs. The key letter for him being the U which stands for 'unidentified'. He believes that people *have* seen flying objects or lights which have never been positively identified as anything - including flying saucers. Someone could argue all night about Roswell or some other event or sighting but unless incontrovertible evidence was presented to prove the theory he would remain resolutely unconvinced. The same goes for

the ‘Kennedy Assassination Conspiracy’ theory; the ‘Flat Earth’ theory; the ‘Elvis Lives’ theory; the ‘Moon Landing Conspiracy’ theory; and many more such ‘theories’.

So what about *this* strange event? And where does Carté and his tall companion fit in? The first time he had ever clapped eyes on the couple was the day of the South London Junior Judo Championships. O’Connor had arrived merely as a spectator with his sister and her two kids; Aidan, seven and Laura, nine, both of whom had shown a keen interest in learning more about their uncle’s passion for martial arts. They found a good vantage point near the front among the crowd which was building up quickly, probably consisting mainly of relatives and friends of the young competitors.

“When’s it going to start, Uncle Mike?” Aidan asked impatiently after only two minutes, already hoeing keenly into a packet of crisps.

At the halfway point of the competition a guest bodybuilder and strength athlete by the name of Andrea Carté from France was introduced to the audience. He had long red glossy hair flowing about his shoulders and sported a golden/red tan - more than likely obtained from a bottle. At about five eight or so he looked shorter because of his huge muscularity. He strode directly to centre stage and performed

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a short posing exhibition accompanied by the final rousing stanzas of Ravel's Bolero. Spurred on by this stirring music a tall woman with short, blonde, spiky hair, seated two rows in front and to O'Connor's right went wild with excitement. She obviously knew the star-attraction for she enthusiastically clapped, whistled and called his name as he went through his routine. At one stage she got so carried away that an official had to come across and ask her to tone it down.

Carté finished his spot with a strongman act which included bending an iron bar, blowing up a hot-water bottle till it burst - the youngsters in the crowd going wild over this one - and tearing a telephone book in half.

Now, *it* happened as Carté bowed in acknowledgement to the applause, especially from his major fan, who O'Connor feared was about to have a seizure.

"That guy ... he's done something," O'Connor mumbled, more or less to himself.

"Who?" his sister asked, turning to him in surprise.

"That Carté..."

"What do you mean, 'done something'? I know he darn-well near blew my eardrums with that hot-water-bottle trick. How are yours?"

"Mine?" he asked absentmindedly. "No, it's not that. It's just.... There's something about him..."

“Have you seen him before? Do you know him from somewhere?” Julie whispered, now beginning to look clearly concerned - for her brother.

“I don’t know ... I don’t think so. There’s just something about him.”

“What are you whispering about?” Laura whispered who was sitting between her mother and brother.

“Nothing.”

“Here, Jules,” O’Connor said and handed his sister some money. “I promised the kids McDonalds. And there’s enough for a cab ... I’m going.”

“Mike..?”

He knew the auditorium and that there were only two exits. Positioning himself in the doorway of an abandoned shop across the street he’d waited. That was it. For a man like O’Connor; completely out of character.

It was this unexpected experience which now threatened to destroy his peaceful, contented life and have him either climbing the walls of his bed-sit or have him committed to one of Broadmore’s rubber rooms.

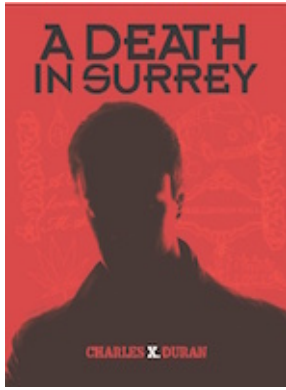
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Almost before the door of his humble bed-sit had closed after his little adventure he was pouring himself a

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stiff Scotch. With a second one in hand he proceeded to the bathroom, stripped his wet attire, and stepped under a steaming hot shower. After drying off and a quick sandwich he was in bed fast asleep by eight o'clock.

Feeling as exhausted as he did he thought he'd sleep right through but after what seemed like only ten minutes he was wide awake. Was that a figure standing near the doorway? No, it couldn't be - just his imagination. But then the hairs stood up over his body as the shadow moved and he realised that it was Andrea Carté. He tried to quickly roll out of bed ready to defend himself but he couldn't move. What was wrong? Was he drugged? Tied? How did the strong man know where he lived? Had he followed him? How did he get in? How could he have been incapacitated so easily? Just then another figure moved into the room. It was Maureen, the young Scottish girl who was gagged with her hands tied behind her back. Following close behind came Carté's tall female companion dressed only in a red and white striped apron. Had they tortured the young girl to make her talk? But she didn't know where he lived, did she? Carté began to laugh and slowly walk toward the bed. O'Connor again tried frantically to move. He tried to shout but couldn't even open his mouth or make a sound --



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