

Chapter 31

Nancy Marcus said nothing for a long, long moment. She assumed I'd come to talk about Eve, so she had been prepared to discuss *that* shock. Instead, another came at her from left field.

I had told her what we knew, or rather what Ingrid had known about her department head – and recorded in her coded computer file – after she served me good, hot coffee and nifty little cookies. As an evening with nothing of spring about it closed in, I sat in front of a warm fire, facing the woman who was offering this hospitality, while I did the dirty. The whole atmosphere was very Warner Brothers. I wouldn't have been surprised if George Brent had walked in. Finally, one of us had to say something and so I did.

“Did she talk to you about the materials she was collecting?”

“You know she did. Isn't it the police who never ask a question they can't answer, or is that lawyers?” She leaned in and put her cup down. Her hand was steady and I gave her bonus points in the Pro column for that. “She'd been throwing hints at me for days, then demanded I come to her home for what turned out to be the *coup de grâce*. Didn't think we should talk at the office in case we were 'overheard.' What a hypocrite. I lied to you about my going to her place. I'm sorry,” Nancy said, running her hand through her hair and shaking her head. “I can see her so clearly, still. She spread those long arms across the back of that shabby sofa and let fly.” She stood. “I need a drink and I'm going to pour myself a stiff vodka. Can you join me?”

“Yes. That would be fine.”

Nancy smiled and a little color came back into her cheeks. “Gerry doesn't have to know about this, does he? None of this will be on the record?”

I nodded and smiled back, saying nothing. Oh, what a clever girl I could be.

“What would you like to drink?”

I asked for the same as she was having. Nancy went off with the tea tray. I soon heard reassuring noises from the kitchen: ice cubes clinking, refrigerator doors opening and closing I walked over to look at a photo on the mantelpiece of Nancy, her daughter Cameron. and a bald man with a nice

smile – whom I assumed to be the absent Gerry. I hoped he wouldn't have an ugly surprise waiting for him when he got home from Riga. Nancy returned with our drinks, handed me mine, and sat down.

“Your daughter looks like you.” I took my drink and the first sip informed that when Nancy Marcus offered a stiff one she meant it. I sipped discreetly, waiting.

Nancy did hers justice as well. “That’s better,” she said. “Where shall I begin?” What she told me soon took its place among those many imagined scenes of life at Ingrid Spoto’s.

Nancy had looked around anxiously as she waited for Ingrid to answer the doorbell. She thought she saw a face looking out between some starched muslin curtains at a window next door, but it was nothing more than a flash of what looked like someone with dark hair. The door opened and she hurried by Ingrid into the sitting room. She looked around her.

Ingrid said: “You’re surprised, aren’t you? Not as pretty as your place by a long shot, is it? I never had any taste.” She seemed to have no regrets about such a misfortune.

Nancy looked at her with dislike. “I’m not here to discuss interior decorating. Ingrid, but I’m not surprised. Homes are a reflection of their owners and shoddy suits you.”

Ingrid smiled and sat down. “My, my Nancy how you do love coming on like everyone’s mother. Are you going to sit down, or stand over me shaking an outraged finger?”

“Shut up, Ingrid,” Nancy said evenly. “Let’s get to the point. I’ve had enough of the game-playing. Tell me what you have to tell me or shut up forever.”

Ingrid sighed. “Okay, okay.” She crossed one track-suited leg over the other. Nancy was surprised at how thin Ingrid’s legs had become; the woman could not have weighed anything. It occurred to her, not without dark amusement, that she could have thrown Ingrid over her shoulder and tossed her into a recycling bin – where she might actually serve some purpose. “You’re a true leader, aren’t you, Nancy. I’ll bet you were Student Body President.”

“And I’ll bet you weren’t.” Even at such a moment, a moment when she disliked Ingrid Spoto so intensely, Nancy still could not help admiring what a fine job Nature had done on the outer woman. What a shame the inner was such a failure. How did she get this way? Nature? Nurture? Both, perhaps, like everyone else, only in her case the mix was toxic. One of life’s spoilers. Nancy sat in a winged chair opposite Ingrid. It was neither comfortable, nor pleasing to the eye.

“Do you understand what you’re doing?” Nancy asked.

Ingrid looked at some point over Nancy's shoulder. The only sign that she was in the least nervous was her fingers plucking at a loose thread on the arm of the sofa on which she sat. "I suppose you see what I'm doing as sadistic?"

Nancy stared at her. "You don't?"

Ingrid shrugged. "I just need to let people know what I know about them."

"You're fulfilling a need by sticking it to other people?" Nancy almost laughed at such gall but she understood something. "You like goading people, don't you? Finding things out about them that they're ashamed of, then you work them over. Death by a thousand cuts. Better be careful though, you might trip over your own feet. Messengers and their fate, etcetera. You might run into a fuse that's a lot shorter than you think."

Ingrid shook her head. She leaned forward. "Women like you never understand women like me. I *like* the power I have over people when I can make them jump so high they're fighting for oxygen."

Nancy studied Ingrid and understood something for the first time. "You're damaged goods, aren't you, so you want to inflict as much damage as you can on others."

Ingrid ran a hand through a head of golden hair to which Nancy could cheerfully have set fire and then said: "I wonder what Gerry and Cameron would say if they knew what you'd been up to?"

Nancy stared at her. This was it. She had known all along what the bitch had been alluding to for days and thought she had been prepared. Now the moment had come and the feeling of vulnerability was appalling. "You don't know anything –."

"Then why are you here?" Ingrid was on a roll. "Oh, dear. What will Gerry think when he finds out you were fucking around, while he, no doubt, was on one of his ego trips to some dump in Eastern Europe? Who was it by the way, Nancy? A colleague?" She smiled. "The guy who delivers the cord of wood every winter? Whoever, he gave you the clap, huh? Bet you had to do some fancy stepping to keep Gerry out of bed, 'til you were fixed up."

Nancy stared at her. The woman was without shame. The woman was nothing more than an appealing husk covering a rancid interior. She needed to be stopped. Nancy stood now. "What a vulgar woman you are, Ingrid."

Ingrid looked as she had just been slapped, but recovered quickly. "Sticks and stones can break my bones –."

"You'd do well to remember that, Ingrid," Nancy told her. "You really would."

"I left then," Nancy Marcus now told me, "Couldn't bear to be with her for one more moment, to say nothing of how futile it would have been to

plead with *her*.”

I didn't think of myself as inexperienced, or naïve, but I was blown away at how far below the belt Ingrid Spoto could punch – but in pursuit of what? Some sort of twisted pleasure? Ingrid's cruelty took me to new territory. I collected my thoughts, giving Nancy a moment to recover her equilibrium after recounting her painful visit. “When did this conversation take place?”

Nancy drained her glass. Mine had been discarded long before, barely touched. “Three weeks before her death.”

“So, you were – .”

“Waiting for the other shoe to drop?” Nancy shook her head. “No, I didn't think she would tell Gerry. She just liked having something to hold over my head, to make me as unhappy and desperate as she was – and don't think I was under the delusion that mine was an exclusive case. She'd had a lot of practice by the time she got to me.”

“Who might have known this about your illness?”

“Here? My doctor, of course. No one else that I know of anyway. I suppose the gentleman in question might have talked. Although you would think it was in his best interests not to do so, ” Nancy said bitterly.

“Who was it?” I had to ask.

She sighed. “Barnett Pazderka.”

I had nothing to say. What could she have seen in *him*? I almost gave her some points in the Con column, but her suffering was manifest. “Gerry was away, we were going through a bad patch and Barnett was sympathetic at a party. I had too much to drink, was feeling sorry for myself, but ultimately I was even sorrier.” She managed a weak smile.

I wanted to say something comforting, but kept it impersonal, knowing that would be easier for her. I had a thought: medical records. “Who's your doctor?”

“Lawrence Saxton.”

God, this whole case was getting to be a study in six-degrees of separation. “Mireille Prudhomme's husband?”

Nancy nodded. “Yes.”

“When was this?”

“Five years ago.”

So, before he married Mireille, but why would he have told anybody? He had taken an oath not to do so.

“Would Ingrid *ever* have told your husband and your daughter, do you think? How would they have reacted?”

Nancy looked at me, her gaze direct. “I don't think so. She just liked having something on me – to spoil what I had. I love my husband and daughter and would kill to protect them.”

“You didn’t though, did you?”

“No. I didn’t, but I can’t say I have any animus against whoever did.”

I did however, on principle. I cursed the never-ending dilemma that was this case.

I checked my watch. It was just after six. I’d had enough. Soon I started the car, then pulled out into the street, thinking about Nancy. I admire people who can handle themselves under pressure. Murderers are the personality type who can’t. I couldn’t see her making such a mess of Ingrid. What was done to Ingrid showed a degree of malice. I’d stake my badge on the fact that the woman I had just talked to had none in her.

I was suddenly exhausted, reminded of why my previous night’s rest had been disturbed. Poor Eve Bishop. I doubted she’d had all that much of a life and then to be dealt a death she didn’t deserve was hard to accept. Barnett and Mireille could wait until tomorrow, I was in overload mode.

I turned at the corner of Nancy’s street. Lights already dotted windows of handsome houses. Cars were beginning to pull into driveways, spilling out children, who had no doubt spent their after-school hours rabidly improving themselves so that they would be eligible for enrollment in the upscale universities their parents wished they themselves had attended.

