

A serial killer is murdering victims in a most unusual way, and you may die laughing before the next victim is found. The body count rises as our hero battles a crime syndicate, government intelligence agency and international terrorists.

Bad Vibrations

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Dan Anderson

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Chapter 1

“Woman Murdered With Vibrator.”

As macabre as it sounded, the headline was not a figment of someone's perverse imagination. There it was, on page one of the Metro section in the *Los Angeles Times*. My attention captured, I folded the newspaper to the article in question. It was uncomfortably warm in the small bathroom of my private detective agency and I fanned myself for a minute before reading on.

In the lurid style of crime journalism, the article proceeded to describe how one "Boom Boom" Saperstein, an exotic dancer at one of North Hollywood's "gentlemen's clubs," had been found dead, floating in her bathtub, the murder weapon still inside her. Electrocution was given as the cause of death, in spite of the fact that the vibrator's electrical cord had been unplugged from the wall and lay innocently on the floor. Also noted in the story was the fact that Ms. Saperstein was the five-hundredth homicide of 1980.

I was just beginning to get into the more graphic forensic details of the article when the bell over the door of my office jingled, indicating the arrival of company. I finished my business and opened the bathroom door a crack to preview my visitor. A soft whistle nearly escaped my pursed lips. Standing in my office, looking out the window, was a stunning creature, the kind I thought only existed in the celluloid world of aerobic workout tapes. She was tall, about five ten, and wore skin-tight designer jeans with a yellow halter that was under considerable stress. Her hair was several shades lighter than her halter and cascaded down her back, terminating in tawny curls midway between her shoulder blades and waist. Her stiletto heels clicked nervously as she began pacing back and forth across my chipped parquet floor.

I quietly closed the door and took a few extra minutes to tuck in my shirt, straighten my clip-on bow tie, and brush the wide lapels of my green plaid jacket. After putting on my broadest smile, I stepped into the

room with my hand extended. To my surprise, the statuesque vision had vanished, leaving no evidence of her presence except the lingering fragrance of her perfume. In her place, almost swallowed up by an old armchair in the corner, sat another woman.

This lady was a far cry from her predecessor. She was diminutive, elderly, and plain; surrounded by a nimbus of withered and wrinkled weariness. Her dull, gray hair was drawn tightly into a bun, its simplicity matched by her dark gabardine frock. Her most salient attribute was her drabness. She spoke in an indistinctive, cracked voice.

"Mr. McFadden?"

"Yes," I replied before asking, "Did you happen to see a young woman in here only a moment ago?"

"No, but I saw one jump into a car by the curb as I was entering the building."

"I wonder what she wanted," I mused. "Well, probably not important. What may I do for you, madam?"

She looked around the sparsely furnished room purposefully. In addition to the chair in which she was submerged, the room contained only a folding chair, a used metal desk purchased at a garage sale, a telephone and answering machine, an appointment book, and a two-drawer file cabinet.

Sensing her disapproval, I offered a pseudo-apology. "Please pardon the appearance of this room, madam. It's a recently opened branch office and the decorators are in the process of sketching some layouts for my review." I had been tempted to tell her that, like the poet Phillip Larkin, deprivation was to me what daffodils were to Wordsworth but I refrained.

She took another look around and sniffed audibly. "Mr. McFadden, I may have a job for you. It could involve some danger. Do you have a pistol?"

That was a loaded question. Somewhere in my possession I did have a revolver. However, infrequent use had eroded its value since most of my cases involved rather mundane fare such as matrimonial infidelity, missing persons, background checks for pre-nups and child custody,

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insurance fraud, evidence procurement, and surveillance. Truth be known, I was more at home with a camera than a firearm.

"A private investigator's license in California doesn't allow me to carry a concealed weapon. However, I can 'pack a piece' if the situation warrants it. Incidentally, may I have the pleasure of an introduction?"

"I'm Rubella Saperstein."

"Saperstein . . . Saperstein . . . that name sounds familiar." I rubbed my chin and studied her thoughtfully.

"It was in all the papers this morning. My niece was murdered night before last. Poor Cleotha."

"Was she the strip . . . uh . . . dancer who was found murdered with a vib . . . uh . . . who was electrocuted in the bathtub?"

"Yes." Her answer was sandwiched between sighs.

"How can I help you, Mrs. Saperstein?"

"I want you to find her killer. My niece worked a couple of miles from here so I know the area. I picked you out of the yellow pages because of your address. I don't have much money, but I figured that anyone setting up shop in this part of town couldn't be charging very much."

I could see that getting her to speak with candor was not going to be difficult.

