THE OLD BOOK CAPER

by
Henry Anderson

CHAPTER 1

"John, Anthony wants to see you. Right away."

Monica's voice on the telephone was theatrically heavy with implication. I was supposed to gather from the way she said it that I was in really deep trouble. She loved teasing me, especially when she could remind me that I was only a lowly intern archivist, whereas her boss, Anthony, was Head of Accessions. She, herself was his receptionist.   She thought of herself as his girl Friday. She was my age, 25, tall, slim, brown, and cool.

"Thanks, Monica," I replied in a suitably dead voice. "Do you think..., I mean, could we, uh, still have lunch, even if its..., well..., you know? I mean, If I'm still employed here, of course."

She didn't know anything. I knew that. She knew that I knew that, too. We almost always had lunch together, each from his or her own brown bag, because the other option was generally eating alone. It wasn't the best basis for a relationship. She had aspiratins for high office, if not actual nobility, and I did not fit into that picture by either of our standards. She might well have seen me as competition, too. I did have a degree in Library Science, and she didn't. She looked at that as only a small, technical matter. I genuinely hoped it wasn't. She paused, as if to consider her busy social schedule for the day, then said with heavy drama, "I am fearless. I will attend you at luncheon. I disregard my reputation in the name of equality." She rang off. I went to Anthony's office at the end of the hall, knocked quietly, and waited.

"Come in, John. Have a seat. How are you?"

When he starts off like that I know something unpleasant is about to be brought down upon me. Anthony is my superior in the library pecking order. He got that way by persistence, hard work, dedication to the library and seniority. Mostly by seniority. He waited until I had come in and carefully closed the door. Everything was confidential to Anthony. It helped create the serious atmosphere. Making everything we did important made Anthony important.

"I want to show you a file. To be truthful, I need your help." He handed me a manila folder.

I looked in the manila folder. There were a couple of letters and two photographs. The first photo was of a bookshelf with books in it. This being a university library, it was just the sort of thing we have around here in abundance. Unlike the untold thousands of books the library has, though, the photo showed only maybe 50 leather bound books. A second photo showed a box containing what looked like papers. The letters took a little longer to look at. They were letters from a creator to the University Archives, offering to donate "the books and papers herein photographed together with the entirety of the collection upon the creator’s demise." There was a lot of other stuff saying how valuable and rare the books were and how important it was that the library have these books for the general welfare and that they were not to be hidden away in some private collection for some rich guy to admire in the presence of his rich friends.

A second letter was a copy of the return letter from the library acknowledging the first and promising to get right out there and look them over within the next week or so. The letters were dated two months ago. I looked up from the letters to show that I had gotten the gist of them at least. I hoped I had a questioning look in my eye, but I get that look mixed up with the one of sheer terror, so I’m never sure.

When we had eye contact once more, Anthony said, "To be truthful, I never got out there and have not seen the books myself. Now look at this." It was always important for Anthony to be truthful, as he said himself often enough, and what he showed me was a copy of a very small obituary from one of the book collectors journals we subscribe to. It was dated one week ago. "Monica happened to see the journal yesterday and remembered that we had some sort of business with him." The slight emphasis on the word "Monica" was to let me know that he would have preferred that I had seen the clipping, but that he was pleased that someone in his office was being attentive to work.

Once again we paused while I hurriedly caught up with what everyone else in the library world, if not in all of Christendom knew, that one George Honeycut, a noted and beloved collector of rare books and manuscripts and owner, since retired, of an antique book store somewhere I didn't recognize, had passed on. He had died, it seemed, of natural causes in his home in Pleasant Valley.

I had not seen the clipping, and I did not remind Anthony that I was unaware of any business we had with George in Pleasant Valley, so would not have remarked the notice had it been headlined on the front page of the New York Times. I was the new boy, wondering how long I would be here at all. There was a pause, and I realized that Anthony was waiting for me to say something. I could think of absolutely nothing to say. Anthony liked having me in that position. I felt sometimes that we weren't having a conversation at all, but rather some sort of complicated verbal chess game. If so, I was clearly in check. I moved a pawn.

"Do we have the collection? The letters seem to say they are ours."

"No we don't."

Rook to King 1.

"Monica only saw the journal yesterday. This is the first we've heard of his death. That's why I need your help. Can you take time off from your duties here and go to Pleasant Valley, crate up the books and papers, and bring them back here? You can take one of the vans and a credit card for the gas. We can only afford $50 per diem, and of course you will continue to receive your regular salary."

