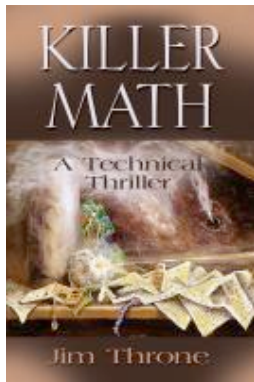


KILLER MATH

A Technical
Thriller



Jim Throne



Doctor Bartholomew Grimes is a quantum physicist hired by NSA to secure highly confidential research from the locked office of a dead third-generation theoretical physicist. He learns that the man died from a tiny hole bored completely through his skull. To recover the critical documents, he must deal with an odd collection of college officials, inept local authorities, brilliant but eccentric students, the spectre of All Hallows eve, and a mythological bear...

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A Technical Mystery

Jim Throne

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The Curse of the Gallows – A Murder Mystery, Booklocker.com, Inc.,
2012

The Book Nook Murders – A Mystery Thriller, Booklocker.com, Inc., 2013



Chapter 5
Later that Evening
Grimes Has Dinner at the Red Tree
He Buys Melody Farmer Drinks

The Phillippe House was designed for breakfasts, society luncheons, and the occasional sit-down banquet. It was not equipped for everyday dinners. The Red Tree Bar and Grille was. The tavern was in the center of town, a good half-a-mile from the Phillippe House.

It was around seven when Grimes slogged in. He inhaled deeply the smells of freshly baked bread and beery hops. The waitress led him to a table near the back of the cozy restaurant, far from millennials clustered around the small bar. He ordered wine, poached trout, and a small salad. While he ate, he reviewed his notes, making notes about the hundred or so digital photos he'd taken.

He'd finished the meal and was nursing his second wine when Melody Farmer approached. Cautiously. She was huddled in a white leather jacket, its hood fringed in white fur. Her black leather pants were tucked into white mid-calf heeled boots, also fringed in white fur.

"Ah, Doctor Grimes? It's me. Melody Farmer? Hi." She looked behind her, then turned back and whispered, "Do you think I could, maybe, sit down for a minute?"

Grimes, puzzled, nodded and pointed to the empty chair across the table. He switched off the camera and slid it and his notes into his briefcase.

She pulled off her mittens and put them on the table. She sat and pulled back her hood, shaking her blonde hair into some semblance of order and combed through it with her fingers. He thought she seemed self-conscious as she unzipped her coat. Instead of her college sweatshirt, she was wearing a sleek wine-colored vee-neck top that revealed substantial cleavage.

"Glass of wine?" he asked, waiting to analyze her response.

"Oh," she blushed and dropped her eyes. "I really shouldn't." She smiled as she looked up at him. "Oh, shoot. Sure, I'd love one," she giggled and batted her eyes. "I guess it's okay, isn't it, Doctor? I mean, you're not gonna arrest me or anything right now, are you?"

He shook his head no and waved to the barmaid, motioning at his glass, then at Melody.

"Y'know, I'm really, really sorry 'bout this morning. I mean, I musta really messed up your meeting, didn't I? And in front of all those very important people. I mean, the dean and the president, and that lawyer. Jeez, he kinda looks like Ichabod Crane, doesn't he? He sure gave me the creepies, if you know what I mean."

He said nothing, but he noticed that when he had failed to respond to her monologue, she'd become tense, edgy. She half-smiled and dropped her eyes to the table. When her glass of wine arrived, she took a long sip. When Grimes raised his glass toward hers, she touched glasses. She took another long sip before she put the glass down.

"I wouldn't worry about your image, Mizz Farmer."

"Oh, please, call me Mel. All my friends call me that," she giggled. "Oh, I didn't mean that you are my friend. I just meant, well, you know." She blushed again.

"I understand, Mizz Farmer," he said, again unemotionally. "But I'd like to keep things somewhat formal for a while, if you don't mind." *Is this woman for real?* he wondered. He studied her for a long moment before saying, "I'd like to ask you a question."

"Okay," she said brightly, her eyes wide open. "Shoot."

"You came out tonight looking for me, didn't you?"

She giggled again. Her ruddy cheeks were getting even ruddier from the wine. "I wasn't looking for you, Doctor Grimes. I saw you when you came in. I was sitting with some friends. Right by the door. I waited until I thought you'd be done with your meal, that's all."