"Have you been to the authorities?" I asked.

"I just got back from the police station," she said.

"What did they say?"

"They weren't very encouraging," she confided.

I sat down and leaned back in my chair, brimming with confidence gained from five years of exposure to police personnel and procedure. "Let me guess. They said they wouldn't be able to launch an investigation anytime soon because of budget cutbacks."

"No, that's not it," she replied.

"Then they said they couldn't do anything because of a manpower shortage due to the current crime wave."

"No, that's not it, either."

My confidence eroding, I leaned forward and said, "Then they told you that since your niece was not a prominent citizen whose demise

had provoked a public outcry, her murder had been shoved to the back burner?"

"No, that's still not it."

Crestfallen, I surrendered. "So, what did they say?"

"They said they didn't give a shit."

I sighed and leaned back in my chair. "I'm afraid that's pretty much the lowest rung on the crime investigation ladder. Don't hold your breath waiting for an arrest."

She nodded her head twice in defeated agreement. "It's clear that if justice is to be had, it will have to be bought and paid for. I don't have much in the way of savings, but I'd like to see poor Cleotha's death avenged, if the price is right." She cocked her head and looked down her nose at me with suspicion. "And, just how much *do* you charge, Mr. McFadden?"

"My normal rates are \$100 a day plus expenses, but you're in luck. Since your niece was in the entertainment industry, I can extend a professional courtesy discount, which would amount to \$49.95 per day plus expenses."

After a moment of eyebrow-scrunched reflection, she replied, "I guess that's reasonable enough. Do I pay you now?"

"Two days in advance for a couple of reasons. First, consideration such as money is necessary to validate an offer and its acceptance and to form a binding contract of mutual assent. Second, such consideration officially establishes a principal and agent relationship between us which authorizes me to act on your behalf in all matters within the sphere of my appointment."

She absorbed this information for a moment before accepting my offer. "All right, Mr. McFadden . . ." She leaned forward, reached into her canvas satchel, and pulled out a roll of money. I watched as she removed some rubber bands that compressed the currency into a tight cylinder. Then, I watched as she slowly peeled off a one-hundred-dollar bill—I thought I saw Ben Franklin blink, probably dazzled by the rare exposure to light—and I watched as she rubbed it vigorously between her thumb and forefinger to ensure that two bills were not stuck together. Satisfied that only one had been successfully extricated from its

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colleagues, she resecured the roll and stashed it back into the satchel. “. . . Here you are.” Finally, this mesmerizing vignette mercifully ended and she handed me the payment.

Even at an arm's distance, the bill exuded the smells of arthritis ointment and mattress mold—the aromas of the old and frugal—but I quickly accepted it and slipped it into my pocket.

“Can you start on the case right away?”

“Let me check my calendar and see.” I picked up the appointment book, hoping she hadn't noticed how dusty it was, and licked my index finger before thumbing through the nearly blank pages. Other than a few paper lice that were unaccustomed to disturbance, I found no conflicts, which I well knew.

“You're in luck, Mrs. Saperstein,” I said. “There *does* appear to be an opening into which I can squeeze you.”

“Thank you, Mr. McFadden. I'm very pleased.” The wrinkles around her mouth softened into what I assumed to be a smile. Her voice went up a note and she touched her hands together. That was probably as close to frenzy as she ever got. I reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a small spiral notebook.

“I'd like to get some information from you, Mrs. Saperstein, if I may. First off, what do you do for a living?”

“I'm a housekeeper for a wealthy man in San Marino. I live in the servants' quarters.”

I flipped a few pages and jotted the information down. “Thank you. Now, tell me about your niece.”

“I raised Cleotha from infancy,” she said wistfully. “Her parents were killed when she was a baby, and I'm all the family she's ever known.”

“How did her parents die?”

“They were trampled to death years ago in an after-Christmas bargain basement sale at Blaufelt's department store. Their battered bodies were found beneath a pile of fluorescent Nehru jackets by the cleaning staff the next day. It was horrible. Thank God, Cleotha was too young to remember.”

“I'm sorry. Please, go on,” I urged.

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"Cleotha was such a good girl when she was growing up—Girl Scouts, good grades, honor society, you know; all the right friends. However, when she got to be fourteen or so, she started running around with a fast crowd and I began to lose control of her. She wouldn't listen to me anymore and became rebellious and disobedient." Mrs. Saperstein paused, absorbed in recollection.