As I cruised along Delacroix I became even more down in the dumps at going home alone to leftovers. I yearned for company, some buzz. I needed real food and I knew exactly where to find it and the atmosphere I craved. The Key West was a West Rapids institution and according to legend, must have been so since before Michigan was granted statehood. It was right out of *American Graffiti* and the tablecloths had been there since at least 1973. It stood on Delacroix, on the outskirts of town because for many years no alcohol had been allowed by state law to be served within a mile of a university. That embargo was now history, which accounted for a lot of the mischief that now happened locally.

The Key, as it was known, was value for money; pizzas and burgers, served in a brusque manner by the student help that the management had always allowed flexi-hours. Your meal was slapped down on wooden tables with about a century of undergraduate initials carved surreptitiously into the tops. Drooping candles stuck in ancient Chianti bottles were The Key’s concession to decorative touches. Autographed photos of past and present athletes hung on walls of an indeterminate color – but best described as dung. It was the traditional place for locals to celebrate rites of passage: first dates, birthdays, post graduation get-togethers, engagements and even the odd marital break-up. Gavin had loved it.

Hopefully I would not be told to “Get real” again by one of the notoriously frank waitresses when I asked for my pizza to be cheese-free.

Chapter 32

A light wind had come up by the time I left the restaurant and the sky was so clear I could see the stars. Not that it mattered – I was hardly in a romantic mood and even if I had been I was alone, so there would have been little point. As soon as I entered the house, I turned on all the lights and the TV. My voice mail came up with only one message: my mother asking when I was coming home, which she did as regularly as Big Ben chimed the hours.

I was glad to have some down time, even if it did mean I would spend it worrying compulsively over what little we had to go on with this case. More irresponsibly, but no less frustrating, I kept thinking about Paul, Paul, and even more about Paul. Another reason not to call old English girlfriends, since they would spot my ambivalence with that justifiably famed female radar and the conversation would last for hours.

Things were at a stalemate between Paul and me. If anything, being at the crime scene with him had brought into clearly etched focus exactly how inappropriate our liaison was. He was definitely holding something back. Whether what he knew was relevant to Ingrid's death was for me to judge, not him. I was a police officer first and – yes, why be coy – a potential lover way down the line. No, it was a mix that would not work the way things stood, so best put it aside. Easier said than done, of course.

I was heading for the kitchen when Herb called. I filled him in on my progress, such as it was. He was not impressed when I told him that I didn't see Nancy Marcus for this.

“That's it? You know who you *don't* think did it?”

I was not in the mood. “Oh, sorry about that.” I opened the fridge and took out a bottle of water. “Unfortunately you can't arrest people on suspicion of something if such suspicions exist only to cover your own ass. Ever heard of lawyers and false arrest?”

He was silent for a moment. “Yeah, sorry.” I could tell he hated saying that. “What about other names on her computer? I mean if someone was giving me the business over my secret life for the fun of it, I might take to the blunt instrument, or the knife. Using people's lives against them gets them mighty

riled,” he said. “What next?”

“Call in Pazderka – .”

“And hang tough on that shit,” he said and hung up.

I got into my flannel panamas and started up a DVD of *Chicago*, munching the left-over fruit salad from my dinner with Paul, an event I realized with a shock that had taken place only the night before. It seemed like a thousand years ago. The chorus was singing “He had it coming!” a lyric that with only the most minor adjustments could apply to the late, little lamented Ingrid Spoto.

Later, I brushed my teeth and with each stroke I repeated the mantra, *Paul Spoto is not important to me*. It didn’t work, but perhaps ninety or so nights of such a routine would. I went to bed, curling up with the latest Susan Kandel. After half an hour I switched off the light. I fell into a troubled sleep, alternatively worrying about what to do with Paul Spoto and how next to tackle a case where the leads were as stale as the plot of a summer blockbuster. I needed a break in this case, fresh blood.

I would get it.

Chapter 33

Janet and I sat across from Barnett Pazderka. The Prof was working hard on looking bored yet on-top-of-things at the same time. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time and had the wrong question-asker for that kind of crap. He was about to find that out.

We were sitting in the interrogation room. It was only a table and four chairs in a dreary little room painted a yellow grey that was hard on the complexion. There was a phone jack on the wall that was in reality a video camera and whatever we recorded *was* admissible in court. Everyone else, other than the detectives conducting the interview, could watch what was going down on this monitor and if they had a question or a suggestion they could hit the interviewer's display pager with an timely message. You get the page, act as if you were looking at a phone number, whatever, and work the question into the interview. I flipped on the tape and gave the relevant details that preceded any interview, ensuring a case didn't get thrown out of court because of a critical omission. Janet sat, impassive, beside me.

Barnett had taken off his cowboy hat at my instruction and without mouthing off, so I took that as a sign he wasn't as full of himself in these particular circumstances as he was pretending to be. His hair needed washing, but there was plenty of it, even if was a grungy shade of reddish brown. What a shame: I'd had my heart set on his wearing that ridiculous hat as camouflage for baldness.

"What am I doing here?" He wanted to know.

I told him.

"Nancy?" He looked shocked. "You know about us? How?"

"The lady told me."

Now he looked stunned. "Whoa, wait a minute. I don't want any trouble. How come she told you?"

"Because your ex, Ingrid, seemed to have found out about the case of clap you gave her – and was tormenting her with that nasty little fact."

"What the fuck . . ." His face got that unfortunate mottled look. God, he was unattractive. I tried imagining how low Nancy Marcus had to have

been and/or how dim the lighting must have been for her to share her bed with him. “How did Ingrid know about that?” he asked.

“I assume you told her.”

“The fuck I did . . .” He was getting nervous, although it would have been a timesaver to have Russell Crowe here to work the same no-nonsense tactics he used on Ron Silver in *LA Confidential*. I wouldn’t have minded seeing the Prof hanging out of the window by his feet. His ugly head in the toilet bowl, even better. Still, bad boy Barnett was softening up. The atmosphere of the interrogation room does that to everyone, except a psychopath of course, but there are not as many of those as the media make out. We kept the temperature in the room way down or way up, depending on the time of year – physical discomfort amplified whatever was happening to already shaken nerve endings.

Normal people felt the isolation of such a room and unless they were downright stupid, or had never watched any TV, knew damn well that other people were monitoring what they said and how they behaved. Everyone felt guilty about something under these conditions. That’s why we did it the way we did it. Barnett, I could tell, was feeling the pinch. I continued to say nothing, examining a file that had nothing to do with him, but he didn’t know that, so he got even itchier.

“Wait a minute. Are you telling me that you think I killed that bitch because she had found out some stuff – .”

“Oh, do you mean the stuff, as you put it. about you and Nancy Marcus, or about your having sex with an underage girl?”

This time he was really thrown. “Shit,” was all he said. “How do you know about *that*?”

“We know.” I had no intention of telling him about Ingrid’s list. “We’re the police, it’s our job to know. Where were you on Monday night?”

“Shit, that again. I was out of town – .”

“No, that was Friday night, I’m interested in where you were on the night Eve Bishop died.”

“What?” He relaxed some, which didn’t reassure me. “Why the fuck would I murder Eve?”

“I ask the questions here.”

“That’s asking? I have the bruise marks on my wrist.” That failed to get a rise out of me, so he sat back, giving me a petulant look. “I graded some shitty essays that had been sitting around for a while and I was alone.”

“So no one can vouch for you?”

“No, you’ll just have to take my word for it.” Barnett rolled his eyes. He was getting more confident, which was what I wanted. I needed his guard down and a little hubris makes my job a lot easier and a lot of it makes it a

pleasure when I stick the knife in. He leaned forward. “This is such a non-starter, hon – .”

“I’m not your hon, Professor Pazderka.”

I got a smirk. “Whatever, Detective Pimlott. Is that good enough? Why don’t you go out and bully someone else?”

I did a P.A.T.I.E.N.C.E. in my head. Herb paged me “Go for it!” and I was more than ready. “You don’t seem to take this issue with an underage girl very seriously – .”

“Because I didn’t deny it?” He grinned, unexpectedly, and I caught a glimpse of the charm that got the girls. It was only a glimpse though and gone in an instant. “Okay, so you got me. Thing is, I didn’t know Ingrid had the goods on me, but so what if she did? It was a long, long time ago. What makes you think I knew she knew, anyway?”

“Well, it’s a pretty good reason for you to go to her house and make such a ruckus that the police were called.”

He shrugged and started rocking his chair back and forth.

“Stop that,” I told him. “You’re not in your office, or in the classroom.”

I got a lot of eye-rolling but he did as I instructed. “Yeah, well, that wasn’t what the ruckus, as you put it, was about and before you ask, I was drunk and I just got mad at her all over again and before you ask, I’d made a dumb pass at her at a party a couple of days earlier and before you ask – .”

“She told you no, as in absolutely and forever.” Janet now finished for him.

Barnett did an exaggerated take. “Wow, it speaks.” He turned back to me. “Yeah and let’s cut to the chase. I might kill her out of passion, but I sure as hell wouldn’t kill her over a kind of allegation that, for one, she’d have to prove, and two, she’d have one hell of a job doing so. Anyway, I have an alibi for when she got it.”

“The alibi in question said you didn’t get to the lady’s place in Ann Arbor until one in the morning,” Janet told him.