He reached over the table. Thinking he wanted to take her hand, she smiled and extended it. Except that he put his hand on her fur gloves instead, pulling them toward him. She frowned and slowly withdrew her hand.

"Miss Farmer, why were you looking for me?"

She sighed and shook her head. "I'm sorry. I wanted to talk with you kinda private-like. So when I saw you sitting back here, well, y'see, I was kinda hoping..." She paused for a long moment before whispering, "Doctor Grimes, I have a really serious problem."

She reached inside her jacket for a tissue. "Y'see, last year, I interviewed for some jobs. And I got several really great offers. I turned down a really super offer from IBM to come here. I mean, six figures. I

really want to get an advanced degree. Maybe even a doctorate. I really wanna do physics, teach college somewhere. Maybe even here.”

She sniffled a little and dabbed at her eyes. “And now, well, my thesis advisor is dead.” She moaned, again dabbing her eyes and now blowing daintily into her tissue. “So, now my fellowship’ll probably be cancelled. And I won’t get a degree. The job’s already gone to someone else and I guess I’ll just be out on the street again.” She moaned again, dabbed her eyes again, and drained her glass.

“I think you are getting yourself quite fretful, my dear,” he said, hoping his face showed no emotion. “I doubt that the college will revoke your fellowship, at least not immediately. And I’m certain that you will be able to find another college or university that will accept you. Considering the circumstances. I’ll wager that even IBM will still be willing to take you on as an employee.”

“Do you really think so?” she said, smiling through her tears.

“I think so. Another glass of wine before you head back outside?”

“Oh,” she smiled again and blushed again. “I really shouldn’t. I mean, a young girl like me accepting another drink from an older, married man,” she whispered. “But, okay. So long as you promise me two things.” She looked around the room, leaned over the table toward him, and whispered. “Number one, you gotta walk me home,” she giggled. “I get pretty wobbly after two glasses of wine. And number two, you gotta promise that you won’t try to take advantage of me.” She giggled again.

The barmaid brought two new glasses of Pino Grigio. She took a long drink and again touched glasses with his. “You didn’t promise,” she whispered in a teasing tone. “Are you gonna promise or not, Mister Agent?”

He looked into her eyes. Her mascara had run ever so slightly. She’d left much of her glossy lipstick on her first glass and more on her second. He recalled that she had worn no eye makeup and no lipstick at the morning breakfast. *All dressed up to tryst with a government agent?* “Before I tell you whether I will do either or both of your ‘things,’ as you called them, I still need to know why you sought me out tonight.”

She propped her elbow on the table and her chin in her hand. “I already told you,” she whispered, smiling. “I am terribly worried about my future. So when I saw you sitting back here...”

“Not good enough, Miss Farmer,” he said, now reaching across the table to take her hand, holding it very gently. “A smart technical person like you should know better than to make up a story like that.”

He closed his fingers to put a little pressure on the palm of her hand. "Do you want me to enumerate your errors?"

When she just frowned, he said, "How do I know that you were not sitting at a table by the bar when I came in? Your gloves were cold. Your face was ruddy from the cold." He squeezed her fingers a little harder. "Then, your lipstick showed no signs of eating and drinking before you sat here. And probably most telling, Miss Farmer, your boots have left large puddles on the floor under your chair."

"That is very good, Mister Detective Agent," she said with a shade of resignation. "You are right. I fibbed. I wanted you to help me get an education and a job. I went to the Phillippe House. They said you headed here. That's why I came here. To find you. To talk with you."

"And that's why you tried the sob-sister routine, right?"

She smiled. "I'm sorry. It didn't work, did it?"

He eased the pressure on her fingers but did not release them. "Miss Farmer, let me put it to you this way. The more you cooperate and help me with my investigation, the more I will try to fix things for you after the event has ended. However, I can make no promises."

She grinned. "Oh, Doctor Grimes, I will cooperate with you in every way I can. I am at your beck and call, twenty-four-seven." She squeezed his hand back.

"Good. Now to the two things you wanted me to do." He motioned to the barmaid that he wanted the check. "Number one. Yes, I will walk you back to your place. After you finish your wine, of course."

She giggled, pulled her hand from his, and clapped her hands together like a schoolgirl.

