

BAD POLICY

A SEAMUS MCCREE NOVEL

James M. Jackson



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DEDICATION

To my father, J. Edward Jackson (1925 – 2012).

Sample

ONE

DRIVING UP MY STREET, A pillow calling my name, I spotted Cincinnati police vehicles collected near the top of the hill. My stomach clenched. An animated gathering of neighbors stood across the street from my house. With my Victorian's ancient wiring, I immediately thought of fire. Not that; no fire engines. I pulled to the curb behind a phalanx of cop cars blocking the street and approached an officer.

I asked what had happened, surprised either one of us could hear my words over the hammering of my heart.

"Other side of the street," he snarled and pointed to the gawkers.

"But this is my house."

"You live here? Hold on a sec. Hey Sarge," he yelled over his shoulder without taking his eyes off me. "Over here."

The sergeant gave me the once-over as he strode across the lawn, thumbs tucked into his belt.

"This guy claims he lives here," the patrolman said.

The sergeant held out his hand. "Got some ID?" To the patrolman he added, "Back to your post."

I dug through my wallet and handed him my license. "What happened?"

He compared the license to my face. "Seamus McCree."

"It's pronounced 'Shay-mus,' not 'See-mus.'"

"Now you say it, the name rings a bell. Right address. We've got some questions for you. It would be better if we talked somewhere quiet. Any objections if we take a quick trip downtown? We'll give you a ride back. Frankly, I'm not sure when the crime scene guys will release your house. You should be thinking about a place you can stay tonight."

He gently took my arm and guided me to a cruiser, opened the back door, and ducked me in. We were moving by the time I realized that he had neatly removed me from my home and temporarily focused my attention on where I could stay rather than what was going on.

"Now can you tell me what happened?" I asked through the grill separating us.

“Sorry, we need to confirm a few things with you first.”

My father had been a Boston police sergeant when he died. Even as tired as I was, I could interpret his answer: you’re a suspect; *we’ll* ask the questions.

The officer left me alone in an interrogation room smelling of burnt coffee and justified fear. I slipped off my suit coat and hung it over the back of the metal chair and loosened my tie. If the police had only wanted information, the questioning would have started immediately. Since I was cooling my heels in a room decorated with a table bolted to the floor, three chairs, and what I knew to be a one-way mirror, I was clearly a suspect. Standard interrogation procedures included keeping the subject off-balance. One approach was to use a sterile room away from familiar surroundings. With minimal furnishings and putrid green walls, this place fit the bill. Then they would add pressure by keeping him waiting alone in the silence.

Silence would not work on me. A thinker by nature, I thrived on solitude. Despite that, corded muscles grabbed my neck and shoulders, adding to the headache I’d had all day from lack of sleep and too much caffeine. My tension came from not knowing what had happened at my house combined with the knowledge that this interrogation room belonged to the Homicide Unit.

Sitting alone in an interrogation room tends to make anyone feel guilty, which is the reason police leave you to stew in your own juices. I was not innocent of everything; I had my secrets. But I had not killed anyone, so if whatever happened at my house involved a homicide, I was not guilty in deed or spirit. Any defense attorney will tell you not to speak to the police without a lawyer present. I considered requesting counsel, but ultimately rejected that course. I knew plenty of lawyers, but none of them were defense attorneys. I didn’t plan to lie, but if during the interrogation I even thought about a lie, I promised myself to stop the questioning and request counsel.

Having decided on a course of action, tension eased from my neck. The headache stayed. Further thinking was fruitless until I learned more about what had happened. Since I had only had two short naps in the last sixty hours, I leaned over the desk and rested my head on my forearms. I awoke to the opening of the door; it took me a moment to recognize where I was.

The same sergeant entered the room accompanied by a Detective Lewis:

gray suit, gray hair, gray complexion. He took the chair directly opposite me and placed a digital recorder on the table. The sergeant scooted a chair to the room's corner for himself.

"Mr. McCree," Lewis said, "okay if we record this?"

"Sure," I said. "Doing video, too?"

Lewis traded a glance with the sergeant. "Been here before?"

"With Lieutenant Hastings," I said. "Except I was in the closet behind the one-way mirror."

"When was this?" Lewis rubbed his left thumb and pointer finger. I took it as a nervous tell.

"Last year. Maybe you've heard of my employer, Criminal Investigations Group—CIG? The Cincinnati Police Department engaged us to help on a homicide. Does she know I'm here?"

"Now I remember why your name rings a bell," the sergeant said. "It was before you joined homicide, Lewis. They did a great job and tied the Cincinnati murder in with a boatload of other murders and financial crimes out in Chillicothe."

Detective Lewis slipped from the room while the sergeant asked for specifics about the Chillicothe case. Lewis soon returned and clicked on the recorder. "Let's get started." He gave the date, time, persons present, and got me to acknowledge that I was appearing voluntarily and agreed to allow them to record the "conversation."

"We looked all over for you today," Lewis said. "Where were you?"

"I flew down to Atlanta this morning for a meeting. When I finished the meeting, I flew back and drove directly home from the airport."

"When did you leave your house?"

"Actually, the last time I was home was Friday night. I flew to Chicago and worked there the whole weekend. Then this morning I flew from Chicago to Atlanta."

"What time did you leave Friday night?"

"Nine-ish."

"Where did you stay in Chicago?"

"I worked the whole time at my client's office."

"The whole time? He doesn't smell like he's been working that long, does he, Sergeant? Who's the client? Who can we contact to confirm your whereabouts?"

Whom. I let the grammar error slide; most people don't like being

corrected. I surreptitiously checked my watch. Four in the afternoon. I had showered only eleven hours ago at the client's health spa. "I signed a confidentiality agreement. I can give you all the specifics once they announce the deal. Until then, you'll just have to trust me."

"Trust you? Now why didn't I think of that myself?" the detective asked the ceiling before leaning in toward me. "What kind of deal are we talking about? This for your employer?" He checked his notes. "Criminal Investigations Group? Who can corroborate your story?"

Well, asking for trust did sound dense, didn't it? "This was financial consulting I do on the side." My head felt like it was following my body by a few inches. I really needed sleep so I could think clearly. "Look, I can tell you this much: I got a call from my client Friday evening and flew to Chicago that night. I went directly to his office and worked there the whole time. This morning I caught a limo to Midway and flew directly to the Atlanta airport where I met someone in one of the Delta Lounge meeting rooms."

"Just a sec," the detective said, and left the room.

"Don't mind me," I said to the sergeant in the corner and rested my head on my hands. The sooner I told them something, the sooner I could get some sleep. What could I say beyond 'Trust me!' without violating the confidentiality agreement? I mentally scanned the past few days for a loophole.

I HAD COME UP WITH a solution to the problem around two this morning. My client, Vince D'Alessandro, the CEO of All-American Bancorp, "rewarded" me by sending me to personally propose it to the CEO of the proposed acquisition. I had yawned a thank you to the limo driver who dropped me off at Chicago's Midway airport. After upgrading to first class on Delta's 6:00 a.m. flight to Atlanta and clearing security without a cavity search, I dropped into seat 3A. Despite needing to review my notes for the morning's meeting—and develop a killer opening line to broach the idea of picking the guy's pocket of \$20 million—shortly after takeoff, exhaustion won the battle with my eyelids. The flight attendant woke me a couple of minutes before wheels down.