I guess when I can say stuff like that with a straight face, I can be Head of Accessions. Right now, I was attempting to keep my face still while I thought it over. First, I had nothing else to do. I was too new to have much of a regular work schedule. Second, if I slept in the van, I could probably make it on $50 per day. I admit, fifty dollars per diem sounds a lot more important when said in Latin, but it was going to be spent in the vulgar language. And third, I needed the experience. At this point in my career I could use all the experience I could get. This was therefore an Opportunity. I said so.

That must have been the right answer. Anthony smiled. "I'm sorry I can't give you any more information, but we weren't expecting this. I don't suppose Mr. Honeycut was either. Perhaps the funeral home will know who the executor is. The county courthouse will also have a record of it, I expect. Get in touch with the executor of the estate and go see him. Show him the letters and we'll hope he believes us. With luck, he already knows about the bequest. It might be noted in the will. We need to get on this right away, these things need to be done quickly or things get lost."

"I can leave this afternoon," I blurted out, without thinking. I didn't even know which state Pleasant Valley was in. And I wasn't going to ask. Anthony had given me the folder. It would have addresses in it. We shook hands and I left. The chess game would continue later, probably the moment I got back.

CHAPTER 2

I went immediately back to my tiny office at the end of the hallway where the broom closet should have been. Come to think of it, it probably had been the broom closet until the library got funding to employ an intern.

I looked again at the documents in the slim folder. The letters included the mailing address and name of the donor, of course, but since he was deceased, I probably wouldn't get anywhere trying to contact him directly. On the other hand the death notice held a wealth of useful information. It gave the date of Mr. Honeycut's death, and the name of his next-of-kin. That was the one I wanted. It was an Elizabeth Honeycut, of Elmo, and the notice listed her contact information.

I telephoned her.

"I've been expecting your call, Mr., ..., I'm afraid I didn't get your name." I told her my name was "Goodwin", and that I was calling from the University Library, and then asked her if she remembered a bequest her deceased brother had made to the Library.

She told me that she knew about the donation, because it was in the will, and that she had all of Mr. Honeycut's books, but that she couldn't for the life of her understand why George would have wanted to give them to the library, or why the library would want to have them, but that I was certainly welcome to them. I would, however, have to pay for having them shipped.

I told her that I would come myself tomorrow to pick up the books. She said that would be just fine, and we agreed on 3:00, to give me time to drive there. Then she asked me if I knew where Elmo was.

I didn’t, of course, and strangely enough, I said so. There was a pause. I could distinctly hear her not asking me the question, "Then how on earth could you know that you would be here by 3 o’clock?" She was very polite and didn’t ask the question, but very slowly and carefully told me where Elmo was. By an absolutely astounding stroke of luck, it was reachable by 3 o’clock tomorrow, if I got an early start.

CHAPTER 3

I left early the next morning and drove to Elmo without incident, taking my time, and enjoying the drive. Elmo isn’t much larger than it’s name, and I found Miss Honeycut’s house easily.

She lived a block from downtown. The house was built about a century ago when you did that. It was a nice house, small and set back from the street. It had a very well tended flower garden in front. I stepped up on the porch and rang the bell.

She answered the door immediately, and invited me in. After I introduced myself, she took me into another room and showed me the books. There were about 50 of them, arranged in a small bookcase. I spent a long time looking through them, taking each one from the shelf and looking carefully at the cover and first few pages. They were a mixed collection of subjects, titles, publishers, ages, and conditions. Some were paperbacks, some were trade editions, some were hardbacks. Most of the latter were somewhat older.

The approximate value of the collection, as well as I could determine after such a limited inspection, was more or less nothing. I knew now why she wondered that Mr. Honeycut wanted to give them to the library, and that the library wanted them. I wondered too. I had this small but growing feeling of dread coming over me. Somehow, I had managed to screw up my first assignment. My first thought was that I had been duped, somehow, as a practical joke. That wold have been possible except for the expense. Nobody in the University Library would spend ten cents of the library’s money on such a joke. And then there was the fact that none of the books showed the least similarity to the books in the photograph.

I tried to sound professional. "Miss Honeycut, I’m afraid this isn’t quite what we expected. We were led to believe that the books had some special value, value as research sources if not strictly monetary. These books are not rare, are not valuable, and don’t seem to have any value as research sources. Are these all the books there are?"

"Every last one. I looked for them all over the house. One of these books even came out of the bathroom. My brother’s will said that his book collection was to go, by prearrangement, to the University Library. You can’t be more puzzled about them than I am."