"She was a well-developed girl. In fact, that was the cause of her problems: her body matured faster than her judgment. She began flirting with boys and leading them on. I'll never forget the first time I had to put up bail for her: she'd surrendered her virginity in the end zone during halftime at a Rams game. Five men were arrested for contributing to the delinquency of a minor, including the place kicker and free safety."

"She certainly sounds precocious."

"As soon as Cleotha graduated from high school, she ran away from home. She got a job at the Glad Gland, a seedy strip joint in North Hollywood."

"Is that when she adopted the stage name, Boom Boom?" I asked.

"No," Mrs. Saperstein replied. "She'd picked that nickname up earlier in high school. After football games, she used to do the dirty boogie with the starting players on top of the wooden planks in the bleachers. I was told that the noise made by these loose boards as they rhythmically slapped her bouncing booty sounded like 'boom-boom-boom-boom-boom' and the nickname stuck. Her yearbook has more athletes' autographs than the Pro Football Hall of Fame." Mrs. Saperstein stopped to recompose herself and blink away a painful memory.

"I'm beginning to see a pattern," I said, briefly basking in the visual of her explanation.

"Yes, well, at the Glad Gland, she danced and stripped, danced and stripped. By the time her act was over, all she had on was two sequins and a boa constrictor named Mohammed Al-Said. The snake's name used to be Jefferson or Jackson or something, but Cleotha changed it when Muslim names became trendy in the black community."

"When was the last time you saw your niece?"

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"Yesterday." Mrs. Saperstein dabbed gingerly in the corners of her eyes. "She was laid out stark naked on a slab at the morgue. They called me in to identify the body."

"Actually, I meant . . . while she was alive."

"Hmmm. Three or four months ago, I'd say. Cleotha rarely called or came to see me. She led her own life and did as she pleased."

"Did she have any friends or acquaintances with whom I could talk?"

"She shared an expensive house with a girl named Wanda Latouche, another dancer at the Glad Gland. I never met the girl, though."

"Was your niece having problems with anyone?" I observed Mrs. Saperstein knotting and twisting a well-worn handkerchief.

"Not that I know of. As I said earlier, I haven't seen her much since she left home. But if she was in some kind of trouble, she would have come to see me. She knew I was always there for her."

"All right, Mrs. Saperstein. I'll see what I can do. If the police do deem this crime to be of little significance, they may allow me to ferret around." I tore a page out of the notebook and slid it, with my pen, across the table. "Please write down your address and telephone number so I'll know where to reach you."

She reached in her pocket and removed some wire-frame glasses that were held together by a paper clip. Then, after obliging my request, she deftly slipped my pen into her satchel. She looked up sweetly. "Is there anything else you need?"

I nodded my head while wondering: why do I always get these clients? "Do you have a picture of Cleotha that I might borrow?"

"Yes," she replied. She rummaged inside her satchel and handed me a snapshot. "This picture was taken more recently than the one they used in the papers."

I slipped the picture into my desk drawer. "That should conclude our business for now, Mrs. Saperstein. I'll contact you as soon as I have something to report."

She didn't budge.

"I believe I have ten cents coming."

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"I beg your pardon?" I asked.

"I paid for two days in advance at \$49.95, which comes to a total of \$99.90. I gave you \$100.00; that means I should receive ten cents back."

I excused myself, walked out to the vending machine in the hall and gave it a swift, well-placed kick. A couple of nickels trickled down into the coin return, and I returned to my office to give Mrs. Saperstein her change. She then used my pen to record the transaction in a black ledger, resumed her death grip on the satchel, and left as silently as she had arrived.

Chapter 2

Flush with funds and a renewed purpose, I thumbtacked a hastily scribbled "Gone for the Day" sign on my office door and walked down the dark hallway of my building. Only one other tenant was presently renting space in the building, an attorney named Melkoff. As I neared it, I saw that the door to his single-room office was still open due to a malfunctioning thermostat. It was doubtful he would catch a breeze from the corridor, but without air conditioning, he'd been forced to keep his office door open and hope.

I glanced inside. He was all smiles, handing a pen and what appeared to be a legal document to an elderly dowager who was squinting and rubbing her eyes. I paused momentarily, out of curiosity, just past the door. "I'm *so* sorry I stepped on your reading glasses, Mrs. Swenson. I'll have them repaired and delivered to your home. However, to avoid delay, you should sign this form today—that's right, on the line at the bottom. This document is a mere formality; it's called a 'durable power of attorney,' and simply allows me to assist you in the stewardship of your assets. It's a wise precaution on your part."