He signed the tab while she drained the last of her wine. "What about number two?" she said, giggling as she tottered getting up from the table.

He stood and pulled on his topcoat. "Ah, yes. Number two. We'll discuss this on the way back to your abode."

"Oh, goodie," she laughed, hooking her arm around his. "Now I sure hope the answer is no."

* * *

It was snowing heavily again. On the sidewalk in front of the Inn, he helped her zip her jacket and adjust her hood, all the while holding her arm to keep her from teetering. He buttoned his topcoat and pulled his stocking cap over his thinning dome. On the way to her apartment, arm in arm, she learned that he was almost old enough to be her grandfather, that he had

been married and divorced twice, that he'd been a confirmed bachelor for more than two decades, and that he lived in a small apartment in Columbia, Maryland. And he learned that she was twenty-one, had a very tiny basement studio apartment ten minutes from the Red Tree Bar and Grille, she had a drop-down Murphy bed, was on birth-control pills - 'just in case' - and slept alone. Mostly. And, she giggled, always in the buff. For his escort duty, he received a warm kiss on the cheek.



Chapter 25
The Following Day
Grimes Reviews His Findings
He Meets Serena in the Breakfast Room

He couldn't sleep. After a night of tossing and turning, he pulled his naked butt out of bed and pushed aside the draperies. The campus was dark and quiet. It was still drizzling. He flipped on the desk lamp and pulled the notepad out of his briefcase. He flipped it open and sat in the armchair. He sighed as he scanned the first few pages. *I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for someone offing a third generation theoretical physicist who was working in the virtual space coveted by national security.*

Melody Farmer was his first interviewee that morning. He thought about her hysterical swooning at his organizational meeting. He smiled when he recalled that she now claimed she was also an actress. But something bothered him about her words at that first meeting. He checked his notes again.

She said that Zarneck had a hole in his head. She didn't say he'd been shot, or that the hole was in the back of his head, or even that he had a bullet hole in his head. She said he had a hole in his head. Strange. From the Coroner's photos, the holes in his forehead and back of his head were the same dimension. So the Coroner and the wannabe police chief could not claim that he'd been shot from behind. Did Farmer know these unusual facts beforehand?

And then there was access to Zarneck's office. There were four keys. Melody had one, the janitor had one, and Zarneck had one. Supposedly the funding agency's person had the fourth one. But no one, not even security or Esterman, would or could identify the agent. He thought it strange that Zarneck's key was still missing. Apparently no one had found it, either on his corpse or in his office after his body had been removed. Or if they had, had kept it for some reason. Such as gaining access to Zarneck's office. To pilfer his work product. .

And what about the computer in the basement? Stonecypher told him that when the thing was off, it was off. However, he did say that it could

sleep, waiting for a sign from some computer elsewhere, presumably at Fermilab. So was it off or just napping when Zarneck was zapped?

He glanced over at the pile of manila envelopes that were stacked on the desk. They were from O'Malley and had been awaiting his return. He flipped through a couple of them. He was disappointed with the lack of depth. He'd hoped for serious FBI-type background checks. Instead, they were basically job application forms.

It is time to decide who is who and who isn't. Now he was hoping that at that exact moment a freshly brewed cup of coffee would miraculously appear to help him cope. It didn't of course. *Maybe I should've taken Melody up on her offer to cook breakfast for the two of us. Maybe she'd be just as much fun as Madeline. Maybe even more.*

He shook his head. "All right, Bart," he said aloud. "Let's get serious about this case, if for no other reason than to get Eberhard off my ass."

Melody Farmer, he wrote on his pad. *What is her game? Is she truly just an innocent graduate student? Was she assigned to Zarneck or did she seek him out? If somebody assigned her, who was he and what was his intention? More importantly, what would be her motive for offing her thesis advisor?* Having thought that, he decided that these would be good questions for ten-thirty.

He flipped to a clean page. **Fergus MacLetty**. *Is he as dumb as everyone says? Could someone have paid him to kill Zarneck? After all, he'd sealed the building a day or so before Halloween night and opened the building the morning after. Motive? Money. Yeah, but what kind of money? Was he paid by someone? Or was he just an accomplice who was paid to keep his mouth shut? He'd admitted to cleaning up the blood on the stairs. Did he also clean up all the stuff in Zarneck's office? Including the blood?* He made a note to discuss some of these Fergus questions with Henry.