One of these books came out of the bathroom. Idly, I wondered which one. I’m strange. Miss Honeycut seemed perfectly sincere.

I showed her the two photos of the books in the bookshelf and the photo of the box of papers. Nothing in the photos resembled any of the books Elizabeth had. Not even a little bit. I was hoping the photos would show her that I was not completely out of my mind coming all this way for Mr. Honeycut's collection of paperbacks and miscellaneous novels, no matter how interesting they might have been to Mr. Honeycut.

"I don't understand at all." she said, referring to the photographs, "I cleared the house out very carefully. There was certainly nothing like this in it anywhere. You are welcome to look again of course, if you like. We are going to sell the house very soon, but you can search the place yourself if you want to. Do you have any idea where they might be?"

Archivists, even little baby ones like me, are trained not to make snap decisions. I could have taken the books offered back to Anthony. But there was no value whatsoever in them, even I knew that. Anthony would have just looked sadly out the window, and the next time he would send Monica instead of his college-trained assistant to gather in a donation. I would be assigned to answer Monica's phone at the reception counter, and peruse the racks at the Goodwill store for possible acquisitions during my lunch hour.

The thought flashed through my mind that Elizabeth could be holding out on me. I held on to that thought for quite a while, but had the good sense not to say it out loud. Why would she do that? She couldn't easily sell the books herself. If they are as rare and valuable as they are described in the letter, the library would hear of the sale. In all likelihood, we would even be contacted by the seller to ask if we would like to buy them from him. But would Elizabeth know that? I waited for an idea, but none came. I think I already said that I don't think very fast. I began to thank her for her time and leave, but she stopped me.

"Mr. Goodwin, believe me, I know nothing of the books in the photographs. My brother had not been ill when he passed on, and was certainly not expecting to die suddenly, or even soon. Furthermore, he was not a practical joker. He did not do things in jest. Not those kind of things at any rate. If he offered the books in the photograph to your library, he did so in perfect faith, and that means that he owned them, and had no intention of getting rid of them."

"Where else could they be?" I asked, "Did he have anywhere besides the house to keep them? An office, a storage room, mini storage? "

"My brother was long retired from his bookstore. He had no office. And why would he need additional space, with that huge old house?"

I could only think of one more question. "Could your brother have loaned the books to someone? The local library, perhaps, or another collector?"

"I can't think of who it would be. I didn't know much about my brother's life these last few years. I suppose he might have. I haven't heard from any such person or institution."

"Maybe whoever it was doesn't know that Mr. Honeycut has passed on?", I wondered out loud.

"I don't know. Mr. Goodwin, I do know I would feel much more comfortable that I had done everything possible to help you if you would accept my offer to search the house yourself. You can stay there for a week or so at the very least, and make inquiries around town. I wish I could help you more."

I had absolutely no other ideas, so I accepted her offer, and the keys and directions that went with it, and thanked her very much for her help and hospitality. I got in the van and drove off confidently and purposefully down the street.

CHAPTER 4

That lasted about a block. Then I pulled over to the curb and got out my map. I had no idea where I was going, or how far it was. Map study indicated that it was about a hundred miles away, and in the opposite direction, of course. I got there in two hours, about an hour before sunset.

The house was indeed huge, and it needed paint. It was on the corner of Main and Pine, almost in downtown Pleasant Valley. The first thing I saw as I walked towards the porch was that there were two gas meters on the left side of the house.

To the right of the porch was the one surviving bush in the front lawn, none too recently trimmed or watered. Nothing grew around the skirting of the house and there was no lawn. Landscaping would have helped a lot. The house was pretty much without ornamentation. No shutters, not much trim of any kind. Just bare windows hanging out, three upstairs and three on the first floor. There were two on the left, then the front door and then one more to the right of the door.

There were actually two front doors, and two porches. The second one was set back and to the right of the first one, off the end of the main porch.

The lock on the left-hand door was shiny and new, and the key I had been given fit perfectly. I went inside.

A large front room opened off of the entry way to the left which accounted for the two first floor windows. The room behind it also opened from the first floor corridor. It had side windows and might have been used as an office, or a downstairs bedroom. There was a half bath under the rear staircase and a kitchen to the right rear. The staircase went upstairs to a corridor with two rooms off of it on the left side of the house as one looked from the street. The front one was a large bedroom and the room behind it was somewhat smaller.