Instead of feeling refreshed, I was a grogamuffin and my mouth tasted like the retreat of the German army after Stalingrad. I grabbed a Diet Coke to refresh my system with caffeine and swished the chemicals around my

mouth in lieu of mouthwash. I much prefer Diet Pepsi, but Atlanta is Coke's headquarters and that's all the airport kiosks stock.

Anthony D'Alessandro, Vince's brother—who also happened to be the chairman and CEO of the proposed acquisition, Graystone National Bank—was waiting for me in the Delta Sky Club conference room rented under my name. Still with no clue how to politely say, “You screwed up big time, but if you fork over twenty mil, we'll let the deal go forward,” I entered the room. D'Alessandro rose from the power chair at the end of the table. “You're McCree? What's the problem with the deal?”

The door snicked closed behind me. At his brusque greeting my shoulders relaxed. Like most CEOs, he dispensed with the touchy feely stuff and got right to the issue. Fine with me since it eliminated any need for an opening line. In three long strides through the deep carpet I met his outstretched hand and we performed the handshake ritual. Standing rigidly, jaw tucked into his neck, he scanned me from under bushy eyebrows; the left one vibrated each time his eye twitched.

D'Alessandro modeled traditional banker attire: blue pinstripe suit, white shirt, rep tie, not a silver hair out of place. On me he'd see the same camouflage attire, although my hair had only a touch of gray. His solid grip left a sheen of sweat on my palm. Once he sat down, I settled into the chair next to him, deliberately invading his space. Under the table, I surreptitiously wiped my hand on my pants.

“My brother told me I needed to meet you,” D'Alessandro said. “The bastard woke me at four in the morning.”

“I know. I was sitting next to him.” I continued with my only lie of the morning. “Vince wishes he could be here. In going over Graystone's books they found some unrecorded liabilities—”

“Bottom line it for me, McCree. The details can wait.”

“All-American's deal to buy Graystone has a thirty-million-dollar contingency reserve. Your accountants misstated fifty million dollars of additional liabilities and you signed off on the financial statements filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Unless we find a twenty-million-dollar offset to bring the net back under the thirty mil, Vince has no choice but to call off the deal. He'll have to inform both boards of the reason, which will not reflect well on you.”

D'Alessandro's face clouded at the accusation and implication that the problem would be reported to the SEC. He rotated his chair to face me. I

dove into the details regarding severance policies and retiree medical liabilities and how actuarial assumptions had caused the problem. His eye-twitch quickened, his chin dropped to his chest and he appeared to shrink into his pinstripes.

“I checked on you this morning.” He spoke with a flat aspect. “Genius at reading corporate financial statements—equally adept at sniffing out a problem if it’s there or finding hidden values. That’s why everyone wants you on their Mergers and Acquisitions team. What kept coming out was that you had old fashioned integrity.” He took a sip of water. “I’m stalling. If the deal were dead, you wouldn’t be here. There’s a way out. What?”

My mouth was dry. In the opening power games, I had forgotten to pour myself a glass of water. “I’m authorized to tell you All-American has no other issues to bring up before the closing tomorrow. Between stock options, restricted stock, and supplemental retirement benefits you would personally gain \$25 million from this deal. That’s not including the bump your stock and options get with the share price increase. Knock off \$20 million and the liability difference drops below the contingency threshold, which allows the deal to proceed.”

With the whoosh of a whale surfacing from a deep dive, he released his breath. His face turned a pasty gray. He took a series of shallow breaths as though I had punched him in the solar plexus. I hoped his heart was in good shape; I didn’t want a dead guy on my hands. After another sip of water, his chin lifted from his chest and he fired detailed questions at me about how All-American discovered the problem, jotting down the specifics I provided to back up the \$50 million liability.

“I need to confirm these numbers.” He paused, circled \$20 million on his pad, and blew out a lungful of air. “It’s a brilliant solution. Any other place you tried to get the money would upset employees or the executive group or put one bank or the other in jeopardy of the regulators. Here only my ox is gored—and the problem happened on my watch. He tried on a smile. “At least this isn’t Japan, so I don’t have to commit seppuku. Anything else?”

“Vince needs your answer by nine o’clock tomorrow—your time.”

D’Alessandro straightened up, filled his suit again. He stared into my eyes. I did not blink and he looked away. With a quiver in his voice he asked, “You married, McCree?”

He didn’t care two shits about my family. He was stalling while he grappled with everything I had dumped on him. I filled in the dead air.

“Divorced many years ago. I have a son who’s about to graduate from college. You?”

“What do you suggest I do? I can’t quite see myself walking in the door and saying, ‘Hi Honey, I just lost twenty million. How was your day?’”

Yet that must be what he was considering. He had caved. My job was done.

AT THAT POINT ALL I wanted to do was sleep for the next two days. I had caught a few Z’s on the flight from Atlanta to Cincinnati, but instead of racking out at home, I was stuck in the Cincinnati homicide interrogation room waiting for Detective Lewis to return.

When he did, he brought two more cups of coffee. “Want one?” he asked.

“Never learned to drink coffee. Thanks anyway.”

Lewis sat down and slurped coffee from a Styrofoam cup. His left hand stayed busy rubbing his thumb and finger together. “Let’s try some questions maybe you can answer. Who has keys to your house?”

“My next-door neighbor Mrs. Keenan. My son, Paddy. He’s at college finishing his finals. The cleaning lady.”

Lewis looked up from scribbling on his pad. “Her name confidential too?”

I gave him the name. “That’s it.”

“Girlfriend have a key?”

My stomach tightened as though anticipating a blow. I tried blinking in order to focus. *Why was he asking about Abigail?* It had been over a month since I’d last heard from her and I wasn’t sure if she would ever be back. Had she come back? Had something happened to her? “No key.”

“Really?” Lewis took a purposeful slug of brew. “We found a lot of her stuff there. Toothbrush, makeup, tampons. Everything a girl would need, except a spare key to let herself in. What’s her name?”

“Abigail Hancock.”

“Where is she?”

“She also works for CIG. She’s a bodyguard and I don’t know where—”

“Let me guess.” Lewis slurped his coffee for dramatic pause. “It’s confidential.”

That happened to be the case, but I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of my answer.

Lewis rolled his eyes and sighed heavily. “When were you last in your basement?”

“My basement? I have no clue. Maybe to get food for my bird feeders? Tuesday? Wednesday?” I wracked my mind trying to piece together the last week, but my sleep-deprived brain didn’t work. “Look. I’m tired. I’m hungry. I want to help because whatever you’re investigating, I didn’t do it. Is Abigail okay? What happened?”

Lewis snapped his fingers at the sergeant who brought over a 4x6 print, which he laid face down on the table between Lewis and me.

“Go ahead,” Lewis said. “Take a look.”

I searched their faces for a clue, but they sported flat cop eyes—daring me to turn over the photo. Instinctively, I picked it up by its edges. Not that I didn’t trust them . . . actually, I didn’t trust them. For whatever reason, I mentally counted to three before flipping the print over. I gagged. A nude man, his face blown away by a shotgun blast, elbows, knees, and ankles shattered, burn marks on his chest, sat in my basement on one of my porch chairs. Orange adjustable straps, just like the ones I owned, held his body to the chair.