Tobias Stonecypher. *He said he wasn't even in town when Zarneck died. But what had he been doing just prior to leaving for Fermilab? And exactly what had he been doing at Fermilab? Particularly for Zarneck? Is he a point man? Maybe even the secret agent?* Grimes reached for Stonecypher's folder, then hesitated and put it back. *Not ready to read about him until I interview him again.*

Moses Stefanofsky. He was really conflicted over this man. *Is he just a goddamned blowhard? Was his work being overshadowed by Zarneck? Was Zarneck usurping his research? Or more importantly, was Stonecypher doing too much for Zarneck and not enough for Stefanofsky?*

And why is he so goddamned belligerent? He decided to address these questions when he faced him mano-e-mano.

Dean Esterman. *A nice old man who seems to be waiting for the retirement bell to ring.* Yet Esterman undoubtedly knew more about the Zarneck secret research effort than he was willing to divulge. He was pretty sure that Esterman knew who the funding agency was. He was certain that the Dean was one-on-one with the mysterious secret agent. But he couldn't imagine this old geezer in the midst of intrigue and murder, either as a willing participant or an innocent bystander, let alone the ringleader. He decided to reserve the Esterman file for bedtime reading.

Alexandra Monroe, Patrick County Coroner. He thought long and hard about the coroner. He dug through the stack of envelopes and found one with the label **Dr. Monroe, Medical Examiner** and opened it. He scanned her disappointingly brief dossier. All that were listed were the credentials she'd enumerated at his group meeting. He closed the envelope and put it atop the others. To his reckoning, this exceedingly well-known and highly trained forensic pathologist had made what he deemed to be sophomoric errors in examining the victim. What really bothered him was that she had allowed the corpse to be cremated without having either an in-person visit from a relative to approve the cremation or to witness it.

President H.H. Oswald. He picked up his envelope and started to open it. He thought that under the little Napoleon's smiling, glad-handing veneer there lay a very self-centered, calculating, even devious mind. *Oswald was more concerned with his own prestige than that of his college or his charges. But why would he want to off one of his cash cow researchers? Surely just the bad press alone had torpedoed any opportunities he might have had for smooth talking his way into the presidency of a more prestigious college. That simply doesn't make sense,* he thought as he re-closed the envelope.

He paused as he was about to place it atop the Coroner's envelope. *Perhaps this wasn't about prestige.* Two ideas came to mind. *Could Oswald be under threat or blackmail? Something that would force him to participate in this type of crime? Or perhaps Oswald was in on some kind of deal. Like selling of secrets to, say, a foreign entity. A more thorough background check is truly warranted,* he thought. *Call O'Malley,* he wrote on his notepad.

Serena Oswald. He smiled at Farmer's spot-on analysis of her - a woman who promoted herself, legs spread. He laughed when he wondered whether her husband had to wait his turn, or if he ever got a turn. To his

surprise, her envelope was thicker than that of her husband's. Almost as thick as the Russian's. *I think this warrants a thorough interview with the femme fatale before I delve into her background.* He wondered whether, unliquored, she'd come on as strong as she did the first time.

Jensen Henry, Patrick County Sheriff

Paul Hewitt, Bleakmoor College Head of Security

Captain Ward Janus, Sykesville Cop

He wrote these three names on his pad and followed each with a question mark. O'Malley's envelopes on each of these trained protectors of the innocents were thin. Janus' was thicker than those of the other two, but even his was only a few pages long.

At first he was going to pitch their envelopes atop the others. But after a little thought, he drew a circle around Janus' name. *There's something inconsistent here,* he thought. He recalled that Janus said that he never saw the body. Yet the Coroner said he was there when she arrived at the site.

Why would Janus lie about something so easy to contradict? And if Janus was there, who had called him? Esterman said that neither Hewitt nor Janus was at the death scene when he arrived with Farmer. This guy says he's in charge of the investigation but has done little to no investigating. And what the hell is with his goddamned attitude?

After a minute, he drew a circle around Henry's name. He recalled that Henry had accompanied Janus on their search of Zarneck's apartment and vehicle. *Who asked them to do that?* To his way of thinking, Esterman should've told them that the victim had federal Top Secret Clearance.