There was not one stick of furniture anywhere in the house. The second key Miss Honeycut had given me fit the lock to the second outside door, to the right and set somewhat back from the first. A staircase led to the second floor. It connected to a combination bedroom-sitting room, a small added-on kitchen, a bathroom, and the back staircase. This apartment was also empty.

The light was fading towards evening as I walked through the upstairs rooms, looking behind every door and in every nook and cranny, as the expression goes. No bookcase. No boxes. No books. Mrs. Honeycut had certainly moved everything out of the house, and it looked to be ready for sale. It was clean, too.

No dust or debris at all. The inside walls needed painting badly, but I supposed that was to be left to the new owner.

I walked down the back staircase to the first floor of the second apartment. The front door to the second apartment was new also but I had no key to it. The door was not bolted from the inside. I carefully turned the knob that bolted the door from the inside and left it that way. Mrs. Honeycut had said I could stay there, so I walked back up the stairs, through the connecting door, down the front stairs and out the front door to the library van to get my gear.

A house with no furniture in it doesn't feel very inviting. I choose a corner in the second room downstairs near the space heater to unroll my bedroll and set my backpack down next to it, looking for as much protection from the open as I could find, I guess. The water was still on, and so were the lights, so it wouldn't be too bad.

I locked the front door with my borrowed key and went downtown looking for diner. When I got back, I bolted the door from the inside and went to bed.

CHAPTER 5

I went to sleep. I didn't think I would, on the floor in a strange, empty house. I guess I was living right. It didn't last, though. I was awake again at 2:40 am on my watch. Now why was that? Then I heard it. Noises. The front door knob turning. But it wasn't the knob on the front door of the main apartment, it was the one for the second apartment.

I froze in my sleeping bag. Making no sound, and having nothing else to do, I thought. Somebody had left that door unbolted so they could enter the house later on without a key. They could now turn the knob, but they couldn't open the door. I wondered if they would figure out that someone had bolted the door, and I wondered if they intended to try the windows. They intended to. I saw a shadow try each one of the windows into the room I was in.

Somehow I decided that the shadow was male. I could see his shape in the window against the street light. I hope he wouldn't see me. I hoped he would just go away. Then I hoped he wouldn't. I wondered who he was, and why he wanted into an absolutely empty house.

Eventually, he did go away. The windows must have all been locked after all. And I went back to sleep.

The next morning, with the morning sun pouring into all the windows, I set forth to search the house, and this time I mean really search it. I got into the attic through the access hatch in the ceiling of one of the closets. There was a convenient ladder in the shed. My flashlight showed that things had been there, but weren't there any more. I could see that by the patterns in the dust.

Of course, just because something used to be there and isn't now doesn't make the something a bookshelf stuffed with valuable leather bound books.

Gradually, my feelings of adventure and purpose were replaced with the old familiar dread of failure. I had run out of places to look. Finally, I had to stop looking. There are no books here. I was sure I would go back to the library empty handed. My mind started the familiar defensive maneuvers. What was I going to say to Anthony? What could have happened to the books? How, if I had had more time I could have looked harder, done some checking around.

But Anthony never said how much time I had to do this. In fact, Anthony never suggested that I should come back at all. Nonsense, of course he wants me to come back.

Maybe Anthony knows there are no books, and this is some sort of a joke. No, Anthony won’t spend Library money on a joke.

The doorbell rang.

The doorbell rang! Who comes to visit a dead man? Who comes to visit an empty house? Who rings the doorbell when he is coming to visit an empty house. Eventually I answer the door.

It was a young woman dressed in work boots, jeans, a red and white checked flannel shirt, and lots of red hair. When I answered the door, she introduced herself by asking me, "Is that your van?", referring to the library van parked at the curb.

"Yes", I responded without thinking.

She might have been thinking of what to say next, since it was her turn. I was just numb. The brain wasn’t yet forming coherent questions. She seemed to hesitate. Then she said, "My name is Rita. I used to live here."

"My name is John. I don’t live here. Or rather, I won’t be living here very long. I mean, it isn’t my house. I just came for the books. I mean, did you know Mr. Honeycut?"

"May I come in?", she asked nicely, smiling at me.

"Yes, of course, I responded automatically. As she was walking through the door the absurdity of the situation filtered in. She had as much right to be here as I did. And what was I going to do now? Continue to play host? Offer her tea and biscuits? A place to sit on the floor?"

We waited around for a bit looking at each other. It was my turn to speak, and as the moments went by, I felt the need to explain something anyway. "I have been sent by the University Library to pick up some books that Mr. Honeycut donated to the Library. Do you know anything about that?"