Barnett didn’t seem to care, which legislated for his innocence, damn it. “Whatever, if she says so. I finished off some work and went over and I didn’t think about the time. I didn’t kill Ingrid and I couldn’t be bothered to kill Eve. Anyway, I can guess what would get Ingrid killed.”

“And you have an opinion on that, I suppose?”

“Yeah, I do,” he said, but he was getting moody again. “Slept around like crazy, which has been known to drive people to murder, am I right? She was a bully, once she had you by the balls you were in deep shit and if she got off on using stuff against people – and that’s what you’re saying now – that doesn’t score points, either. Come to think of it, why don’t you go after that

Lee kid? I bet she pushed him around some.”

I pushed my advantage.

“I should do that, because?”

He said nothing.

“Why would she push him Lee Il Kwon around?” I asked again.

Barnett played with the ridiculous studded leather band on his hat.

Honestly, who did he think he was, Roy Rogers? “Because she was ‘doing’ him – happy now?”

I was indeed. I looked at Janet inquiringly. Judges at the Old Bailey do this when they are pretending not to understand a reference made by a witness. Usually it’s the bailiff who has to explain with a straight face that the Beatles were a singing group, or some other cultural reference that everyone knows except the old duffer on the bench. If memory served, Charles Laughton pulled off this bullshit perfectly in *The Paradine Case*.

“Having carnal relations,” Janet explained, keeping a straight face. She got points in the Pro column for pulling off that one.

I turned back to Barnett, who was examining not very clean fingernails. “You didn’t seem privy to this information when we spoke last.”

He looked up. “Privy? Did you say privy? For Christ’s sake, you sound like someone who got her crinoline caught in a door.” The man had plenty of nerve, I’d give him that. “In answer to your question that bitch Ingrid told me when I hit on her one day about a month ago. I said she looked buff, so she told me why and all about Lee. Never missed a chance to get in a cheap shot. She had that kid under her thumb and believe me, Ingrid got off on that. Cross her and his degree would be nothing but a dream – he’d be a personal trainer for life. Maybe he got sick of her jerking his chain.”

There was silence, then: “You knew her very well, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” Barnett told me. He sounded as bitter as the others had when talking about Ingrid, but then again, the subject seemed to encourage that attitude in people. “I’ll tell you one thing for free.,” he continued. “It’s shit being hot for someone you don’t even like.” I gave him some bonus points in the Pro column for admitting that.

Herb paged me again. I pretended to write some notes while I thought of how to approach what the boss wanted me to ask. But the boss had more pressing matters to attend to because his next text was a bombshell – the body of Nancy Marcus has just been found and she, too had been murdered. I showed this message to Janet but I did not share it with Barnett Pazderka. I had to go on.

“You told us during our first interview that you and Ingrid were together two years ago?”

He nodded. “Almost to the day.”

“Well, the autopsy results indicated she had an abortion during that time frame.”

Barnett looked from me to Janet and back to me, the color draining from his face again; the mottled effect was not becoming. “Are you shitting me?” he shook his head vigorously. “That isn’t possible, no, uh, uh. No. She couldn’t have been pregnant, no way, no way.”

He hadn’t known, I was sure of that. The news had hit him too hard.

“So, you didn’t know that, in effect, she had killed your child?”

Barnett looked at me, incredulous. “No, no, no - wait just a fuckin’ minute. You have the wrong end of the stick. That isn’t what’s getting to me.”

“What is, then?” Now it was my turn to be at a loss.

Barnett actually made a drum roll on the table with his hands, then said: “Because, because, because, Ms oh so clever Detective, I had a vasectomy five years ago, that’s why.”

Then who *was* the father of Ingrid’s baby?

Chapter 34

Cameron Drew was sobbing on the stairs, a female uniformed police officer, Sharon Burke, whom I knew slightly, was comforting her. The second shattered child I had encountered in this case. Sharon inclined her head very slightly as assurance that she had things under control. Forensics and uniforms tiptoed up and down the stairs, doing their job as quietly as possible. Occasionally one of them would look at Cameron and shake his or her head. There was the occasional flash of a camera and Cameron's head would jerk up, only to fall into her hands again.

"Girl found her mother's body," Roger told me in a low voice. He had been called immediately as soon as the call came in. "She dialed 911 at 7:45. She'd gotten up, made her breakfast before going to school. When her mom didn't come down to run her there, she went upstairs to look for her. She wasn't there, so went into the study and bingo." He looked around. "This is getting crazier and crazier, Sophie."

Oh, really? "Time of death?"

"*Rigor mortis* had set in, so we're looking at between 12:00 and 4:00 in the morning." He inclined his head toward a study that I had admired the first time I had been at the Drew house. "She's in there."

Nancy lay sprawled on the floor. The belt of her grey cashmere robe had been wound around her neck and used as a garrotte. I could see a white cotton nightdress beneath the drapes of the robe and that made her seem even more heartbreakingly vulnerable. Her face was purple, her tongue protruded sickeningly. Her hands were still at her neck after struggling to free herself.

Her daughter's last memory of her mother had to be that one.

A photographer was taking shots of the ligature. The contents of the filing cabinets were everywhere, papers on the desk were thrown about and her computer had been smashed. The body did not appear to have been abused in any way – at least there was that to be thankful for, but why the change in M.O.? Was this nothing more than a coincidence? Should we be looking for an intruder who panicked? I looked around.

"Anything taken that we know of, Officer Hart?" I asked of a uniform

standing in the doorway. He looked about fifteen.

He shook his head. "No ma'am." *Ma'am?* He *was* fifteen. "Only used this room. Guy must have just got in the house when she came down. We're brushing for prints now."

I thanked him. Was I really trying to convince myself this was nothing more than a robbery gone wrong?

Roger was bending over the body. "Well, now you know who hasn't been going around killing people, huh? Guess you can draw a line though her name on the suspect list."

I'd had the same guilty thought myself, but to hear it out of Roger's mouth made it seem all the more repulsive. "I have a suggestion for who should go next, Roger. Drawing and quartering would be fun to watch."

"Yeah, yeah. A little humor never hurts, Sophie, honey." He lifted Nancy's head, ignoring how I flinched at the 'honey.' "Ah, that explains it." He carefully parted the hair and showed me an abrasion matted with dried blood.

"Explains what?"

"Whoever it was, banged her on the side of the head and stunned her. There's no sign of a struggle, nothing under the fingernails for example. The victim was a big, strong woman. She wouldn't let someone get anything around her neck without fighting back, unless she was unconscious. I figure she came to, which is why her hands are on the belt around her neck. Too late, though."

That answered my question all right. "This is no intruder, Roger. For one thing, if he got her on the side of the head, odds are they were talking. She may have known who did this. If burglars are surprised they get away as quickly as they can. He would have hit her on the head and then made tracks. This one stuck around long enough to kill her."

Janet came into the room before Roger got the chance to either agree or disagree, not that I imagined him inclined toward the latter. Janet stared at the lifeless body of Nancy Marcus. It isn't good for a police officer to cry, but she looked as if her jaw would crack from holding back the tears.

"I checked upstairs," she told me now. The bedclothes are pulled back as if she got out of bed and came downstairs. No sign of the intruder having been up there."

I thought of the daughter who had been asleep up there. "Thank God."

"What do you reckon?" Janet asked.

I couldn't look at Nancy for another minute. "If you need us we're going to talk to Cameron," I told Roger. I turned and walked out of the study, talking over my shoulder to Janet, loping along behind me. "Hazarding a guess, I'd say someone wanted us to think they were looking for something, when all they wanted was to shut her up."

“But she’d already talked to us.”

“Whoever it was didn’t know that.” A young woman from the forensics team walked by and nodded a greeting. I went on with my train of thought. “Someone is desperate to conceal something. It’s in that coded file of Ingrid’s, has to be. Go through it again.”

Janet shook her head. “I read nothing worth killing three people for, Sophie. Puffing up your publishing record, messing around with undergrads – it was that kind of stuff.”

“Then it’s something that isn’t in that file.”

“But the killer might think it is,” Janet muttered.

We reached Cameron and I hunkered down on the step beneath her. “I am so sorry sweetheart,” I said. “Your mother was a lovely lady.”

Cameron looked at me, her hazel eyes red. She looked so like her mother. Guilt washed over me. “Who did this? It’s crazy, she never hurt anyone, ever,” she said.

“I know and we’ll do our best to find who did this.”

“When? When will you find him?”

I looked at Janet. “What makes you think it was a him, Cameron?”

“Because I woke up in the middle of the night, you know how you do.” Janet and I nodded. “I thought I could hear a guy’s voice, you know, talking to my mom. I thought maybe my dad had come home early and I got out of bed. The voices stopped though, so I went back to bed and just fell asleep again. I’m a heavy sleeper. Mom rags on me about how hard it is to get me up in the morning.” She began to cry again. We waited until she had calmed down, some.

So, Nancy had been talking to her killer, which confirmed my suspicions that this was no stranger. “Do you know when you think you heard someone? The time?” I asked hopefully.

“No,” she told me. “It was still dark.”

“Do you think you’d recognize his voice again?”

“No. It was just a guy’s voice. I might even have dreamed it, you know what I mean?”

I did. “When is your dad going to be home?” Poor, poor Gerry Marcus.