I swallowed hard to keep the bile down and concentrated on the picture. Without a face and without any distinguishing marks, I had no clue who the victim was. I felt dizzy as I processed the rest of the picture. No blood spatter, no pools of liquid on the floor. Someone killed him elsewhere and then staged him in my basement.

Lewis cooed, “Lover gone bad?”

When I didn’t take the bait, he tried, “Or maybe a confidential business deal gone bad? Now’s the time to talk to me, Mr. McCree. Sticking with that crap about clandestine meetings in Chicago and Atlanta won’t do anyone any good.” He tapped the picture. “Face it. You ain’t a doctor and you ain’t a priest and your confidentiality agreement is worth bupkes in a murder investigation. Less than bupkes. Better you tell me now. Who is this guy? Why did you do this?”

Continuing to stare at the picture, I could not match it to anyone I knew.

Everyone looked up at the door click followed by low heel taps on linoleum as Homicide Lt. Tanya Hastings entered the room. She acknowledged the detective with a flick of slender fingers and gave the sergeant a quick smile. She leaned her five-eight frame against the far wall. Bright,

skilled, and tough enough to be Cincinnati's first African-American homicide lieutenant, normally her smile took in her entire face, and if I was not careful I could drown in her chocolate eyes. Not today.

"He giving you a hard time, Seamus?" She inclined her head toward Lewis. Her lilac scent began filling the room.

"I wish I could be more helpful." I shrugged one shoulder.

Hastings said, "Why don't you two take a break?" They shuffled out of the room, probably to take positions behind the mirror. Hastings took the detective's chair. How long had she been watching? She brought me out of my thoughts. "I think you were just about to tell us the name of the deceased?"

"Hard to tell after someone blew his face away."

"He was obviously fit, nice tan under the bruises. Can't tell from the picture, but he had interesting hands: polished fingernails, no calluses, no rings."

She shifted gears before I could assimilate the new information. "Lewis is right, you know. You are obstructing justice by withholding evidence. We dumb city cops wouldn't be smart enough to profit from whatever acquisition you were working on. Besides, that would be illegal. Friendly or hostile?"

"Oh, the detective was friendly enough, I guess."

She leaned the chair back on two legs and hooted. I caught myself staring at her long elegant neck and felt a flush heat my face.

She took the top off the second coffee cup and peered into the tan liquid. "I think I'll pass. What I meant is," she enunciated each word carefully, "is the acquisition friendly or hostile? I assume your confidentiality nonsense has to do with a merger or acquisition or leveraged buyout or some such. Might this murder in some way be related to a hostile transaction?"

"Friendly. Besides, I have no skin in the game. They pay me by the hour and get my advice. They make the decisions, not me, and I've already completed all my work. It's up to the two parties now." Actually, it was only up to Anthony D'Alessandro or possibly his wife. Would she give up the twenty million? The banker in him realized he was still millions ahead if the deal went through, but what would it do to her ego?

"What if your guest's a muckety-muck of either the buyer or seller?"

"Doesn't make any sense, Lieutenant. Only a couple people at the buyer knew of my work . . ." *Oops, I just gave that away. Now she's confirmed*

it's an acquisition. Be careful, Seamus. It won't take much work to figure out who in Chicago was buying whom in Atlanta, especially if you knew banking and financial institutions were my specialty. "They only got me involved over the weekend. The seller knew nothing of me until early this morning. Did someone break into my basement?"

She sucked on her bottom lip. "Doors were locked tight. A 911 caller said they heard screams coming from your basement. District Five checked it out and saw the victim through your cellar door and . . . here we are." She nudged the picture closer to me.

"And you think I did this and now I'm making up some cockamamie excuse about these meetings? Once they ink the deal or it falls through, I can give you chapter and verse. Besides, you can check my plane tickets."

"We're doing that as we speak. We'd also like permission to search your car."

"What? I killed the guy somewhere, brought him home in the car, and left him in my basement for all to see while I jetted to Atlanta for a quick tete-a-tete?"

"I'll go out on a limb here. Between the two of us, I don't see you killing this guy. First," she held up a finger, "you hate guns and this guy was shot by at least two different types. Two, I'm not saying you couldn't kill somebody—you've got the temper for it—but if you did, it would be quick and rash, not premeditated, as this obviously was. Three, if you're going to store a dead body in your house you're going to stick it behind the furnace where no one could see it from outside." She waved the three fingers at me.

No rings on her fingers. *What happened to her engagement ring?*

"However," she continued, "you're a smart and crafty bastard. You might decide that's what I would think, so if you did kill someone, you might make it look sloppy, like this. I do love my job, indeed I do. About those car keys?"

I retrieved the keys from my suit coat pocket. "Remember to fill the tank when you're done."

"I'm dying of laughter. What are you working on for Criminal Investigations Group?"

"Just some boring forensic accounting work relating to a couple of UK firms Interpol thinks are laundering terrorist money. As far as anyone knows they have no connection to the US, which is why CIG gave me the work. They figure I'm out of harm's way."

“Fine. But the fact is, we found the body in your basement. You sure nothing you’re working on either privately or for CIG could lead to what we found in your basement?”

“I don’t believe so.”

She leaned forward, and I couldn’t help looking into her eyes. “You’re lying. You’re still sniffing around the Chillicothe stuff, aren’t you?”

Heat crept up the back of my neck. “You know I was yanked off the case.”

“You didn’t exactly answer my question, Seamus. Are you messing with that investigation?”

Could the dead body connect with that? Couldn’t be. We’d been super careful, hadn’t we?

“You in there?”

“Sorry, Lieutenant. I am really, really tired. I was just thinking.”

“I know that’s what you’re supposed to be good at. People pay you really big bucks to think. In fact, things work much better when you think and other people do the actual investigating. But of course, you already know all that.”

She pushed her chair back with a squeak and stood, leaned over the table. “In Interrogation 101, they teach you to ask a question three different ways, so here goes try number three: What have you been doing on the Chillicothe case?”

“Nothing.” Crud. I had broken my self-promise about asking for counsel before telling any lies. I regrouped. “Paddy and I tried to track some of the missing funds.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Really? I thought he was at school?”

“Paddy hid our ISP address so we’d be safe.” I couldn’t hold her gaze. “You guys had nothing and it’s millions of dollars.” From the haze, I remembered her question. “Paddy is still at school. This was while he was home on spring break. Besides, we got nowhere.”

Hastings rubbed her eyes with the backs of her hands. “Well, Sherlock, some reality just got brought home to roost. If you and your son have been screwing around with people who were willing to kill scores of innocents as part of their scheme, maybe it’s a good thing you were away for the weekend. Maybe you would have been the guy strapped to the chair.”

“Did they administer the IRA six pack in my basement?”

“An IRA what?”

“Six pack. The IRA used it on informers. Shot their elbows, knees, and ankles. Effective advertising about why squealing on the IRA is a bad idea.”

Hastings jotted notes on a spiral-bound notepad she took from her shirt pocket. “How do you know about IRA six packs?”