Janus and Henry and even Hewitt should've gotten clearance from the Feds before doing any investigating. Unless, of course, someone with proper credentials had, in fact, authorized them to proceed. Perhaps someone right here in Sykesville - even at the college - had authorized them. Oswald? Esterman? He made several notations along this line.

He walked to the window. It was still dark and still raining. Drizzling, mostly. Across the commons, the clock on Old Main showed quarter to seven. Security lights still illuminated the still empty sidewalks. Although the library was still dark, there were lights on in several rooms of the second floor of the Science Building.

Fergus. Already at work, he thought. He flipped back to the timeline that he'd started in the restaurant. *Suppose Fergus had opened the building at six. Now, according to Farmer, she'd discovered the body around eight.* He wondered if Fergus had unlocked Zarneck's door. If so, he would've found the body first. *Had he relocked the door and waited for Farmer to*

unlock it again? If Farmer had immediately alerted Esterman, why did he say he arrived just before nine? Who had called the Coroner at 'precisely 8:42'? Did Farmer or Esterman call Hewitt? And, what the hell was Stefanofsky doing there? Was he just coming in or had he been there before the body was found?

He checked his notes. Doctor Monroe had authorized the removal of the body around 9:58. According to her blood and body temperature analyses taken around 9:30, Zarneck had been dead eight to ten hours. *Meaning, according to her, he'd been killed somewhere around midnight.*

He put a circle around the 'ten.' He wondered how accurate this time really was. *Could it be several hours in error?* If it was as much as six hours in error, Zarneck might have been alive when Fergus had locked the building around six.

He closed his notepad, sighed, and again wished for a really hot cup of coffee. Black, no sugar, please. And maybe one of Madeline's bear claws. The thought of Mad prancing naked about the room quickly and visibly excited him. He decided to take a shower down the hall. *At least the Budget 6 had a private bathroom,* he sighed, grabbing a towel and his toiletries from the bureau top. Remembering the missing photographs, he locked the door.

* * *

He could smell the coffee as he exited the toilet. He could not get dressed fast enough. He was in the breakfast room with his first cup of coffee even before the ladies had set the tables or brought out the pastries.

He was savoring his third cup and debating about a second prune Danish when he heard, "Well, well, well. Good morning, Doctor Grimes. You're up bright and early." Serena Oswald stood in the archway, smiling her Cheshire cat smile. "May I join you?"

"Certainly," he said, motioning to an empty chair.

She glided to his table, leaned over and kissed his cheek. He thought he smelled gardenias. She smiled again and draped her raincoat over the back of the chair. He noticed that, despite the persistent rain, it was dry.

She glided to the buffet table and returned coffee and pastry in hand. "How have you been, Bartholomew?" she whispered. "Have you solved the murder of our dear departed physicist?"

He smiled and shook his head no. He asked her what she'd been up to. She gushed that the College Board of Directors at their quarterly review meeting the previous evening were pleased with the fund raising efforts.

But, she added, they were sorely disappointed with the lack of progress on solving the murder. “Not good press,” she cooed.

While she was emoting on her favorite subject, fund raising, he observed that her normally perfectly coiffed hair was somewhat askew, her dress, normally perfectly pressed, seemed somewhat wrinkled, and was buttoned wrong. Her makeup was worn, her normally brilliant red lipstick but a memory, and she wore no jewelry – earrings, bracelets, necklaces, dinner rings.

He frowned. *Her appearance is totally unlike her public image.* And while she chatted about upcoming events, he observed one of her false fingernails was missing and another was broken. While she continued on with her litany, he saw two elderly men dressed in business suits hesitate at the archway. He thought at first that they were coming in, but after a moment, they continued out the door to the commons.

When she stopped chattering to sip her coffee, he asked, “Serena, may I ask you a question?”

“Certainly, Doctor Grimes,” she said seductively.

“How much do you know about research funding here?”

“Why, I guess I know a little about it. Why?” she said coyly.

“Professor Zarneck’s research funds. How much do you know about them?”

“A little. It is my understanding - from sitting in on some of the faculty presentations before our wonderful board of directors, you understand - that Doctor Zarneck was receiving substantial funds from a federal agency. Enough to support his salary and overhead and that of his graduate student, Melissa.”

“Do you mean Melody?”