Sharon answered for Cameron. “He’s on his way home, we checked. He left Riga about three hours ago and lands in New York. The NYPD will contact him as he gets off the plane and Cameron’s aunt is flying in from San Francisco. She’s airborne already. Several friends and neighbors have called.”

“I’m going over to my best friend’s house. Megan and her mom are coming to get me as soon as you say they can.”

“Call them now,” I told Sharon, inclining my head toward the study.

I didn't want the poor kid seeing her mother's body being taken from the house. Sharon nodded her understanding: a good woman. "There's no need for her to stay here." I stood. "Your father will be home soon, sweetheart," I told Cameron, who nodded and then put her head in her hands, her shoulders beginning to heave again.

We stood under the porch outside the house and I could feel the warmth of the sun against my face. I put on my sunglasses against the glare, aware of the irony of it being such a lovely day, at last. Things were out of hand. Time to get tough and play rough.

"Janet, let's bring some people downtown. Scare a few people, see if we get lucky."

"Who do you want?" Janet asked.

"Get Barnett Pazderka in again. I don't give a toss what he's doing. The more you shake him up, the better. Take a uniform with you, that should make him nervous."

My cell phone rang. Herb said: "Remember what I said at Eve Bishop's about a triple play?"

I did. My stomach sank. "I'm off the case?"

"Nah. That was bullshit. "

He hung up before I got the chance to thank him for the gracious apology.

Chapter 35

Barnett had more to say on the subject of paternity – as Janet and I began a second round of questioning.

“When I got divorced I had two kids already, enough for me. Seen the tuition for independent schools lately, to say nothing of braces times *deux*? I had a vasectomy. So whoever was the father of Ingrid’s kid, it wasn’t me – .” Something dawned on him then, something that clearly infuriated him. “Wouldn’t you know that while she was fucking me, telling me how hot we were together, she was fucking someone else?”

“She got under your skin, didn’t she?”

He shrugged. “I guess. Don’t know why.”

“She was very beautiful.”

I got another shrug. “Seen what walks around campus these days? Just as hot and younger too. Still, there was something about her . . .” His voice faded away and the room was silent for a moment and then he shut his eyes: Barnett Pazderka’s idea of a requiem, perhaps. Then he leaned forward, the rash on his face looking even more livid. “You’ve got your job cut out, haven’t you? When it comes to how many folks had a reason to kill Ingrid Spoto, it’s take-a-number time and you’d be killed in the crush to get into the top ten. But I’m not even in the bottom five, hon, and you know it.”

“Hon” was added just to make me mad.

When I got back to my desk after the second Pazderka interview I found a message from Paul waiting on my cell phone. He had something to show me that he had found among Ingrid’s effects, ones that he’d taken back to the motel. Could we meet later at my convenience? As it happened, I did want to talk to him about a number of things and none of them had to do with our phantom future together. I called back and he answered on the first ring.

“I hoped it would be you.”

It was so good to hear his voice, too good. I reminded myself of my duty.

“We think Ingrid might have been . . . well, goading others with things she’d found out about them.”

“For money? But she didn’t need money, for God sake!”

“No, no. More for sport.” Could I never deliver good news about his sister? “We need to talk as soon as possible. I have a couple of things to do here first.”

We arranged to meet within the hour.

One of the chaps in the detective bureau was sent to get Lee and bring him in. I was convinced we didn’t have the full story here. Barnett had known Ingrid a lot better than almost anyone and I trusted his instincts. Maybe Lee had indeed lost it and killed her – just out of a need to be free of her.

“Let that smartass cool his heels until I get back,” I told Janet. “And bring in Vera again, let’s play the one off against the other. Make sure they see each other. That might stir things up and we’ll get *something* that will get us on track. I don’t trust what either of them was up to when Eve died, to say nothing of the fact that both of them are strong enough to throttle someone – and mean enough to slash a throat open.”

“That’s for sure,” Janet said. She was going through Ingrid’s coded file yet again to see if any colleague listed here was worth pursuing. “I think I’ve gone through this darn thing with a toothcomb and no one on this list could have done this.” That was true. Meanwhile the uniforms had fanned out again to find Mister Baseball Cap, but so far nothing.

“Ingrid must have told someone what she was up to, a secret isn’t a secret until it’s shared,” I added. “Three people are dead over something she knew. Find him – .”

“Or her,” Janet reminded me, thinking of Vera, no doubt.

I left the station and made my way through a group of hungry reporters. One of their number was from Detroit and I wondered if we would get attention from even further away. Three related homicides in a row was newsworthy anywhere, never mind in quiet little West Rapids. A young man from the Flint local TV outlet made my obligation to the public clear to me, but I told him firmly to speak to the Deputy Chief, that I had “No comment.” My competence was called into question but I didn’t take it personally. Well, only a little.

I left the station to meet with Paul.

Chapter 36

He was waiting for me at the Starbucks on the corner of Delacroix, near the station house. We bought ourselves skinny, decaf cappuccinos, the skinny in deference to my tastes, and headed for the campus – that was directly across the street. I was wearing a grey wool pantsuit and a black tee, but I'd forgotten to put on any jewelry. I looked exactly like someone who had dressed in a hurry. Paul had shed his raincoat and wore the tweed jacket, the brown cords and a grey oxford-cloth shirt. He was carrying a manila envelope that he handed to me as we walked along.

“I found some photos at Ingrid’s that might be of some use. I have no idea how, but you may as well have them.”

I thanked him and, putting the envelope in the outside pouch of my bag, said, “It’s turned into a nice day, let’s walk.” Then I told him that Nancy Marcus had been murdered.

We headed for the river, then strolled along the banks of the Delacroix. I was conscious of him beside me, of his presence, one that disturbed me in a way that was so pleasurable and exciting. A group of students were feeding the ducks. The sun was shining on the water, the grass was getting greener and the trees were working hard on developing some foliage.

“Spring always seems late to me here,” I said.

“Very far north.”

I nodded. “I mean it’s late when compared to home.”

He looked puzzled and I felt ridiculous. “I meant when compared to England, of course.”

Paul smiled. “I got confused by your saying ‘home’ and ‘England’ in the same breath.” He linked a little finger with mine. It felt sexier than if he had thrown me on the grass verge and covered me with kisses. “Isn’t West Rapids home now?”

I caught my breath. “Most of the time, but I miss . . .” my voice trailed off.

Paul asked gently, “Tell me.”

I made myself lighten up. “Oh, it’s nothing, honestly. I have

everything I need here in terms of a home, things that I would never have in London. People here generally have their heads screwed on straight, but there's something about London . . ." I thought how best to put it. "I miss all of the people. So many of them and so different from me in terms of who they are, their religion, their color, what they do, where they come from, what they want. They don't notice that they aren't like me and I feel the same way. Live and let live. Kept me grounded. I could sit in a café and not know anyone, yet feel so at home, so grounded, as if I belonged. Here, I can be in a room filled with people I know and feel as if I've just landed from Pluto."

Paul laughed. "Yes, I know what you mean."

"Here, I feel like an outsider all the time. The pressure not to stray from the perceived way things *should* be done and the resentment toward anyone who does stray. It masquerades under buzz phrases like "family values" but the real value is conformity. I mean the townies hide behind one view of life, the academics another, but both think they are right, right, right and grind their teeth over the others for not coming into line. It doesn't bother me all the time, but enough that it gets under my skin." I stopped, feeling guilty. "What a mouthful – where did that come from? Do I sound horrible?"

"Yes, a bit." He laughed at what must have been the stricken look on my face. "I understand, though. You're saying what people from big cities have said about small towns since Moses. You should hear what small town people say about big cities."

I nodded. "I have and it isn't pretty. It's the smugness level that hits hardest."

"You have a point." Paul paused and looked at me, head to one side. "You came here because of your husband, didn't you?"

I couldn't look at him. "It was his home. Gavin."

"And even though he isn't around anymore, you aren't ready to leave?"

I sipped my cappuccino. "I don't know."

"Well, that's pretty decisive," he said with a raised eyebrow.

I smiled. "Crunch is coming. Contract is up for renewal."

"So you said before."

Oh the hell with it. "Gavin's dead, you know. My husband."

Paul nodded. "I thought it was something like that. An accident?"

I wavered for a beat or two, then realized how foolish that was. "He had an existing heart condition when we met and we hoped it would . . ." What had Gavin and I hoped? That it would go away. That love would conquer all and he'd be fixed, not broken anymore. "Anyway, he died three years ago."

We found a bench and sat with the sun warming us. I went on, the floodgates opening. "People think it's romantic to be widowed when you're

young, but it isn't. You haven't had time to get bored, or exasperated, or used to his stories, his body, or his habits. You haven't had time to become jaded. The novelty of being with someone new is still there, so the sense of loneliness when they are gone is acute. Everything you want, all the things that make you happy disappear while you are just exploring one another. I don't know whether I stay here because it's become my home now, or if I'm not ready to give up the memories. I have to get the hang of a new life, but the knack doesn't come easily."

"I don't think it should," he told me.

We were both silent. Paul handed me his handkerchief as tears poured down my face. A couple of people stared in curiosity as they walked by, but that was it. It felt good to let some of it out, instead of hugging it inside, as if sharing what I felt was a betrayal of my grief, of being disloyal to Gavin's memory. It wasn't, I knew that now. It was as much a relief as throwing off a stone collar.