I shook my head sadly. If the old lady was turning over the management of her estate to Melkoff, it was a sure bet she'd be buried in a potter's field. He was a master in the subtle art of "asset conversion." The only thing I admired about Melkoff was that he was a self-made man. He had taken correspondence courses on civilian and military criminal law while imprisoned at Fort Leavenworth awaiting a court-martial. With his newly acquired legal knowledge, he managed to get many of the charges dismissed as well as gain valuable preparation for his future career.

Melkoff had been a staff sergeant in the U.S. Army, in charge of a battalion mess hall, until he was apprehended selling government hams and turkeys to off-limits restaurants. While in prison, he met several JAG attorneys who were serving short terms of their own for various and sundry swindles and who inspired him to steal through the back door

rather than the front. Convinced that the road to wealth was more easily traversed by bending the law as an advocate rather than breaking it as an adversary, he changed his identity through false documentation and earned his law degree. He then proceeded to set up a low-overhead practice here—a fleecing operation that had grown to be unrivaled even by professional norms.

Somehow, he managed to stay one jump ahead of any inquiries by the bar association and evade indictment. But, even if he ever was caught and disbarred, I had undaunted faith in Melkoff's consummate skills as a survivor. I had *no* doubt, in fact, that he would quickly open up another racket under another assumed name and proceed once again to separate the unwary from their valuables. With his flamboyance and low ethical threshold, I was also confident that he would eventually wander into politics, lobbying, or used-car sales. I shook my head and left Melkoff and his prey, walked down the stairs, and opened the door to the street. As the door closed behind me, I looked over the neighborhood, a former grande dame that had fallen upon hard times.

Most legitimate businesses had abandoned the area years ago in anticipation of advancing urban decay. The few surviving stores, propped up by cheap rent and free parking, hung on for dear economic life and included the usual denizens of the dump: tattoo parlors, tanning emporiums, bail bond offices, paycheck cashers, liquor stores, and pawn brokers—businesses whose clients were more likely to appear on police blotters than society pages. Even the gangs that once livened up the area had fled some years ago for better ZIP codes. The only evidence of their prior habitation was the faded graffiti that still managed to cling tenuously to cracked stuccoed walls and a few looted phone booths that dotted the sidewalks like Stonehenge monoliths.

I blinked to help ease some of the irritation in my eyes. Air quality in the area had been in a funk lately from forest fires that were burning near Bakersfield. Slowly and surely, the acrid smoke and accompanying ash had risen into the upper air currents to waft their way westward. The result was general discomfort and upper respiratory misery in the coastal cities.

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Looking up, I saw that the sun had already cleared the roofs of two-story buildings and was beginning to bathe the concrete sidewalks and asphalt roads with early morning rays. A summer-long drought had wilted even the most stubborn weeds. Once sprouting defiantly in cracks and vacant lots, they now hung limply under the solar bake. They had been joined by a fresh assortment of trash whipped in by recent Santa Ana winds. Newspaper pages, in particular, wrapped themselves around the bases of telephone poles and wove themselves into fences: there, they would stay until dislodged by the wakes of passing trucks or disintegrated by winter rains.

Walking to my car, I looked up and down the block. The streets were barren except for a Chinese laundry that had managed to attract a few customers with their semi-annual auction of unclaimed shirts. The laundry catered to a rough crowd and assumed that clothing not picked up after six months meant the owner had been crammed in a barrel under the end of the San Pedro pier, buried at the bottom of some landfill, or compacted inside a junked automobile at a metal reclamation yard.

My 1952 maroon Hudson was parked next door in a deserted gas station whose faded signs still advertised petrol at 36.9 cents. As soon as I sat down in the seat, I rolled down the window and started coaxing the choke and stomping the accelerator. After several minutes, she sputtered to life, and I headed to my first stop, a convenience market, to procure some peanuts for the office mice. Their recent droppings suggested a lack of dietary fiber which I sought to address through legumes and a bit of cheddar.

As I exited the market with purchase in hand, I heard a crash and looked around to my right. Standing outside of an adjacent shop was a lady cursing at the top of her lungs, waving her arms, and stomping her feet in flamenco fashion. A mid-sixties Pontiac was speeding away from the parking lot, after leaving behind a bent fender on a pale yellow Rolls Royce Corniche. Acting on instinct, I memorized the license plate number of the departing car and approached the animated lady jauntily.

"Good afternoon, madam. You appear to be in need of assistance."

"That greaseball backed into my Rolls and took off," she fumed.

"Unfortunately, in this neighborhood, many people don't leave their names and phone numbers under the windshield wipers of cars they damage. However, I may be able to obtain the identity of the irresponsible driver for you." I smiled confidently; the license number of the Pontiac securely tucked away in my memory banks.