“Of course. Melody. How silly of me,” she said, smiling. “Anyway, his research funded her and gave a substantial stipend to Doctor Stefanofsky and to Stoney.” She smiled again. “Sorry. I meant Tobias Stonecypher, his graduate student. Everybody calls him Stoney.”

Interesting slip-ups, he noted. *Forgetting Melody’s name and calling Tobias ‘Stoney’ rather than Toby.* Insofar as he knew, only the people at Fermilab had called him Stoney. *This lady’s a viper,* he thought. *And she knows a helluva lot more about this case than she’s willing to tell.* “And, money back to the school?” he asked, propping his elbows on the table and resting his chin in his hands.

She laughed. *Like falling rain,* he thought. “Of course, silly. Plenty of money.”

“All for the good of the college, I presume.”

“Everything is done for the good of the college, Doctor,” she said seductively. “Everything.”

“Missus Oswald, I won’t ask you how much money is involved, but...”

“Just under a quarter of a million,” she said without emotion. “A year.”

“Thank you. And I assume that all of this goes toward the college in support of this program.”

“Of course,” she said again, smiling seductively. “Where else would it go?”

“And of course, the distribution of all of those funds is accountable and overt, right?”

“Doctor Grimes,” she said, still smiling. “Are you insinuating that someone might be siphoning off funds for other purposes?”

“I’m not insinuating anything, Missus Oswald. I’m merely assuming that everything regarding this project is truly on the up-and-up.”

“I assure you that it truly is.” The tone of her voice had hardened.

“Great. Have you or any of the members of your board of directors ever met with anyone from the funding agency?”

“Not that I can recall,” she said slowly, carefully. He noted that she seemed quite defensive in her answer.

“Do you have any idea how and why Zarneck was chosen to receive this very high-profile research grant?”

“I believe he had received it before he decided to come to Bleakmoor from Coe College.”

He let the ‘Coe College’ comment go by, instead asking, “Did you or your husband or the board of directors recruit Doctor Zarneck in any way?”

“Oh, I don’t know the answer to that,” she mewed. “If I’d been asked to help recruit Doctor Zarneck, I would’ve. After all, the grant was a very impressive amount of money.”

“You said ‘was.’ Do you know if the grant money has been terminated now that he’s dead?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Again she answered his question defensively. “I believe that there should be some money left to support the girl. You say her name is Melody? At least through the end of the semester. Why do you ask?”

He ignored her question. "It is my understanding that his work was so secretive that his office was always kept locked, even when he was working there." He said it as a statement but was in fact asking it as a question.

"I had heard that was the case." He noted that she gave yet another careful answer.

"Supposedly, there were only four special keys to his office. He had one. Miss Farmer had one. The janitor had one. And I understand that an agent from the yet-to-be-identified federal agency had the fourth. Is that what you understood as well?"

Her laugh was hard. Uncharacteristic, he thought. "Doctor Grimes, I have no idea how many keys there were or who had them."

"And you are saying that you never had a key?" Before she could answer in the negative, he continued, "Not even for a short time? An hour? A day?"

"Doctor Grimes," she said. Her tone indicated to him that she was getting irritated with his questions. "I told you I have no idea how many keys there were or who had them. I'm not certain I could tell you what one of them looked like. Does that help you?"

"Not really, Missus Oswald. But I guess that'll do for now." He pushed back his chair and rose. "Thanks for joining me for breakfast. I saw your guests - board members, I believe you said - leave the guest house a while ago. They're probably headed toward Old Main." He held out his hand to her. She instinctively took it. He looked into her eyes. At first she smiled at his attention. The longer he held her hand, the less she smiled.

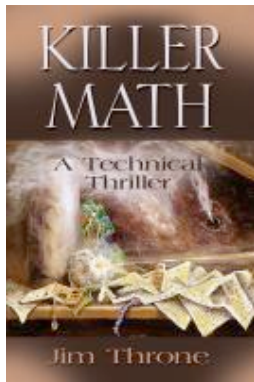
"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Not a thing, Serena. I am certain that I will enjoy attending your husband's next soiree. And I look forward to a more intimate tête-à-tête than our last one." He smiled a half-smile.

She smiled, blew him a kiss, and slowly withdrew her hand from his.

He picked up his cup and walked to the coffee urn, his back toward her. "Oh, and Missus Oswald? Between now and then, please take care of your nails."

He was still filling his cup when he heard the front door slam.



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