As to Paul Spoto, sitting quietly beside me now, as long as I lived I would be grateful that he did not take my hand, or stroke my back – he did nothing but sit there and respect my unhappiness. It's a rare gift to give a person their privacy while still being there for them and managing to be very appealing as you did so. My feelings were ambivalent at that moment. In spades.

But after a few moments of quiet tears, I could no longer enjoy the luxury of thinking about myself. I had some questions and they needed answering before we had another corpse on our hands. I blew my nose into Paul's handkerchief – very romantic.

"You were shocked about the files she kept on her colleagues, weren't you?"

Paul nodded. "Yes and yet it reminded me of when she was a kid. You said they were in code?"

"Yes."

He shook his head. "She liked things like that. A fiend for puzzles and I remember finding a diary of hers when she was away at school and that was in code." He smiled. "I got hell for trying to read it, as I remember. Quite right. It had something to with the letters from the first part of the alphabet – ."

"Being reversed with the second?" God, where had he been when we needed him?

"Yes. A secretive girl."

"Yes, well she had secrets worth keeping." I wouldn't have minded his sharing some of those he knew about with me, but he didn't and I didn't push it.

We were both quiet, watching the river. The sun went behind a cloud

and it suddenly felt much colder – more pre-winter than post-summer. I stood.

“I have to go. I’m interrogating someone. Janet is expecting me.” I thought for a minute and decided to tell him who was in the hot seat. “We’re talking to Lee Il Kwon, one of your sister’s lovers. Her grad student as well.” I sighed and went for broke. “Another lover as well, Vera Ziegler.”

He didn’t seem surprised; perhaps he was becoming inured to shock when it came to Ingrid. “So, her colleagues were not the only ones with secrets?” was all he had to say. We started walking back the way we had come. We walked up the path that brought us to Delacroix Avenue. I looked up at him. “Do I sound crazy? Perhaps this case has finally driven me round the bend from sheer desperation.”

“No.” We stopped and he put his hands in his pockets. He smiled. “Look, I know how busy you are but can I tempt you with dinner? We both have to eat and to be honest I’m seriously spooked by this third murder.”

“You’re not the only one,” I said with feeling.

He nodded. “I met with a real estate agent today about the house,” he continued. “Doesn’t look good for a quick sale, which isn’t really surprising is it?”

So I had assumed. “Predictable,” was all I said, though.

“I suppose.” He watched two young men jog by. “I’ve arranged for her body to be taken to Chicago on Friday. I meet with an auctioneer tomorrow. Contents of the house.” I could see his hands clenching in his pockets.

Then he would leave. “Thank you for holding my hand through my whatever it was I went through this afternoon,” I said awkwardly.

“I would say it was my pleasure but that doesn’t sound right, does it?” He smiled. “Feeling better?”

“Yes, very much so.” I smiled back. “Dinner would be nice, but can we make it for tomorrow? I have to catch my breath tonight. Can I call you to confirm? About 6:00?”

He nodded. “I’ll look forward to it.”

“So will I,” I said, hoping I was right, I started to walk off.

“Oh, Sophie?”

I turned. “What?”

“Who played the eponymous goddess in the 1958 film based covertly if clumsily on the life of Marilyn Monroe?”

“Kim Stanley,” I shot back and laughed for the first time in many a moment.

Chapter 37

I watched Lee Il Kwon across the table. He was not intimidated. If he and Barnett were anything to go by, Ingrid had liked her men to be just a little bit on the dangerous side, cool stud types. Or, who thought they were – until she got into their heads.

I began asking him to account for his whereabouts on certain critical occasions.

He shrugged. “This about Eve Bishop? Why would I kill her? Why would anyone bother? Hanging around Ingrid all the time. She needed a life.”

A generous eulogy. “Could you answer the question?”

“Home, putting the finishing touches on the proposal for my PhD thesis.” He was inspecting a hangnail. “Have to find a new chair for my committee though, and I have to figure out what to do about that. Back to the drawing board, huh?”

I knew bravura when I saw it. Herb paged, “Ask him about the money.”

“Did you know Ingrid Spoto had a lot of money?”

He looked interested. “No kidding? How much?”

I told him.

“Really?” He shrugged, “That’ll come in handy for someone.”

Janet suggested: “People have been known to kill for money.”

“Not guys like me.” He ran a hand through that gleaming hair. The accompanying grin could only be described as shit-eating.

“Oh, really?” Janet said, so I guessed Lee’s attitude had irritated her as much as it had me. “Strikes me a guy like you would do anything for money.”

“Prove it,” Lee told her and leaned back, the smirk gone. “Prove it. But you can’t because you have nothing on me. Nothing, zilch, *nada, rien*. You’re panicked because three women are dead, so you’re wetting yourself, hoping for somebody to pop out of a box and get you off the hook. Jesus. You aren’t just dealing with some stud flexing his muscles for a living. I have a brain and I know how to use it. I have a lawyer too and I know how easy it is to sue the cops for harassment. Then we’d be talking money that would get *me*

excited.”

Janet said nothing, while I gave Lee points in the Pro column for not letting himself be pushed around and a handful in the Con column because we’d been doing the unsuccessful pushing. I brought the proceedings back under control by asking if he know anything about a man with a baseball cap?

“No and are you really chasing a cliché like that? God, talk about desperate.”

That was pretty much the way things went for the next half hour, Janet and I getting the worst of it, Herb getting sore fingers from paging queries that got us nowhere. and Lee Il Kwon becoming more confident by the moment. I’d had enough, since I didn’t see him as a credible suspect, anyway. He *could* have demanded money from Ingrid for keeping his mouth shut, but I doubted he had and there was no credible reason for his killing Eve. Lee was right – he was smart and he knew lots of ways of getting money from women that had nothing to do with killing them.

We concluded the interview and stood.

“Oh, I can go, huh?” Lee said and smiled. What white teeth he had and what fun it would have been to rearrange them.

We all tramped out of the interrogation room and there was Vera, wearing a red suit and stiletto heels. She loomed large and was breathing fire. Two uniformed officers stood on either side of her and even Herb, hovering behind her, looked cautious. As it turned out they all had every reason to.

Without missing a beat, she hurled herself at Lee who was strutting in front of Janet and me. “You shit!” She screamed and Janet and I involuntarily stepped back. “Were you and that bitch laughing at me behind my back?”

Lee knew better, but testosterone got the better of him. “You bet we laughed, until we fucking wet ourselves, diesel dyke!” he yelled back. A mistake. Vera hit him hard across the face even as she kneed him in the balls – the woman was like lightning. He went down like a house of cards, arms flailing against Vera, who had a firm grasp on his hair. “Get this crazy cunt off me!” he screamed as she straddled him.

Well, at least my curiosity about the consequences of a meeting between Ingrid’s lovers was satisfied. The uniforms tried to intervene, but Vera got one of them with a right to the side of his head and the other folded with a left to the stomach. They fell back, stunned and she returned to pummeling Lee, who landed a right to her left eye that served only to infuriate her more. They rolled around on the floor, while the rest of us watched, shocked.

Herb stepped forward and tried pulling Vera away, but she was kicked him in the ankle and, without missing a beat, she thumped Lee in the left kidney, even as she hit him on the right eye. The woman deserved to be on the US Olympic boxing team.

“Holy shit!” Lee screamed in pain, retaliating by biting her in the shin, getting a return howl of agony as he drew blood. Seeing his advantage, Lee ripped open Vera’s jacket. I would have worn a more substantial tank top myself – it was April, a volatile month in terms of temperature – but I guess a hot-blooded type like Vera didn’t need insulation. The uniforms’ eyes nearly popped out of their heads, even as a desperate Lee pulled a handful of her hair out by the roots.

“You fuck!” Vera screamed, drawing her fist back and hitting Lee in the face. Blood sprayed out of his mouth and chips of porcelain landed at my feet: yuck and double yuck. Lee’s front teeth were history. I remembered my speculations of moments before; heavens – but this case kept throwing up shock after shock.

“Those are my veneers, you crazy bitch dike,” Lee said as well as he could. “I’m suing you and the fucking cops.”

“No, you won’t,” Herb said, pulling them apart, limping slightly. He pulled Vera to her feet as if she was a stick doll, his hand gripping her upper arm. “Get him on his feet,” he told the uniforms. They managed to do so, but only just. Both cops looked pale – to say nothing of their being terrified by the last minute or two of carnage.

Janet moved over to help them as the combatants continued screaming abuse at one another, their free limbs still lashing out wildly. I kept out of the way. There are times when things are best left to men. Many in the sisterhood, including Vera, obviously, would disapprove of my bias but to hell with them. I would have been massacred in such a *mêlée*, my teeth were still my own and I planned on retaining them for the foreseeable future. I would sacrifice quite a bit to find our killer, but not bits and pieces of my own physiognomy. Lee’s dental loss was the last thing that was going to keep me from my sleep.

Finally, they were separated, breathing as heavily as a couple of bulls and both the worse for wear. “Get a doctor in here,” Herb said wearily and one of the uniforms got on the phone to do just that. Lee sat on a bench, glaring at everyone, a handful of rapidly reddening paper towels held to his mouth. Janet frogmarched Vera, still struggling and cursing, into the interrogation room, Herb behind them. The buttons were gone from the suit jacket, a tuft of hair was torn out from above her right ear and her eye was beginning to turn the same nasty colors as Lee’s, but otherwise he had got the worst of the exchange.