She looked at me quizzically. "Who are you, little man? And, how could you possibly help with this?"

"Private investigator," I replied. I smiled while holding my breath and unsuccessfully trying to button my jacket.

"Do you have a business card?"

I reached into my jacket pocket and handed her one.

"McFadden Investigations," she read before cocking her head back and sizing me up.

While she was looking me over, I looked her over—a much more pleasant undertaking. She was a striking brunette, a head taller than I was, with dark brown eyes and an hourglass figure that had more sand in the top than the bottom.

"And *you're* McFadden?"

"Chauncey McFadden, at your service." I bowed slightly from what remained of my waist—it had been an early casualty to overindulgence and sloth, two traits more highly regarded in Tudor England than in anorexic Southern California.

She lowered her designer shades and viewed me with suspicion. "You don't look much like a private eye, Chauncey McFadden."

In my late thirties, I was still slightly less than five feet eight inches in height and not-so-slightly more than two hundred and fifty pounds. My poor vision had been largely corrected by black, horn-rimmed glasses; my premature baldness, on the other hand, had not been similarly blessed by any of a number of corrective antidotes. "That may be true, but my bland appearance serves me well when I work undercover," I retorted.

"What other experience have you had?"

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“I’ve been a night watchman, museum security guard, and package checker at the super-mart exit . . . among other things, of course.”

She didn’t look impressed. “I thought all gumshoes were ex-detectives who got canned for insubordination or for not following police procedure—even though they usually lead the precinct in number of collars and commendations. I thought they were steady drinkers with nerves of steel who’d been dumped by ex-wives who didn’t like their hours or the job stress. I thought they were lonely knights who walked the mean streets with honor and without fear.”

“You certainly have a nodding acquaintance with the genre,” I acknowledged. “I’m cut from a little different bolt of cloth. My application to the police academy was rejected, my only commendation in life was a penmanship award in the third grade, and I become inebriated by sniffing a bunghole; I have never been married, despite three rejected proposals, *and* I can be bought.

“However, the value I bring to the table is that I can start on your case right away, I don’t charge if I don’t get results, and my discretion in sensitive matters is guaranteed. You should also know that to be licensed as a private investigator in California, I have had to accrue six thousand hours of compensated experience in investigative work.”

“Your honesty is refreshing,” she replied. “I may have a job for you that has nothing to do with this dent. Can you come to my home this evening at seven o’clock? My name’s Jill Barrington and I live at 14 Regal Place in Halcyon Hills. You’ll be discussing a very important and confidential matter with my father, Alfred Barrington. I’ll tell him that we met and ask him to hire you.”

I was surprised at her offer since Halcyon Hills was one of the wealthiest, most prestigious residential areas in the city. Also, Alfred Barrington, better known by his previous title of Judge, had been *the* central figure in Los Angeles politics before retiring to assume a more oblique role of puppeteer to the so-called city hall marionettes.

“I’ll be there.” I had almost stammered as I watched her retreating *derrière* sway back and forth like an inverted windshield wiper. I didn’t move—okay, maybe I couldn’t move—and before long, the Rolls glided

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past me out of the parking lot and down the street. I noticed her personalized license plate as the yellow carriage and its princess receded from view: DANGER.

I hoped that wasn't a portent.

Chapter 3

Since it was late summer, the sunlight was sufficient at six-thirty to catch at least partial views of the mansions that flanked both sides of Regal Place. Each residence was ensconced on at least three acres and reflected an architectural style and quality of construction long extinct. Few, if any, of these homes had a replacement value of less than eight figures, which is why any sales price was usually met—and promptly so—on those rare occasions when a Halcyon Hills address did go on the market.

I cruised slowly past open gates, spying lawns and shrubbery that were well manicured, the recipients of meticulous care, and an occasional rainbow among the late afternoon sprinklers that whirled contentedly above serene sod. Flower beds exploded with an effulgence of color, often in stark contrast to the subdued hues of the homes themselves.

Along the road, I spotted crews of Japanese gardeners in dilapidated pickup trucks and Hispanic domestics walking to bus stops. Otherwise, the quiet of my tranquil drive was only occasionally interrupted by the hum of speeding German and Italian convertibles filled with laughing young scions of luxury, darting about with loosely tied tennis sweaters streaming from their tanned necks like the silk scarves of World War I flying aces.