“We didn’t play cowboys and Indians growing up in South Boston. We played IRA and Ulster Guards. There wasn’t exactly unanimity in the community about whether the IRA were good or bad.”

Detective Lewis reentered the room. “Delta confirms Mr. La-Dee-Dah flew first class on the flights today and paid for a conference room in their Atlanta lounge. We got no airlines that have him flying out anytime Friday or Saturday. He’s so full of—”

“My client flew me to Chicago in their corporate jet. I told you that—”

“Doesn’t really mean anything,” Lewis snarled. “The coroner said—”

“Enough,” Hastings commanded. “The crime scene techs are willing to release everything in your house, Seamus, except your basement. They’ll seal that off and let you back in, assuming you want to be there.”

“You’re letting him go?” Lewis asked.

She shot me the smile of a shark before focusing her attention on Lewis. “I’m not saying Mr. McCree is innocent. Until we check tape from some airport monitors, all he has are a bunch of reservations and receipts. We’ll let him go for now.” She shifted her laser look to me. “I’m giving you rope, Seamus. You can choose to climb out of the hole you’re in or hang yourself.” Once again focusing on Lewis, “Are we clear?”

The expression on the detective’s face indicated he was anything but clear, but knew the chain of command. “Yes ma’am.” He closed the door behind him.

Hastings sat down, clicked off the recorder and leaned in, giving me a good slug of her lilac scent. “You have a criminal lawyer? Didn’t think so. The best in town is Leroy Patterson. He’s selective about the cases he takes, so tell him I said to call. Use him as a conduit to confirm your alibi without divulging who’s buying who.”

“Thanks. It’s whom.”

“What’s whom?”

“Who’s buying whom.”

“Who the hell cares?” She stood up and glared down at me. “Look, Seamus, if even one neuron in that vaunted brain of yours thinks about splitting town, remember this: I will hunt you down and drag you back by your balls.”

Two

I SLEPT THE SLEEP OF the just—or at least of the thoroughly exhausted. Ghosts have no hold on me. Since the murder didn't occur in the basement, I had no problem staying in my house. Someone had used it as a temporary funeral home, and I didn't have any concerns about visiting those.

My internal alarm did not ring and I slept late. My first thought was to call Paddy and let him know what happened at the house. However, me calling my son at 8:00 a.m. would be like him calling me at 3:00 a.m.—it had better be an emergency and this no longer was. I waited a couple of hours and ended up leaving him a message to call me when he had a chance.

The cops talked to me numerous times during the day, asking the same questions each time. To no avail, I barricaded myself in my third floor study to get some work done. The phone rang fourteen thousand times. I let voicemail overflow with requests/demands to talk to the media. At the end of the day I had accomplished exactly nothing, which I resolved to change.

The following day, after a longer than usual morning run to shake out the cobwebs, I retrieved the newspaper from the lily of the valley surrounding my porch where it ended up at least once a week. Over a breakfast bowl of five-minute oatmeal, I skimmed the news. The business section used ten column inches to announce the D'Alessandro brothers were going to be working together once All-American Bancorp completed its planned acquisition of Graystone National Bank. By contrast, the John Doe at my house—officially Cincinnati's forty-second murder of the year—had vanished from the paper, rating only five column inches when first reported.

The sol-mi chime from the doorbell jarred me from contemplating what a sad state of affairs we were in if a murder was only one-day news. A quarter to eight is suspiciously early for visitors. If it was a reporter I was going to be ticked. I choked down the remainder of a cranberry-orange bagel. From the dining room door, I spied on the front porch. Lt. Hastings

peered through the window beside the front door, a hand shading her eyes. I brushed my teeth with my tongue.

After I opened the door, she gave me a full body appraisal. A smile crept over her countenance. “Cute outfit.” With her hand she indicated my running shorts and tee shirt molded to my body with sweat. “Nice legs too.” She strolled from the foyer into the library. I followed her scent. “What a gorgeous mantel. Rookwood fireplace?”

“All the fireplaces are Rookwood tile. The mantel’s—”

“They don’t make them like this anymore, and you’ve used wonderful deep colors for the rooms. And I love the ten-foot ceilings. When was this built?”

“Eighteen ninety-five.” I wanted to wave my hands in little circles and move this conversation along to the reason she was here, which certainly wasn’t about admiring my house. She picked up an antique candle lantern from the mantel. “Maybe sometime you’ll give me the cook’s tour.”

“Now?”

“I don’t have time to see your etchings . . . just now.”

I looked at her left hand. I hadn’t imagined it. Her ring finger was bare. What had happened to her engagement to the football player?

She settled into my grandmother’s rocker, crossed her shapely legs, and motioned me to take the antique Hitchcock chair opposite her. “I have some follow-up questions from the interview. Where did you say your bodyguard girlfriend was?”

“Her name is Abigail Hancock, and I have no clue where, other than someplace in England. They’re keeping it close to the vest, so I—”

“Where does she keep her weapons when she’s out of the country?”

“I don’t like them in the house, so not here if that’s what you were thinking. Maybe at her brother’s?”

Hastings leaned forward. “Turns out you knew the John Doe. We caught a fingerprint match from a National Association of Security Dealers’ application. Someone from the Chillicothe area. Care to take a stab?” She removed a picture from her pocket. “Want to refresh your memory of how he last looked?”

Mentally I was driving in the slow lane, still sorting through her apparently broken engagement and wondering whether the etchings comments meant she had some other motivation for asking about Abigail. A moment passed before I processed the new information. I had no need

of the murdered man's picture. I remembered it too clearly and shivered at the memory of first seeing it in the interrogation room. With closed eyes, I considered all the Chillicothe people I had met during the investigation. When I go into thinking zone, I have no sense of time. Eventually it came to me. "Chip Kincaid."

"Unbelievable. Twenty-two seconds." She slid back into the chair and rocked. "How did you figure it out?"

It took considerably longer than twenty-two seconds to get her to follow my logic starting with the assumption that if the fingerprints came off an NASD registration form, the person took a security licensing exam, and ending with Chip Kincaid. "He had to take those exams to own his insurance agency. I never liked the guy, but that probably says more about me than him. I just don't cotton to people who line their pockets at the expense of their customers. Most brokers—"

"Back to Charles P. Kincaid. I don't have all day."

"The best I can say was he was a 'hale fellow well met.'" I grinned at a recollection. "His secretary had a great smile."

She stopped rocking. "Clearly important. Let me write that down."

"The CIG research guys discovered Kincaid got his hand slapped for improper recordkeeping a while back. Resulted in a fine. We looked at him and the agency but didn't find anything illegal."

"So what the hell was he doing in your basement?" She leaned in. "When did you last see him?"

"Not since the investigation, so months. Why was he in Cincinnati?"

"Autopsy found clothing embedded in the wounds, so he was shot while clothed, although we didn't find any clothes in your basement—besides one sock behind the dryer, which matched others in your bureau. Someone slipped him a roofie. You know, the date rape pill?" She bounced out of the chair and paced the room. "Here's my problem. Follow me on this. You solve the Chillicothe crimes and thwart, but don't capture, the actual hitman."

"Wasn't me who lost him."

"Point taken. However, someone kills Kincaid and leaves him posed for a *Necrophilia Magazine* photo spread in your basement. Too much coincidence. If this isn't related, I need another explanation for why Kincaid turned up here."