I sat next to Lee, a box of Kleenex in my hand. “We can drive you to your dentist.”

He nodded. He was shaken, badly. He gingerly took the paper towels away from his mouth, touched his swollen lips with a careful finger and flinched. I have to say he was a mess. I would say he was feeling about as happy with his dental problems as poor Dustin Hoffman in *Marathon Man*. I

would have said in Lee's case the damage was fixable, as soon as his lips went down and the teeth were fixed he'd be okay – while Dustin had even bigger problems than toothache. Lee's ego however, might have sustained an injury not so easily cauterized, but who cared?

“Ingrid had a secret thing going on,” he lisped. “Beside me and Vera, that is.”

“Do you know who?” Please God, let it be the man in the baseball cap. He looked sullen.

“Well, do you?”

“Yeah, the guy you asked about, with the baseball cap.”

I thanked God, then cursed Lee Il Kwon for not telling us this before another person had died.

Chapter 38

I felt like dealing the death knell to the rest of Lee Il Kwon's veneers, but compensated myself by giving him many, many points in the Con column.

"Do you know who this person might be?"

"Lawrence Saxton. Doctor, married to Mireille Prudhomme."

Oh, my. The perfect partnership had a chink. "Exactly what do you know? You'd better tell me everything and I want the truth, or it'll be one hell of a long time before you see a dentist." I was as much shocked as I was relieved to discover the identity of the elusive lover. The ramifications were something to ponder, as well. For example: how would Professor Prudhomme react if she knew about Ingrid and her husband?

Lee Il Kwon, however, was still was a long way from losing points in the Con column – to say nothing of his being light years from scoring points in the Pro. The fool might have saved a life, or even two if he'd spilled the beans, or he might not. Now, though, we would never know. "Tell me everything and tell me now," I demanded.

He shrugged, which in his condition wasn't easy. "He was the one got her into leather, I'm fairly sure. One time she was taking a shower and I checked the closet and the drawers in her bedroom." No surprises there. That was what happened to withholding types like Ingrid – they turned other people into sneaks. "Anyway I knew I wasn't into that kind of stuff and I didn't think Vera was either. Ingrid told me that Vera was really romantic and old-fashioned, know what I mean?"

I was not so sure, having seen the lady in action, but this was not the time to debate the issue. "Get to the point. How do you know it was Lawrence Saxton?"

"One night I was going to surprise Ingrid, but as I drove past the house to see if she was there I saw him going inside. I was the one that got the surprise that night." He gave a laugh that could be described as mirthless, except the injuries to his mouth rather muddled the delivery.

"How did you see his face?"

"The light was on in the entranceway and he took off his cap and I

recognized him.”

“How?”

“I’d seen him around with Mireille P., that’s how.”

“How do you know he wasn’t just leaving off something – .”

“Because Ingrid grabbed his crotch and there was some tongue, that’s how.”

I believed him, but I wasn’t happy with Lee by a long shot.

“You’ll be lucky if I don’t find some way of hitting you with charges for concealing vital information.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, whatever,” he said, but Lee was a broken man. If I’d known earlier that all I had to do was tweak his vanity to get him under my thumb, there’s no way of guessing what I might, or might not have done. Police stations are stressful places and this makes people more prone to having accidents on the premises. Now, Lee repeated his threat to sue Vera.

“No you won’t.” I handed him a handful of Kleenex. I held a wastebasket for him to dispose of the blood soaked mess in his hand. “You asked for it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He mopped away at his mouth, now swollen to comical proportions. He didn’t sound like anyone worth taking seriously either. The effect was of someone shot up with Novocain.

“You and Ingrid were getting off on Vera not knowing about the two of you, weren’t you? Like two nasty kids in the playground taking the piss out of a third. Did you and Ingrid exchange glances and snickers while she and Vera worked out together – because you knew something Vera didn’t know?”

His silence was all the answer I needed.

Surely you aren’t surprised that she went for you when she found out?”

“How did she find out?”

“I told her.”

He looked as angry as his messed-up face could manage. “What the fuck for?”

I ignored that question. “You made a fool of her, both of you. Ingrid is dead so that left you to face the music.”

Lee didn’t disagree. “Okay, but if she could do what she did to me in front of a handful of cops, does that give you an idea of what she might have done to Ingrid if she’d found her alone?”

It did indeed and we had one or two more pieces of the puzzle. Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble – Ingrid Spoto had been like one of the witches in *Macbeth*. No, make that all three witches rolled into one. Now though, it was time to throw Lee a bone.

“I don’t deny Vera is violent – how could I after today’s performance?”

We'll talk to her and find out if she has anything of substance to add to this mishmash. If it means anything, I feel responsible for having her outside the interrogation room as you were coming out. Will you be okay? I hope your teeth don't cost too much to fix."

He tried smiling and got a couple of points in the Pro column for that. "Shit, I'll just sue Vera," he repeated.

I stood. "If it means anything I don't believe even for a moment that you killed Ingrid, or anyone else."

He didn't look all that thrilled. "Well thanks for that." He touched his eye and winced and then massaged his sore kidney. Ever the gentleman, he resisted what must have been an overwhelming urge to test the damage to his impressive package. My guess was nothing permanent. "Can you ask someone to drive me to my dentist, now?" he asked.

I shook my head. "You have to be checked over by our doctor before we can let you leave. Legal reasons, liability, etcetera. He'll be here any minute."

He nodded. "Want me to tell you something really weird?"

"What?" I asked warily. I'd had more than my share of such stuff over the last few days.

"I miss Ingrid, I really miss her."

Yes, that *was* weird, all right. I had rarely encountered a victim so unmourned. "She was part of your life, you should be missing her," I told him, not that I thought he would be doing so for long. He looked at me and nodded, but said nothing.

My thoughts did not linger on Lee Il Kwon's doubtful choice of love object, however. I wanted badly to touch base with Lawrence Saxton, he of the leather fetish. I spared a thought for his wife again. Did she know about his off-beat tastes and if so, how far would Mireille Prudhomme go to protect her marriage, to say nothing of her ambitions? She was smart enough to know that it was only be a matter of time before her perv hubby would be spotted visiting another woman on the sly in the very neighborhood where they lived. When he was actually identified and the subject of gossip, there would go her dreams and schemes. This was a small town and news travelled fast. Yes, I also wanted to speak with the dazzling Mireille again and the sooner the better. That would be after I spoke to her husband and found out whether or not he had told Ingrid Spoto about Nancy's case of the clap.

I was reasonably sure we finally had the right dots to join up.

Meanwhile Herb had gotten nowhere with Vera Ziegler, because there was nowhere to go.

"Had to let her go. Said she could go after the doc had seen her. She claims the same alibi for the night of Eve Bishop's murder, as for Nancy and

Ingrid's. A cast of thousands saw her around the club, blah, blah, blah. The truth is I don't see her motive for killing any of them, but I don't pretend to know everything about the way Vera's mind works." He shuddered and I didn't blame him. "It works in a creepy way, though, I'll tell you that."

I told him that Lee had refused to press charges. "Agreed he had it coming."

"Yeah," He said with feeling. "He sure did, Vera made that more than clear."

"My ears are still ringing," he told me. "The doc insisted Vera have a tetanus shot and that got her worked up all over again. Wanted the rabies series as well, but we talked her out of it. She's a piece of work all right, but she isn't our piece of work. She's very cut up about Ingrid."

"I'll have Janet check those alibis," I suggested, but my heart wasn't in it. On the other hand we had a real lead in the gentleman we were on our way to see, so things were looking up. Not very far up, that is, but when you've been down as long as we had any lead is worth following – as Herb made clear before we left the station house.

He was as pissed off as I had ever seen him.

"When I said it might be useful to get Vera Ziegler and Lee Il Kwon together, it didn't mean in a free-for-all. All we learned was that they hate each other and that was no surprise. I don't like suspects getting into it on my turf," he wound down finally, after chewing us out for several minutes without drawing breath. "That was craziness, pure bullshit. I just hope to God the press didn't get hold of what happened. We look bad enough without looking like buffoons who can't stop a bust up in our station house."

Who could argue that point? I didn't bother, just told him about Lawrence Saxton.

Then I offered a thesis. "Perhaps she used something he told her to blackmail someone. They were having a strange-on-strange affair. He's a doctor, so who better to cut out the tongue of a snitch?"

"I like it and I'm coming with you," Herb said. "Show him we're bringing out the heavy artillery."

That was for sure.

Chapter 39

Now, we were on our way to Dr. Lawrence Saxton's office in Saint Joseph's Hospital, Janet behind the wheel. I had gotten out of the way as Vera limped from the station house, a bandage over the bite on her shin.

We sat cooling our heels in Dr. Saxton's outer office as he finished a consultation, 5:30 approaching, Herb coming to a boil. The nurse-receptionist showed us into his office after fifteen minutes. She was duly reverential – to her boss, not to us, of course.

We did the handshaking routine. Lawrence Saxton had clean, dry palms and the kind of firm grip that instills confidence in patients. As he eased himself gracefully into a fine brown leather chair, behind an even finer oak desk, I had a chance to look him over and decided he was a more than fitting consort for the queen of the social scene, Mireille Prudhomme.