The Halcyon Hills constabulary patrolled the streets in a continuous vigil for interlopers. Knowing the residents, frequent guests, and menials by sight, they approached anyone else with a cautious civility that could quickly become a brusque insistence for departure should an intrusion be unauthorized. I suppose, then, it was only natural that my rusty Hudson would attract their attention. Soon enough, with minimal fanfare, a patrol car discretely ushered me over to the curb. Two patrolmen stepped quickly from the car, each approaching a different side of my vehicle.

"What's the problem, officers? I was barely going twenty-five," I offered ingenuously.

The officer peering in my window asked, "Let me see your driver's license, pal. What's the nature of your business in Halcyon Hills?"

The other officer positioned himself on the passenger side of my car and tapped his holster, as if adding punctuation.

"I have an appointment with Judge Barrington at seven," I replied, handing over my license, "for which I shall be late if this unwarranted detainment isn't expedited."

The first officer took my license to run a check on it while the other officer propped his foot on my fender and looked inside the car. Having little else to do, I stared at his heavily starched uniform and polished brass.

In a few minutes, the first deputy returned and broke the silence. "All right, McFadden, your story's easy enough to confirm. Follow us, and we'll escort you to the Judge's place. If you're not on the level, we'll be continuing this conversation."

They climbed back into their blue and yellow patrol car and led the way. I followed in limp pursuit and we eventually arrived at a security gate, which opened after our presence was announced through an intercom. I followed the officers into the grounds of the estate on a cobblestone entrance road that was bordered by Italian cypress trees. It ended at the entrance to a transplanted English manor: a modern homage to a Buckingham forebear.

The officers parked and allowed me to proceed toward a massive oak door, where I rang the bell. A septuagenarian in butler's attire appeared momentarily and I announced myself loudly enough for my escorts to hear: "My name is Chauncey McFadden. Judge Barrington is expecting me."

As the man stepped back to allow my entrance, I turned and nodded at my escorts, then entered into a large foyer. I glanced at the butler whose slightly knocked knees, stooped carriage, twitching ears, and wispy muttonchops gave him an arresting presence.

"May I take your coat, sir?"

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"Thank you, no. I'm not wearing a coat."

"May I offer you a coat?"

"I think not."

"Very well, sir. Please follow me to the Judge's study."

It was not difficult to keep pace with the dotty old seneschal. He exhibited the gait of a man afflicted with pernicious hemorrhoids or suffering the ambulatory after-effects of four decades on a rural Southern chain gang. I followed his short, shuffling steps until we reached the terminus of a long corridor: double French doors.

Once the mahogany doors were opened, I saw that the "study" was in actuality a cavernous library-museum. Besides housing what must have been thousands of books nestled in columns of never-ending open shelves, rare scholarly tomes were secured behind the leaded-glass panes of antique bookcases and brittle manuscripts were locked in glass display cabinets. The room itself was highlighted by several huge stone fireplaces with mantels of sienna marble; many brightened by Beauvais tapestries suspended above them.

The furnishings in the room were no less spectacular. As I've mentioned, in a previous life, I was a security guard at a museum. Its collection specialized in European antiques and paintings, and I picked up some knowledge on the subject as well as an eclectic appreciation. Based on that knowledge, I recognized several pieces: a grand flugel pianoforte and an eighteenth-century English harpsichord, numerous Louis XIV bronzes, console tables of carved mahogany and terra-cotta topped with verde antico marble, and commodes, or large French chests, with decorative tulipwood marquetry and gilded cast metal ormolu.

Eighteenth-century French sculpture was well represented by some thoughtfully selected works of Pigalle, Falconet, Clodion, and Houdon. Several fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Renaissance paintings were displayed against a background of Genoese velvet; featured were such Italian and Flemish masters as Marnardi, Roger van der Weyden, and Jan van Eyck. Porcelain works were much in evidence in the form of Sèvres vases, a Meissen candelabrum, and some Chelsea plates.

"This is a spectacular room," I commented in spellbound awe. After my enchantment subsided, I added, "I'll bet I can tell you the most valuable objects here."

"Indeed, sir," the butler replied with decorum and disinterest.

"The knobs of the doors we just passed through: they're the most priceless of all the collectibles."

"The door knobs?"

I thought I sensed a touch of genuine curiosity.

"Are you quite sure, sir?"

"Yes, they're the varnished balls of Charlemagne and, as you can appreciate, are virtually irreplaceable in today's market."

The butler didn't look convinced, but he furtively wiped his hands on the seat of his trousers anyway and eyed me warily. "May I get you something to eat, sir?"

"Why, thank you." I brightened. "I'd like a bologna sandwich, on a kaiser roll—heavy on the mayo."

"I'm sorry, sir, but the cook has retired for the evening and the kitchen is closed. May I bring you a cocktail instead?"