"You're implying Kincaid was involved with the crimes? We certainly didn't find any connection last year, and we looked hard."

In one fluid motion, she turned toward the stained glass window, raised her hands high over her head, and stretched backwards. God, she was a fine looking woman. I wondered what might have happened if we had gotten together. Idle speculation.

She did an about face. “So far we’ve got nothing. Officers will come by later today to remove the yellow tape so you can get back in the basement. Unless you met Kincaid in Chicago, I don’t need to know more about your meetings. Next time you want to stay covert, don’t fly on All-American’s corporate jet and don’t have the guy you’re meeting in Atlanta give the Delta Club attendant his name in case someone calls for him.”

“You’ve been busy. I’ll keep your suggestions in mind.”

“You do that. I’ve released your car. You can pick it up whenever you want. That reminds me. Something just doesn’t quite square: you flew first class, took limos, but you drive a car born in the last century.”

“Clients pay for business. I pay for personal. If some guy’s buying you a glass of wine you don’t order Two Buck Chuck, even if that’s what you drink at home, do you?”

She gave me a questioning look and I realized I hadn’t picked the most apt analogy.

“Don’t get up. I’ll see myself out.”

I popped out of my chair.

She released a rich contralto laugh. “Always the gentleman. It goes without saying, but with you I’m going to say it anyway: give me whatever ideas you think up and under no circumstances do I want to hear about you or your son starting any separate investigations. Got it?” Her sparkling eyes sucked me into their depths.

I walked her to the door, made a flamboyant show of opening it, and watched her perfect backside all the way to her cruiser. With my eyes closed, I inhaled deeply. I sure hoped Abigail got back soon. I was developing a thing for lilac perfume.

AS PROMISED, THAT AFTERNOON THE police removed the yellow tape. I planned to be a good little Seamus and let the professional investigators do their job, but once I walked down to the basement and saw the chair someone had strapped Chip Kincaid to, I viscerally knew I had to

understand why someone had gone to the trouble of picking my basement lock and placing Kincaid inside.

I have many failings and one has to do with taking orders. When my mother was in the delivery room, the doctor flipped me over and told me to stay put until I was born. I flipped right back. I still don't take orders well. I'm an independent cuss and proud of it—a trait that has not always served us Irish well over the centuries. I still might have been able to control myself if Lt. Hastings had not repeatedly issued orders to stay away from investigating Chip Kincaid's murder, which was like waving a red cape in front of a bull. Upon reflection, I didn't want to take that analogy too far; the bull doesn't usually turn out the winner in the long run.

To mitigate the potential for problems, I promised myself I would stay out of the police investigation's way, so the question was what form my inquiry should take. Paddy and I had gotten nowhere fast trying to find the missing Chillicothe money, and Paddy assured me no one could track the internet searches to us. That left open the question why someone would go to the trouble of breaking into my basement in order to dump the body of someone I knew only slightly from that investigation?

There had to be a connection. Could I use this new development to lever myself back into the official Chillicothe investigation? Hastings clearly didn't think so; how about my boss at CIG? I could hear Rand's response, in prep school English, "You make a cogent argument, Seamus, but I shall not be persuaded on this issue."

Nope, pushing Rand wouldn't work. If I took this on, I'd have to keep it secret from him. Well, it wasn't the first.

Hastings had apparently talked with my police contacts in and around Chillicothe, no doubt warning them not to talk to me. However, I had gotten to know Charlene Worth, the girlfriend of one of the Ross County Sheriff's officers, a guy aptly named Bear. She might be the camel's nose under the tent.

Waiting for Charlene to answer the phone, I broke into a smile picturing her and Detective Albert Wright together. She was fourteen inches shorter and one hundred and fifty pounds lighter than he was. The restaurant she worked at, Sue's Home Cooking, was still hopping, which if I had thought about it I would have known. I settled for leaving a message.

I tried to relax with a glass of cabernet and WGUC, Cincinnati's classical radio station, playing in the background. I selected the book from the top

of my to-be-read pile, a Robert B. Parker mystery, and plopped into an easy chair in my library. The opening pizzicato of Bruckner's Fifth Symphony startled me out of the book. Shortly before Abigail left for England, we heard the CSO perform the piece in Orchestra Hall. Where in England was she? What was she doing? When would she get back? Trying to ignore the hollowness those thoughts brought, I refilled my wineglass and buried myself in the thriller.

The low brrrrp from the phone called me back to the present. I raced to the kitchen and caught the call in the midst of the answering machine's greeting.

"Hold on," I yelled. My stomach growled. I needed more than wine for dinner. Once the answering machine's spiel ended, I told Charlene tomorrow's *Chillicothe Gazette* headline would announce Chip Kincaid's murder and explained where the police discovered the body.

"How awful for you. Chip should have known that if he played with fire he'd eventually get burned."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning Chip preyed on women."

I primed her pause with another drawn-out, "Meaning?"

"He married right after college. Screwed around so much she divorced him. He gave her everything except the condom he wore. That was because after they left the judge's chambers they went to her apartment and had a celebratory screw."

"You'll be surprised to know he didn't share those details during the Chillicothe investigation." I was pleased with myself for thinking to call Charlene. This was the sort of background I'd never get from the cops. "He preyed on women?"

"Well, the girls do sometimes talk, and I hear stuff while taking orders. Hold on." The clunk of a receiver bouncing against the wall came down the line. From the distance, Charlene yelled, "Just a minute. I'm on the phone."

After a moment, the phone rattled and she said, "Some people! Where was I? Oh, yeah. You wouldn't believe the stuff waitresses hear. People think we have no ears. Chip was a few years behind Bear and me in school. Decent athlete but nothing like Bear. He had the hots for the ladies, especially older, experienced women. There was a bar downtown. I don't remember its name. Anyway, after school he used to drop in and attach

himself to a housewife and do the deed before hubby got home. So they say.”

“Precocious.”

“Lives, uh lived, outside town on a gentleman’s farm. I guess more like a stud farm.” She giggled. “Is your machine recording this? I can’t believe I said that. I hear tell it’s secluded so no one knew who he entertained.”

“My, my. Did he still go for older women or did he get stuck at a particular age?”

“I never heard of him with jailbait. Otherwise, if she walked, she was fair game. He mostly went for damaged goods, though.”

“How much of this is gossip and how much confirmed?”

“You’re hurting my feelings, and I’m paying for this call too.”

“I’m sorry, Char—”

“I’m busting your chops, Seamus. Mostly gossip, but it’s come from so many places and for such a long time, it’s probably true. One of my girlfriends worked for him for several years. Sounds like you’re looking for info. I’m sure she’d talk with you. You don’t embarrass easily, do you? She’s a bit, um, earthy, but she knows how to dish dirt. Want me to give her a call?”

“You betcha.”

THREE

CHARLENE SET UP A MEETING with Martha Winklevoss for lunchtime at Sue's Home Cooking. GPS devices suggest a faster route from Cincinnati to Chillicothe than the one I chose, which was a straight shot out US 50. If time wasn't a concern, I preferred local roads over highways. My chosen route was shorter but wandered through a number of towns.