Lawrence Saxton, MD, was tall and rugged, with an All-American boy face and thick, wavy hair, now with more silver than its original blond. There was a time when Doug McClure could have played him. No doubt he worked out some, but I would have said he was more the tennis and golf type than someone who hung out at the gym. He was well maintained: the teeth and complexion were those of man who ate carefully, went to the dentist three or four times a year and got enough sleep. The where and when of the latter was what concerned me.

The man had as much charm as his wife. What a bright, attractive and successful couple – no wonder they were so successful socially. We chatted for a moment or two and, of course, he recognized Janet. After what was becoming the customary nonsense between my associate and her fan base, Doc Saxton turned his attentions to me, with warmth and interest. He wanted me to know what a fine little island I came from, presumably so that I wouldn't feel left out. After three or four minutes of such froth, it was time to send up the balloon.

“Dr. Saxton, I believe you knew Ingrid Spoto?” Janet asked.

He got that solemn expression on his face that doctors must practice

in front of a mirror, then nodded a head covered by that expensively trimmed, wavy silver hair. I guessed he and his wife shared the same snipper. I was beginning to recognize Boris' work. "Yes, terrible thing, terrible. She had dinner at our house the night before her death."

"So we understand from your wife." There was a flash of something in his eyes when I told him that, but nothing I could read. "You knew Eve as well?"

"Yes, my wife's colleague." He shook his head. "Tragic. So terrible."

"And another colleague of your wife's, Nancy Marcus? She's one of your patients as well, am I correct?"

He looked surprised, then recovered, quickly. We were treated to another dignified nod. He sat back in his brown leather chair and made a steeple of his hands. "Yes, but we both know it's unethical to discuss a patient."

It was my turn to nod. I didn't know if I looked as dignified as Lawrence Saxton as I did so, but I didn't care, either. I went for gold. "Yes we know that, so perhaps you can explain why you did exactly that with Ingrid Spoto? A lady you were much, much closer to than any of the other guests at your home the night she died – if my information is correct? As in carnally closer?"

Lawrence Saxton lost his color slightly, stood, swaying slightly and grasping the edge of his desk to steady himself. His eyes sank into his skull and he aged about a decade. It didn't look that bad on him, though.

"How do you know about Ingrid and me?"

Good, he wasn't going to waste our time with blather or denial over having blabbed about a patient to an outsider. "We know about the affair, that's enough for you to know."

"We know the *exact* nature, as in this or that piece of bondage gear, in this relationship as well," Herb told him – and the man sank back into that fancy chair, one that was not unlike Barnett's, come to think of it. I judged that to be about all the two men had in common – other than Ingrid Spoto, of course.

Lawrence Saxton rubbed his face with his hands, but emerged a moment or two later looking none the worse for wear. "Does my wife know? Well, does she?"

"Not to our knowledge," Herb told him. "That's not the issue that interests us. We need to know when you last saw Ingrid and we're talking alibi, Doctor."

"Probably just before she died, so why beat around the bush?" He was getting a grip on himself now that he thought he was home free with the wife. "An hour or so, and, before you ask, I didn't do it. Ingrid and I understood

each other, things were perfect between us.”

Herb did not even dignify that. “Weren’t you giving a dinner party on the evening of her death? Where Ingrid was a guest?”

“Yes, and as she left, we made arrangements to see one another later in the evening.” With his wife chatting to his other guests? This was a man with bucketsful of style. “I told Mireille I had a couple of patients to check on and she should go to bed – because of our early start for Ann Arbor the next day.”

Had his wife believed him? “When did you leave Ingrid’s?”

“A few minutes past 12:00. Only took five minutes to walk home.”

That I already knew. “Did you see anyone as you left the house? A parked car, for example?”

He shook his head. “No, and I was vigilant about such things, of course.”

I believed that. “Can your wife corroborate your estimated time of arrival back at home?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Since we’re on the subject, I know exactly where you are going with this line of questioning. Just so you won’t waste any of our time, I had an emergency surgery last night that lasted for several hours. That covers me for Nancy’s death, am I right?” He was in control again; the color was back in his cheeks and the twinkle in his eye had been restored more than it deserved to be.

“Depends what the autopsy confirms about the time of death.” That deflated him some, but not enough. I’d reckoned he’d come up with some kind of alibi. I marvelled, cynically, how fresh and full of energy he seemed to be for someone who had not only been up all night, but had lost his lover and two other people he knew by violent means in as many days. Talk about resiliency. Good at prioritizing, too. He continued, now sure as sure can be of himself and our knowledge of his affair now only a blip on the radar. “The evening of Eve’s death I was at home, nursing the beginnings of a cold.”

Probably caught by skulking around in the dead of night. I said, “Let’s get back to why you don’t know if your wife can corroborate your coming home on the night of Ingrid’s death. Why not? Didn’t she notice you coming to bed?”

He picked at something invisible on his desk. “We don’t share a bedroom.” He looked up. “We don’t have that kind of a relationship.”

No, it was more of a partnership than a relationship and I was willing to bet someone knew that besides the good doctor, his lady wife and, without a doubt, the dead blonde without a tongue. “Did your wife know the nature of your relationship with Ingrid Spoto?”

“The ‘nature of the relationship?’” he repeated, mocking me. My, my,

he was using up his ration of goodwill; there went a handful of Con points.

“We both know, Detective Pimms.”

“Pimlott,” I corrected him.

Saxton couldn’t have cared less what my name was. “My marital bed or lack of it, is no concern of yours. None. We both know it. Unless you can prove my involvement in any of these deaths, either by forensic evidence, or a reliable witness, then I suggest you get out of my office – otherwise my attorney will be contacting your superiors.”

Who cared? Herb leaned forward. “*We* decide when we leave, not you Dr. Saxton. That is, unless you want to leave this office in handcuffs? Take a trip to the station house?” Herb leaned back, hands across his stomach.

I put my two cents in. “The station house, where I have a feeling the press just might be covering the side entrance? I suggest you tell us about your last meeting with Ingrid Spoto. Then and only then will we leave as if this is nothing more than a routine visit and you can go home to the missus.”

Chapter 40

As Herb continued the interrogation I couldn't help reviewing the scene— as it might have played out that night. Lawrence was in the hallway with Ingrid and helping her into her coat, a dowdy thing, he noticed, in a nondescript brown accompanied by a cheap silk scarf with a paisley pattern in blue and yellow. It and the coat looked ghastly together. He had a fleeting thought that made him smile, of suggesting Mireille do something about Ingrid's dress sense. Other than the things *he* chose for her to wear, that was. Now though, he took a huge chance, kissing her furtively on the neck as she put a hand behind her and slipped it into his slacks. He couldn't believe how hot she got him.

“Later? Can I come over?” he murmured.

She nodded. “What shall I wear?”

“The leather thing? The corset and the boots?”

“Done!” Ingrid said and smiled as she adjusted her scarf around her neck.

He opened the door and they said loud goodbyes. “Around 11:00,” he whispered and watched her go down the walkway. He imagined he was hurting her and was aroused immediately. She liked being hurt, he liked hurting – they were perfectly matched.

He went back into the sitting room where a conversation was going on about some dunderhead on the Fox network, whom the assembled liberals found especially ridiculous. He stood behind his wife, putting his hands lightly on her shoulders and she in turn rested her hands on his. Lawrence Saxton knew what a fine picture he and Mireille made as a couple. If only people knew this was an alliance, not a marriage. That she wouldn't let him touch her after the first few times – when she had been almost hysterical at what he demanded in bed. Not that he wanted to touch her now, now that he had Ingrid.

He checked his watch, with skill enough not to let the others see. He could kick this bunch out by 10:30: patients to see, early start. People believe anything doctors tell them, because they held the key to everything – or so everyone thought. Like high priests. He loved that, loved being listened to.

Only one more hour of this bunch and he was out of here . . .

“Truth is, straight sex bores me. Hooked for years on getting rough, very rough,” he told Ingrid sometime later, as he thrust into her. “I managed to get the occasional nurse to cooperate, always thought they’d end up as Mrs. Saxton. Never happened, but they said nothing. Doctors have the power. Those gals know the score. Now I have you, though.”

“Yes,” she gasped. “You surely do, baby.”

He could not get over how someone so beautiful, so bright, was so up for anything when it came to sex. She liked being hurt and she liked being hurt wearing leather. The first time she’d put the stuff on for him, Ingrid had stood in front of the mirror and he watched her get as hot for herself, as he was for her.

What if he’d met her before marrying Mireille? No, Ingrid was not safe, predictable, she liked playing too close to the boundaries. He didn’t, by a long shot. His kicks came from juggling both lives and not giving his all to either. He knew there were others too – that Ingrid needed others, liked playing them off one against the other. It was catnip to her. That was okay when she was a lover, but it would never do for his wife to behave like that, to risk exposing him to ridicule.

He went to the bathroom and stripped off the condom and flushed it away. No worries when you took precautions. No pregnancies, no abortions, no STD’s, no chance for blackmail. Ingrid turned over as he came back into the room. The corset had chafed against her skin. He liked that she didn’t take it off in spite of that, because she knew that would make him angry. Sometimes, she made him angry so that he’d punish her. They both understood what she was doing, both got off on that.

“How long have we been together?” he asked her, standing, hands on his hips.

“Three months,” she murmured, eyes closed.

“Strange, how it just happened, isn’t it?”