"Yes, a snifter of amontillado sherry will do quite nicely."

"I'm sorry again, sir, but the wine steward resigned this morning, and we have been unable to locate the key to the cellar. Will there be anything else?"

"I would ask for a concubine, but I'll wager that she's out of service with a yeast infection."

"Actually, sir, she's visiting her mother in Glendale."

Since this was going nowhere, I looked for a seat. Chairs, primarily English in origin, were tastefully arranged around the room and included some Chippendales, a few red velvet side chairs from the William and Mary period, and some eighteenth-century Georgian pieces. Finally, I spotted a more comfortable looking overstuffed armchair and prepared to sit down. I joked to myself that the seat had probably once been graced by the derriere of Cardinal Richelieu.

"One moment, sir—" the butler cried upon seeing my intention. He shuffled over to me as fast as his pedestrian locomotion would permit, whipped out a whisk broom from a concealed pocket in his coat,

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and proceeded to dust me off, grumbling each time a straw became ensnared in my synthetic threads.

A sudden draft of cold air against the back of my neck prompted me to turn around; I was face-to-face with a man, staring at me from the doorway of the study. The man was more than six feet tall and erect in carriage; his lean frame flattered the dark blue smoking jacket, white silk shirt, and burgundy ascot that he wore. He was a little older than the picture used by the newspapers, but I had no doubt of his identity: the formidable Judge Barrington.

Determined not to speak first—that was the obligation of the host—I used the opening silence to continue looking over my prospective employer. The judge was an imposing figure, a fact that had not handicapped his dominance in local politics. He had dark, wavy hair flanked with wide bands of silver that began at each temple and swept back over pointed ears to the nape of his neck. Thick, bushy eyebrows were mounted above black, piercing eyes, which could stir discomfort in the target of a prolonged stare. In his youth, he had no doubt been handsome. The passing years had muted some of this surface attractiveness, however, and given it a sinister undertone.

"Mr. McFadden, I believe."

"I'm honored to meet you, Judge Barrington. How good of you to see me."

"My daughter informed me of her meeting with you this morning and of her invitation. I hadn't really thought about hiring a private investigator, but Jill was so insistent that I finally agreed. I don't suppose it can do any harm."

He paused, and I noted that his eyes were still evaluating me.

"She also warned that you didn't look like the steel-jawed, muscle-bound, smoking-gun avenger from a film noir movie poster."

"Quite so, your honor." I had to agree. "However, I've found innocuousness to be a formidable weapon in the hands of a skilled craftsman. My feckless and fatuous appearance has allowed me to succeed in the past, where more vain predecessors have failed."

He continued the conversation, obviously not impressed. "Did Jill tell you what this was about?" he asked.

"She only mentioned that you were concerned with a family matter of utmost importance and confidentiality. Investigative matters requiring third-party tact, discretion, and efficiency are my specialty," I informed him in my most professional manner.

The judge still lacked any hint of interest, but after a short pause, he replied, "Very well, I suppose I have nothing to lose by your investigation," as he slumped into an Edwardian parlor chair and grimaced, apparently in anticipation of the painful narration to follow.

"In addition to Jill, whom you met today, I had another daughter—her twin sister, Justine."

"You used the past tense . . ." I dared to say.

"Yes." He replied, almost in a whisper. "Justine was brutally murdered two weeks ago, and her husband, Dr. Kevin Rutledge, has disappeared without a trace."

"My condolences on your loss, judge. Under these circumstances, I'm especially appreciative of you seeing me. Is Dr. Rutledge a physician?" I asked.

"No, he's a scientist. He has a couple of doctorates in computer science and engineering from MIT."

"Is he suspected of involvement in your daughter's death or is he more likely a co-victim of foul play?"

"He's just a material witness at this point. I believe the police have labeled him a 'person of interest.' No charges have been filed by the district attorney's office, but he's the subject of an intensive manhunt."

"How well do you know your son-in-law? Has he ever manifested a predisposition to violence?"

"None of which I'm aware. Kevin is a likeable young man. He drifted into Los Angeles a couple of years ago, and he and Justine were married after a whirlwind courtship. I did have reservations about their short engagement, but they were largely overcome by the hope that marriage would provide some stability to Justine's active social life."

"You had him checked out, of course . . ."

"Naturally," the judge replied. "His credentials are bona fide. He comes from a prominent family in the Hamptons, although their standard

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of living has become increasingly dependent upon loans and the disposition of assets rather than investment prowess.”