The first fifty miles to Hillsboro are flat. I concentrated on the scenery in an attempt to forget the reason I had a cleaning crew in my basement and a locksmith changing all the locks to the house. At Hillsboro, the Appalachian foothills begin, the twang becomes more prevalent, the houses a bit shabbier, and poverty's slip frequently peeks out from under its flowered dress.

The last forty miles to Chillicothe wander through the valley carved by Paint Creek, once a mighty river, now exhausted by summer's heat to a dribble along the valley floor. Approached from the south on I-71/75, Cincinnati has a majestic entry. You round a hill and find the cityscape laid out before you. Blink and you miss the sign announcing Chillicothe.

Not far outside town, Sue's Home Cooking hugged US 50. Its clientele favored pickups and beaters, sit-down meals, and conversation. Four months after the event, Sue's still sported Santa and sleigh poised on the roof ready for takeoff; sinusoidal curves of alternating red and green bulbs hung against the fake stone front.

I paused in the vestibule and read the *Chillicothe Gazette* headline:

CHILICOTHE MAN BRUTALLY MURDERED IN CINCINNATI.

Charlene almost took me out as she burst through the double doors from the kitchen, releasing the sounds and smells of frying bacon.

"Saw you pull in." Her face glowed with good health and a cheery smile. "Make another million bucks in the stock market and you still drive that old thing?"

Why's everyone picking on my ride? "It's only got 170,000 miles."

“Saving your money for tips, I hope.”

We hugged. I held her at arm’s length and looked her over. “You got skinny on me.”

“Thought I’d run a marathon this fall.”

She brought me to the first booth in her section, the one she normally reserved for Bear. “He’s in Akron picking up some scum. Gets back late this afternoon.”

I slid into the booth. “Before I forget, thanks for setting up lunch with Martha.”

“No problem.” She tucked a strand of bleach-blond hair under her red bandanna. “She was more than happy to help out after I gave her the lowdown on what happened to Chip. You can pay me back with another stock tip.”

Charlene fetched a tall Dr Pepper and short ice water, set them on the table, and leaned in to whisper, “I think Bear’s going to ask me to marry him. He’s working up to it, and my birthday’s in two weeks.”

Before I could respond she straightened and waved toward the door. “Here comes Martha.”

A Rubenesque woman in her early thirties walked toward us. A crisp John Deere cap topped her mop of brown hair; a faded denim jacket layered over her scoop neck shirt. Too-tight jeans and white sneakers completed her outfit. I’ve never understood how some women keep their sneakers so white—or why they bother.

Charlene made the introductions and hustled to get Martha coffee. Martha set her purse on the bench seat and slid into the booth, knocking the purse onto the floor. She bent down and provided me with an unobstructed look down her shirt.

No bra. Heat rose to my face, and I quickly looked away.

Charlene returned with Martha’s coffee and took our orders: the BLT plate with fries for Martha, minestrone soup and grilled cheese combo for me. I briefly regretted it wasn’t tomato soup so I could dunk the grilled cheese. Martha brought me back from my mental journey to Mom’s kitchen.

“I liked Chip. Not that he wasn’t a scumbag, but in my opinion not worth killing. I guess someone didn’t agree.” She flashed a tentative smile.

I smiled back. “Charlene said you worked for him?”

“For a couple of years I took care of his office. He paid good and the work wasn’t hard. Chip had some fine qualities, but keeping accurate

records wasn't one of them. He'd write notes on slips of paper and forget to give them to me. By the time he'd remember, we'd missed deadlines and stuff. It wasn't my fault, but when he got fined by the Insurance Department he had to bring in some hotshot MBA to run the office, and I was history."

"Bummer."

She dismissed my sympathy with a wave of her hand. "He gave me a nice severance package and real good references. He wasn't doing anything illegal, just sloppy is all. Charlene didn't say exactly who you worked for?"

I gave her the whole nine yards about Criminal Investigations Group. Well, eight and a half yards, neglecting to mention I wasn't actually working for them on the Kincaid murder. I told her about how a gazillionaire founded it in the sixties to assist law enforcement agencies that needed help but didn't want to deal with Hoover's FBI. We provided technical assistance and had no interest in taking over their cases. After nine-eleven, the FBI concentrated much of its resources on antiterrorism and local law enforcement called us in on all kinds of cases.

"And you're like what—one of their big agents or something?"

"Hardly. The director caught me on the rebound from quitting Wall Street in disgust and talked me into setting up CIG's financial crimes group."

"Well, isn't that just fascinating?" she bobbed her head a couple of times.

I wasn't sure how to take that so I plowed ahead. "Charlene said Chip was a ladies' man?"

"That's a nice way to put it. I think he bedded half the women of Chillicothe." She leaned in and dropped her voice. "From what I gather, my story is typical. My ex started coming home stinking of liquor and perfume. You might have noticed I use a little blush and eyeliner, but I don't reek of chemicals. He was full of excuses, and like a lovesick fool, I believed him for a while. Eventually I got the nerve to ask my girlfriends. They all knew and were just too nice to tell me. After a big fight, he admitted an affair, but swore it was all over. I was pissed and wanted to hurt him. Not exactly a mature reaction, but I was only twenty-five. That's when I first met Chip."

She paused to stir three packets of faux sugar into her coffee and took a sip. "I began hanging out at bars after work. He bought me a drink. I needed to talk and he was a real good listener, you know?"

"Sure," I said.

“One thing led to another. We met at a local park, took a blanket into the woods to fool around a little. The risk of getting caught made it exciting, and I still wanted to hurt Roger, my ex. It progressed to where we hadn’t done the dirty, but only Bill Clinton would say we weren’t having sex. Anyway, after several weeks, he asked if I could get away for a weekend. He knew I loved ballet—I danced as a kid. He got tickets for Prokofiev’s Cinderella at the Cincinnati Ballet. Have dinner, see the ballet, enjoy the night in a nice hotel. It sounded wonderful. I gave hubby some cock and bull story—oh, what an interesting choice of words—anyway, a story about visiting one of my college roommates for the weekend. We left Friday night after dinner. Took separate cars. I met him at the Omni’s bar.”

Her hazel eyes took on a dreamy quality.

“Chip already had the room. After a couple of drinks, we went upstairs. We were at each other all night long. Saturday after brunch we toured the Art Museum up on top of the hill in some park. I don’t remember its name.”

“Eden.”

“Right, Eden Park. We didn’t stay too long. You know.” She looked at me over her coffee and giggled. “We hit the sack again and took a quick nap before the ballet—center orchestra seats at the Aronoff. First time I’d seen it. Absolutely wonderful. After, we had a late dinner at the Maisonette. I was so exhausted I fell right to sleep once we got back to our room. We had one last roll before we checked out Sunday.”

At least Chip wasn’t cheap. He used a good hotel, and the Maisonette, now closed, had been the *Mobil Travel Guide’s* longest running five-star restaurant in the country. “And then?”

She grabbed the front of her shirt and fanned herself. “Makes me hot thinking about it.”

I focused on my Dr Pepper.