Ingrid agreed. “Yes,” then laughed out loud: a derisive sound. “I wonder what Charles would think.”

“Pass out, especially if he knew it had started at that party he gave for my birthday,” Lawrence finished, laughing.

“Wonder what Mireille would say?” Ingrid gave a slight smile. “She doesn’t like me all that much.”

Lawrence shook his head. “No, but by and large she would be worried about people finding out, more than by what we’ve been doing.”

They both laughed. “We aren’t nice, are we?” Ingrid said, reaching for him.

“No,” he agreed. “That’s why we work.” He kissed her, hard,

wrapping his hands in her hair. God, he loved her hair. “No one knows about me, do they?” he asked now.

Ingrid smiled. “No, are you crazy? I can’t afford anything like this getting around. Know why I’m with you? I mean apart from your turning me on to this kind of shit.” She pointed to the leather corset.

“What?” God, he got off on her. Ingrid was so damn sexy.

“You’re as tough as I am. We’re a matched set. I can’t twist you around my little finger, like I can with the rest of them. You take over and that’s about as sexy as it gets for me.”

Lawrence felt on fire. That was exactly the way he wanted to be with a woman. He wanted to dominate his equal and Ingrid gave him that gift.

Now she looked up at him. “What do you want me to do?” Her voice was low, smoky.

“You know what.”

She smiled, licked her lips. God, he loved her mouth .

Fifteen minutes later, he hurried down the walk from Ingrid’s house – after checking the street was empty. It was so cold now that he could see his breath. He turned quickly and caught a glimpse of Ingrid in the crack of the opened door, the white bathrobe wrapped around her. He thought about what she wore underneath and had to use every ounce of control not to run back, to fuck her again. He checked his watch. Nearly midnight already, he had to get home.

God, he was crazy about Ingrid. She did everything he wanted and she loved it. Telling her what she’d wanted to know about some of his patients had been a small price to pay. and what harm could it do, anyway?

My mind returned to the questioning of Lawrence Saxton, who now sat back and blinked a couple of times.

“When I left at just before midnight, she was alive, very much so,” he said, confidence restored. “I had no reason to kill Ingrid, believe me. We were good together. I shouldn’t have told her about Nancy.”

“So you did tell her?”

“It was pillow-talk, nothing more than that.”

Pillow talk? How dare he. “Did you know that Ingrid used what you had told her?”

“What for? Why?” he said, but he looked shaken.

I shook my head. “No, no, no. You gave her the ammunition she needed. Ingrid liked finding out things about people. The things they were ashamed of, embarrassed by, things that could affect their relationships, even their careers. Then she stuck it to them, to see them twist in the wind.”

He licked his lips. I could well imagine his mouth had gone dry. “Why? . . .”

“Because she was a sadist and you have every reason to know,” Herb supplied.

Lawrence Saxton said nothing – he just looked what the English refer to as sick as a parrot. If he could have moulted, he would have.

“She had a file in her computer with all the dirt and we found it,” I told him.

He stared at me. then leaned forward. “Did she have anything on Mireille? Anything that could have caused any trouble for us, I mean?”

Talk about cutting to the chase – the only thing that concerned him for more than ten seconds was whether or not Ingrid Spoto had anything on his wife that, by extension, could harm him. Lawrence Saxton as the center of every drama – what a despicable prick.

“The only thing she had on your wife was that she was married to a philanderer with a taste for the offbeat,” Janet said. “But there was nothing about Professor Prudhomme, so you’re both in the clear so far.”

“Both? So far?” That got to the Doc some.

“Well, she’s your alibi, right? And when it comes to that, who can confirm where you were the night Eve Bishop died?”

He seemed more confident then. “I told you I was at home. I had a slight cold.”

“Well, we can find out about both nights from your wife, right?”

Oh my, oh my, that got him by the soft and curlsies. “How much will you tell her?”

“Only as much as we need to determine you’re in the clear.” Herb wasn’t smiling.

Lawrence Saxton started tapping the desk with a Mont Blanc pen. “I trust you’ll be discreet?”

“We’ll take a page out of your book, Doctor.” Herb stood, put his hands on the desk and leaned in. His large body brought his face very close to Lawrence Saxton’s. “I’m betting you’re in the clear, because truth is I believe you when you say you and Ingrid Spoto had a great thing going. You had no reason to kill the golden goose, to say nothing of the fact that it was a messy kill – .” Saxton went pale.

I took up the cudgel. “And even the most loyal wife can’t overlook a husband coming home in the early hours chirping ‘I’m home dear,’ if he’s covered with another woman’s blood, brain tissue and bone chips or with a severed tongue in his pocket – .”

“Tongue?”

“Then again, you could be lying about how cool everything was between you.”

“Of course it was – .”

“So you say. But Ingrid might have given you the thumbs down and you got angry. You don’t share a room, so how would your wife know what condition you were in when you got home?”

Lawrence Saxton’s knuckles were as white as his face now. “You’re talking about someone I cared for – .”

“Yeah?” Herb gave him a look as sceptical as looks get. “Lucky girl, huh? Well, too bad. Someone didn’t. You should have seen what they did to her face, Doctor. Ruined. Broken. Jaw, nose, cheekbones. Smashed teeth - .”

“That’s enough,” Lawrence Saxton said, weakly.

“Then her head smashed in.”

“No – .”

I took over from Herb. “Left her body in the back yard, covered in blood, dressed in S&M gear that hid nothing, left her for a kid to find – but you must have known that from the news. Didn’t it give you a shock that she was found dead wearing the stuff she’d been wearing for you? That she must have been killed very soon after you left – if that was the order of events. We only have your word for that.”

“Oh, God,” Lawrence Saxton looked in that moment as if he would lose it. He did not even seem to care about the not so veiled accusation I was making. It seemed he could only think of Ingrid Spoto and her terrible death. I guessed then that Saxton, in his own gaga way, did care for her. On the other hand, who wants a perv to care what happens to you? We would never know whether Ingrid would have been touched, or contemptuous. My guess, on the evidence of the lady’s feelings about her fellow human beings, was the latter.

“Who could have done that?” he whispered. “Spoiled her, humiliated her like that?”

No concern for the child who had found the body, I noted.

Herb nodded. “That’s what we want to know and for a golden moment I had high hopes that it was you, but it doesn’t quite compute, unless we can break your alibis. As to your violating your Hippocratic oath by talking out of turn about your patients, I don’t know. Guess a Board of Medical Ethics determines that.”

Lawrence Saxton sat back, his expression hardening. “You can’t prove I told Ingrid Spoto anything. She’s dead, so she can hardly confirm anything I did or didn’t say.”

He was fast on his feet at figuring out the angles that were to his advantage. No wonder he and Ingrid had hit it off – they were two sides of the same coin. I stood. “Maybe, let’s just see what your wife has to say about your involvement, shall we?”

“She won’t say anything to anyone but me and perhaps not even then.” He was sure of himself again. “We have a life, the kind of life she

wants. We're connected in West Rapids and status means everything to Mireille. She won't jeopardize that. The applecart isn't worth upsetting over my need for offbeat sex."

As we got to the door, I turned. "Dr. Saxton?"

"Now what, Detective Pimlott?" He tried sounding like the take-charge guy whom Ingrid Spoto knew and screwed, but he was on shaky ground and he knew it. "Surely you've said everything there is to be said?"

Oh no I hadn't. "One of these days you'll do something I *can* get you on because it's in your nature. You're arrogant as well as kinky, which means you'll be tempted at some point. We'll get you for it and it will be worth doing. We're the police, Dr. Saxton. The police. We have eyes in the back of our heads. People tell us things about other people just to save their own skins and you'll get careless."

Lawrence Saxton shrugged, showing little interest. "I would think you had more pressing issues than what I do or don't do, Detective Pimlott."

Now, he'd made me mad. "I'd get rid of the baseball cap if I were you, Doc."

He stared at me and I knew his mouth had gone dry. "What are you talking about?"

Herb shook his head. He was enjoying himself. "That dopey disguise. We had a door-to-door to see if anyone could identify you. You were seen, that's how we knew how to start a search."

"Who? Who saw me? Where?"

"Skulking around Ingrid's and at least three people spotted you. One of them knows it was you."

"You're bluffing." Of course he knew Herb wasn't.

It was my turn. "No, we don't have the imagination for that, we're just a couple of plodding cops. No, a caring member of the public told us. How do you think we found you? Didn't think to ask that, did you?" He was silent, but I was guessing his miserable mind was going a mile a minute. I threw more salt at the wound, rather as Ingrid would have. "I doubt that person will stay quiet forever. No reason to, Dr. Saxton."

"Yeah, I see that happenning," Herb nodded, "Too good not to tell someone over a drink, or in bed, come to that. Pillow talk, know what I mean, Doc?"

We left him to think about that on his own, because, as Herb and I agreed, we needed some air. Badly.

"Do we tackle Mireille now?" I asked as we got back into the car.

Herb thought for a moment. "No. Let him sweat overnight, wonder what we're going to do next. He won't dare mention this conversation, probably just sit around chewing on how much his wife does or doesn't know.

We'll catch up with her first thing tomorrow. You can take over on your own now, with Janet sitting posse. Be tough on her, although I doubt she knows anything – considering what we're going to put her through.”

“You never know,” I said, because the mist was beginning to clear for me over Ingrid Spoto's last few minutes on earth. “You never know.”

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