“Then, if Dr. Rutledge *has* been kidnapped, a ransom might be a natural expectation. You, most likely, would be the recipient of that ransom note. I assume you have not received any such demand?”

“That’s correct,” the judge acknowledged.

“Were Justine and Kevin having any marital problems?”

The judge frowned. “No more than the usual tiffs that newlyweds have. They’ve been married less than a year. To be honest, I have suspected that all of this has something to do with a secret project Kevin has been working on.”

“A secret project?”

“Yes. According to Kevin, and my resources inside the Department of Defense, he received a sizable grant from the federal government to build some sort of supercomputer that could accept massive amounts of data from unconventional sources and media and compute this data in trillionths of a second. In addition to the supercomputer, Kevin was to develop a number of military applications, which would give our country superiority in the fields of military intelligence and defensive and offensive weapons systems.”

“How close to success was Dr. Rutledge in creating his super number-cruncher?”

“Several months ago, I got the impression that an announcement was imminent. Kevin had become increasingly excited and had dropped some comments about the vast power and wealth that would be forthcoming. Recently, though, I did notice a change in him. He showed signs of fatigue and stress. He appeared nervous and was quick to anger.”

I decided to go off in a different direction for a moment. “I don’t recall reading about his disappearance or Justine’s murder in the newspapers.”

The judge smiled wryly. “I still have some influence on what does and doesn’t make the front page in this town. Justine’s death was reported in a small obituary on the next-to-the-last page of the evening edition.”

Penultimate journalism strikes again, I thought.

“Are there any other siblings?” I asked.

“No, just the two sisters.”

“I suppose Mrs. Barrington is taking this very hard.”

“My wife has been confined to institutional care for some years now because of poor mental health. She was told of Justine’s death, but its impact upon her is unclear.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said. “It must have been difficult trying to raise the girls on your own.”

“Montrose, my butler, whom you just met, has been of assistance in this regard. He’s functioned as a surrogate mother when asked.”

There’s a scary thought. “Did Justine have any coworkers or friends with whom I could talk?”

“Justine didn’t work. She lived comfortably off the proceeds of a family trust administered by my bank. She’s entitled to all the income from that trust and can even invade the corpus at the discretion of the trustee. As for friends, I have no knowledge of her associates. Perhaps Jill can give you the names of some of her friends,” the judge replied.

“How did Justine spend her free time? Did she do any philanthropic work or participate in volunteer activities?” I asked.

“Nothing so productive or worthwhile, I’m afraid. Justine’s favorite charity was herself. She passed the time at martini lunches and working on her tan.”

“Had she recently asked you for any money or requested the trustee for an unusually large sum?”

“She hasn’t asked me for money nor has she approached the trustee. While it’s an irrevocable inter vivos trust into which I’ve surrendered control to get the assets out of my estate, the trustee gets his instructions from me, the grantor. Why do you ask?”

“I was just wondering about a possible blackmail scenario.”

The judge reacted with a wan smile. “Justine would have laughed in a blackmailer’s face.”

I saw the judge glance at his watch.

“I’m afraid I have to cut this short, Mr. McFadden. I have an engagement to attend to. I’ve told you as much as I know, in any event.

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You can get details from the police file—that is, if you're still interested in taking this case."

"Very much so. As you probably know, the spouse is usually the prime suspect in marital murders. So, unless he's been the victim of an extraterrestrial abduction, locating Dr. Rutledge will be my top priority."

"So be it. Find the killer, whoever it may be, and I'll pay you ten thousand dollars. This will have to be a handshake deal—no retainers and no contracts."

"Your word is acceptable, and I agree to your terms," I said, dollar signs bombarding my retina. "By the way, do you have a picture of Dr. Rutledge I could borrow?"

The judge crossed the room to a desk, removed a small glossy of his son-in-law from a picture frame and handed it to me.

"I'll see myself out," I offered, after pocketing the photograph. "Incidentally, how did your daughter die?"

The judge's lips tightened, distorting the hiss which passed through them. "She was found in her bathtub—electrocuted with a vibrator."

With no further discourse, we shook hands, and after leaving the room, I hustled almost blindly down the long corridor, trying to digest the shock of this latest revelation, and fumbled with the doorknob to get to fresh air. Finally, I jumped into my car and, after a drive I barely recall, arrived at my apartment. My preoccupation with the developments of this case was intense but did not prevent me from noticing the black limousine that was framed in my rearview mirror, which had followed me from the boundary of Halcyon Hills.

A serial killer is murdering victims in a most unusual way, and you may die laughing before the next victim is found. The body count rises as our hero battles a crime syndicate, government intelligence agency and international terrorists.

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