“We met a few times at his house, mostly in the late afternoon, but occasionally for dinner. It was never the same after the weekend in Cincinnati. I suggested we go away for another weekend. He wasn’t interested. We met less frequently. Then one day I saw him with a red-headed chick coming out of Shorty’s bar. I followed them into the park. They pulled into the exact same space we had used.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Uh-oh’s right. I thought about sneaking into the woods and catching

them with their pants down, but I chickened out. I was hurt. Actually, I was pissed and for the first time felt guilty about breaking my marriage vows. I cried it out and promised myself I was done with him and would try to make things work at home.”

“And?”

“I confronted Chip. He was surprised—not that I had found him out, but that I had ever assumed I was something special. He wished me luck with Roger, told me I was a good lay. If I ever wanted to be fuck buddies, I should call him. I’m not embarrassing you, am I?”

I shook my head and grabbed my Dr Pepper to avoid having to lie outright.

“Roger was still Roger, so eventually I threw him out.”

She looked up from her coffee, gazing at me through her bangs. “Not too long after that, Chip called and offered me the job at his agency with a big raise in pay. Screwing wasn’t part of the job description, but a few times I was lonely enough to take Chip up on his other offer. It was good clean sex and satisfied the need.” Her tongue slowly licked her upper lip, like a metronome about to run down.

Although the loves of my life have tended toward greyhounds and gazelles, I felt horns scratching for attention.

“I’ve been doing all the talking. Charlene tells me you used to be some Wall Street guru, and you made a killing on the Appalachian Casualty deal.”

I took a sip of soda and placed the glass aside to make room for the plate Charlene carried. “I worked in New York for a while writing boring reports about financial companies that not too many people read.”

“He’s way too modest,” Charlene said and slid our plates in front of us. “He was voted the top analyst three years running, and I told you he was rich. After all the negative news last year about Appalachian, he bought a boatload of the stock. Made over a million bucks when they got the takeover offer.” She slapped my shoulder. “Although you’d never know it looking at him.”

Martha choked down her coffee. “You’re shitting me.”

“All true,” Charlene said. “And the dear complains it happened too quickly so he had to pay more taxes. Poor guy.”

“If you’re that good,” Martha asked. “Why the hell did you leave New York and come here?”

“The short story is I had a disagreement with my boss, who falsified one of my reports. After I quit I wanted to get far away from New York.”

“And,” Charlene smiled and patted my hand, “he believed Mark Twain, who said that when the world ended he wanted to be in Cincinnati.”

Martha took the bait. “Why?”

“Because it’s always twenty years behind the times. Anything else for you two?”

Martha cleaned her plate. I finished the soup and savored the last mouthful of grilled cheese. How to proceed? I was interested in whether Chip always took his lovers to Cincinnati, but didn’t want to ask the question directly. “Do you know the redhead or any of Chip’s other lovers, particularly recent ones?”

“The last time I slid into his satin sheets was about a year ago. I had broken up with a boyfriend and was feeling pretty low. I will say this for Chip: whenever I was with him I felt like a million bucks. I don’t mean just orgasmically. He was in the moment, not thinking about work or the next girl or whatever. You know, conquests would be the better word. I don’t know if Chip ever loved, other than loving the chase. Chip was a good lesson for me. He helped me understand that I flat out like sex. You know what I mean?”

She paused, but I chose not to respond. “But he really hurt a friend of mine. Angie got burned bad.” She shook her head at the thought. “I can guess at some others, but that wouldn’t be fair.” She pursed her lips to become the picture of someone concentrating. “Bea Prichard may be your best bet. She and Chip were really close—at least they were when I was working for him.”

“Where can I find these ladies?”

She looked at the ceiling for a five count before telling me Bea Prichard owned a one-woman beauty shop in the strip mall housing Kincaid’s agency. She claimed not to be sure about Angie. She glanced at her watch. “I need to get back to work. They keep a pretty strict clock, and I haven’t worked there long.”

“One final question. Where were you last Saturday night?”

She wagged her finger at me, but her face wore a gigantic smile. “Dancing at the Elks. ’Bout a hundred people can vouch for me. Left twelve-thirty, maybe one o’clock.”

I thanked her for her time and the information, gave her my card, and asked her to call me if she thought of anything else. She got up and wiggled

the card into her front pocket, changed her mind and sat back down. She took another card from me, wrote her telephone number on the back. “Call me anytime you want, Seamus.”

My blush deepened. Before I could respond, she slipped out of the booth, waved to Charlene, and scooted out the door.

Charlene came over, wiping her hands on a towel and trying to hide a mischievous grin.

“Get what you wanted, Seamus? Need anything else?”

“Either Abigail or a cold shower.” I didn’t dare look her in the eyes.

“No problemo,” she said and picked up the ice water pitcher.

I caught her wrist as she raised the pitcher from the table. Charlene playfully punched my shoulder with her other hand. “I always wanted to do that,” she said. “So do you have a plan?”

I ruffled my hair. “Feeling shaggy. I think I’ll get a haircut.”

Sample

FOUR

BEA PRICHARD WAS WITH A Klip and Kut customer. She had an opening in forty-five minutes. I scheduled a wash and trim. With time on my hands, I stopped in Kincaid's insurance agency to talk to the woman I had nicknamed 'Miss Smiles.'

The sign on the agency door said, "We're Open." I peered in the window. Miss Smiles sat at the receptionist desk reading. Institutional gray file cabinets lined the wall behind her. She looked up at the bell's tinkle, flashed her smile, and greeted me, "Hello, Mr. McCree. How are you today?"

"Very well, thank you. Surprised you remember my name. You have me at a disadvantage. I don't believe Chip ever introduced us."

She stood and stuck out her hand, a cool firm grip. "Ronnie Adams, Chip's half-sister. I never forget a name . . . or an interesting face. What can I do for you?"

My reaction to hearing her name was like sensing the last ripple made by a small pebble dropped in a large pond. Had I indeed heard her name before? Underneath her ribbed sweater, she had Chip's athletic form, but her facial structure was more rounded, her eyes exotic. She motioned for me to take one of the leather chairs in front of her desk.

"I had no idea you were Chip's sister. This must be hard for you."

She jerked her head away and dabbed at a tear, her French braid swinging in an arc. "We decided it would be easier if no one knew. That way his hiring me wouldn't look like nepotism."

"From the way he treated you, I would never have guessed you were siblings. I'm sorry, I should be more coherent." I handed her my CIG card. "I'm helping look into his death. Do you know why he was in Cincinnati?"

"I was his silent partner, not his chaperone. I tried not to know about his other . . . activities."

"Silent partner?"

She rolled her shoulders twice. "I agreed to join him for half the

business. He handled sales, which he was superb at. I have a business background and an MBA from Amos Tuck, so I handled everything else.” She squared the papers in front of her and stuck them in a folder. “Chip and I had the same mother. It’s a long story and probably not what you’re here for.”

“CIG checked the agency out last year. Your name wasn’t on the business records.”

“Contractually, my bonus equals fifty percent of the profits. The agency remained in Chip’s name.”

“What happens to it now?”

“Chip’s lawyer is new and not aware of a will. Hopefully, Chip’s safe-deposit box contains something. The lawyer’s supposed to obtain permission to open it. Mom and I are his only living relatives. Once he grew up, he refused to see my mother. He feels—he felt she abandoned his father and him.”

“If he died intestate it all goes to your mother?”

“Ironic isn’t it? No will and Mom gets it all. Unless he left a child out there somewhere, which would not be a big surprise. I could buy the agency with the key man life insurance we put in place when I joined, but honestly, Chillicothe’s not my idea of home. Maybe I’ll go back East?” She looked around the office. “Right now, everything’s up in the air.”

I had other ways to determine how the business had been doing, so no need to ask her. “Had Chip seemed worried or received any threats?”

She gazed at the ceiling and answered in measured tones. “He seemed tired, sometimes had dark circles under his eyes. He mentioned having trouble sleeping.”

The phone rang and she answered it with her smile voice. “Kincaid Agency. Just a moment please.” She listened, then held her hand over the phone. “I’ve got to take this. To finish answering your question, the last couple of days he seemed like the old Chip. I figured he found someone new.”

BACK AT KLIP AND KUT I sat in one of the two yellow plastic chairs crouched around a low round table covered with out-of-date magazines and a recent grocery store tabloid. The front page blared, “MARTIANS

CLONING HUMANS IN ARIZONA, PICTURES INSIDE.” A hidden speaker played songs from the eighties, losing the competition with a 1500-decible blow drier Bea was applying to a blond pageboy. My nose twitched from the scent of bleach and chemicals.

Five minutes later, after removing my glasses, she tipped me backwards over the sink. Warm water loosened my neck muscles; her strong fingers shampooed my hair. Finished, she threw a towel around my head and led me to the cutting chair.

“How did you want this cut today?” she asked.

“This is the first time I’ve been here, so imagine it two months shorter and you’ve got it.”

Her small angular frame surprised me by the low chuckle it produced. “Martha warned me about you.”

“Oh?”

She pulled on my hair, quick tugs to straighten it or something. I’ve never understood why hairdressers did that. “She told me about your conversation and,” she pulled a hank much harder than necessary, “I should keep my mitts off you. She’s got first dibs. I can see why she’d be interested in your money, which she told me about, and your,” she changed her voice to a husky gravel, “ruggedly handsome good looks.” Another hair yank. “Which she didn’t.”

First dibs? “So what do you think about Chip Kincaid’s demise?”

“Demise? Fancy Dan words too. Those big cities aren’t safe like here. I’ve only been to Cincinnati once, and that was my price for Chip to get me in the sack.”

It’s risky to ask a personal question while someone has scissors at your ear, but I needed the information. “Was that his *modus operandi*, to take his lovers to Cincinnati for the consummating weekend?”

“Whoo-wee, listen to you.” She ruffled my hair. “Demise and *modus operandi*. Do your smarts rub off? Truth is, only the hard-to-get ones got the junket to Cincy,” Bea said, speaking around the comb or scissors she kept in her mouth. “What he didn’t know was that I was the one seducing him! I told him after our Cincinnati Cha-cha. From then on our liaisons became a matter of convenience. The chairs in here are pretty flexible. I’ll leave the rest to your imagination.”

“Did he happen to mention an Angie . . .?”

“Angie Buttersworth? Probably. You know, he never talked about actual

conquests, so I can never know what really happened. He did talk a lot about who he'd like to hop in the sack with. For example, a couple of months ago he came in here for his usual and after we were done he tells me he's going upscale. 'I'm going to boff Judith Dinehart' was how he put it."

"I'm not familiar with the name."

"Very hotsy-totsy." She brushed her fingers several times under her nose for emphasis. "We don't run in the same circles—hardly the same planet."

"Did he act any differently the last few times you saw him?"

"Nope. Same old Chip. Want to look in a mirror and see if I got it right?"

"Hand me my glasses, please, or I can't see a thing."

Looked perfect, so she dried my hair. Finished, she leaned over me, left breast caressing my cheek, and brushed the hair from the sheet covering me. "You let me know if Martha doesn't work out."

What was going on? Was I giving off pheromones?

I paid with a reasonable tip and left her my card. From her phone book I found addresses and phone numbers for the only Dinehart and two Buttersworths in town. Bea blew me a kiss as I walked out the door. In my car I tried the Dinehart number. A maid answered and told me Miss Dinehart was at *The Club* for the afternoon.

Judith Dinehart was indeed hotsy-totsy. Only one place in Chillicothe was *The Club*. The Chillicothe Hunt and Racquet Club consisted of 2,500 fenced acres in the hills northeast of town. It catered to those with real money. Its amenities included a private 18-hole links golf course, indoor and outdoor tennis, racquetball and squash courts, and a fifty-meter pool. The dining room was first class, with a required monthly tab of \$2,000 per member. Out-of-town members used its private airstrip.

A closed gate forced me to stop at the guard house. Beyond, traffic spikes rose like bear claws from the pavement. A half-mile further stood the clubhouse, a rambling affair grown through time like a New England farmstead: white paint, gray slate roof, additions sprawled in every direction. A burly man dressed in a blue blazer with the CHR crest, white starched shirt and tasteful maroon tie ambled over. I lowered the window. The perfume of distant lilacs filled the car and immediately brought visions of Lt. Hastings to mind, causing a brief flash of guilt for my investigation.

He held a clipboard in his hand. "Name and member you are visiting?"

His tone was flat, uninterested—or maybe disdainful of my none-too-clean vehicle? We were on candid camera. A security eye attached to the guardhouse pointed to the car. Hidden semi-discretely in a bush, another camera recorded the rear end.

“Seamus McCree to see Judith Dinehart.”

He looked down at his list. A frown canyoned his brow. “What time was she expecting you, sir?” The sir was fractionally late.

“I’m a couple minutes early. Did she forget to put me on the list?” I craned to look at the clipboard, pretending he had somehow missed my name.

“Please wait, Mr. McCree. I’ll be right back.” His turn revealed a flash of brown leather under his left arm. Carrying.

Back in the guardhouse, he picked up a phone and punched three digits. His mouth moved. He nodded, spoke again, put down the phone, and wrote something on his clipboard. He slowly sauntered to my window.

“I’m sorry to inconvenience you, Mr. McCree. Miss Dinehart asked me to apologize for her forgetfulness. She is about to have a massage, and she has guests for dinner. She requested your card so she can contact you to reschedule.”

“Geez, that *is* inconvenient. I drove all the way from Cincinnati. Does she forget often?” I pulled out one of my personal cards, engraved on heavy stock, detritus from a time when such things mattered.

“I’ll see she gets this, Mr. McCree. I hope you have a pleasant trip back.”

After I was out of sight of the guardhouse, I pulled over to the side of the road and called the first of the Buttersworth numbers—answering machine with a male voice. At the second number a female answered with a brusque hello.

“Angie Buttersworth?”

“Yes. Who’s this?”

“Angie, I am calling in reference to the Chip Kincaid murder. I hope you have time for a few questions?”

“Oh, shit! I was afraid of this.” Her voice gained an edge. “Who did you say you were?”

“I didn’t. My name is Seamus McCree, and I work for Criminal Investigations Group. I’m involved with the Cincinnati police in the murder investigation.” Well, it was the truth, no reason to mention I was a suspect.

“It was so long ago.” Her hard voice broke and I thought she might cry.
“I had hoped it was over.”

“I won’t take much of your time. Can we meet somewhere?”

“The kids will be home from school soon. So, I don’t—”

“I’ll be right over.”

Sample