She didn't answer directly. Instead, she sat down on the floor with her back to a wall and invited me to do the same. I sat. She seemed to be stalling and I wondered why. Finally she said, "You need to know some things about the situation." She seemed to be warming up to a long story. I didn't mind. She was a lot of fun to look at. So she talked while I looked.

"I lived with George Honeycut for almost a year here in this house. He offered me an apartment upstairs when I really needed one. I needed someplace safe to stay while I looked for work. I finally got a job, but only part time. During those months, his eyesight began to fail. He didn't want to admit it, but he couldn't take care of himself any more, so we became friends and I took care of him. Neither of us knew anything about that kind of thing, but I learned how to take care of a blind person while he learned how to get along without much vision."

"When he died, I had to leave the house, and let me tell you that wasn't much fun and my current situation isn't nearly as nice as it was. They say I am in the will, somehow, so I am staying close by until the lawyers get through with everything. I can sure use whatever he left me."

"We talked a lot once he got to where he couldn't go out without help, which he didn't admit for months. He told me a lot of things."

"And then he died. Right in this room. Of a stroke, or that's what the doctors and the medical examiner said. I don't think so. I mean, he died, and it was probably a stroke, but it wasn't natural, if you know what I mean."

I nodded. The story seemed strange, somehow. I was listening now. It wasn't that I was tired of looking at her. You don't get tired of looking at anything that beautiful, but you can after a while get used to it. And besides, the best way to keep her talking was to act interested. Was she saying that the old man was murdered? She continued.

"A month or so before Mr. Honeycut's death, I met a guy in a bar. What I really mean is that he met me. He sort of invited himself to have a conversation with me, and for some reason I let him. It wasn't the usual come-on. He acted like he was really interested in my world. Looking back, I wonder why I didn't notice that. Anyway, he wanted to know where I lived, and who Mr. Honeycut was, and," she paused, "other things. Things about Mr. Honeycut, I mean. I got the idea he was more interested in George than he was in me. I should have been offended, I guess, but I was also interested, so I played along."

"The guy, Clinton was his name, started asking me out. All very regular, all very proper, walked me to my door and all. I had the idea even then that he had something on his mind other than me. I was curious about that. I never had much feeling for him, but he was spending money on me, and I wanted to see the shows, and he was Certainly being polite."

"One evening we got home early enough for me to invite him in to meet Mr. Honeycut. He told Mr. Honeycut that he sold insurance, and was in town temporarily meeting possible clients. He even offered to sell Mr. Honeycut life insurance. Mr. Honeycut just laughed at him and said that it was a little late for that, that he had nobody to insure. Somehow that seemed to satisfy Clinton. I got the feeling that he wasn't very interested in his job. I mean, I've met insurance salesmen before, and they don't give up that easily. But at the time, I didn't care if he was lying to me or not."

"We had coffee together, the three of us, and talked for a while. Clinton asked Mr. Honeycut all about himself, like he had me. It was all very friendly and nice, and after a while it was over and Clinton left."

I knew there was something missing out of all this story telling. Mr. Honeycut was a book collector. I had come about books. Rita's former or current boyfriends were not important. Mr. Honeycut's blindness was a side issue. And why wasn't she saying anything at all about books? I put it to her directly.

"All this is very interesting, and you fascinate me as much as you did Clinton, I'm sure, but what about Mr. Honeycut's book collection?"

"Please let me finish", she said. "Mr. Honeycut died suddenly during this time, and it wasn't a natural death, no matter what doctors say it was."

"You said he died of a stroke. That happens rather suddenly, doesn't it? And there isn't any warning of one. They just happen."

"Yes, but there were other strange things going on. Someone was in the house during the funeral. I know this because things in my room were moved. Big things. My dresser was moved over an inch. Things seemed weird when I came home, but I looked down as I was getting into a drawer and saw the depression where the leg of the dresser had been and I knew that I hadn't moved it."

"So was anything missing?" It was the only thing I could think of to say.

"No." She hesitated for a long moment. Then it was as though she had made up her mind about something.

"OK, I know all about the books. I know George gave them to the library. Clinton wanted to know all about the books. He was always asking questions about them. Where they were, Were they valuable, could he see them? George put him off, never telling him anything about his collection and asking Clinton how he knew about it in the first place. Clinton told him that I had told him. I had. I had this funny feeling that I shouldn't have. So I hid the books. I told Mr. Honeycut that I had hidden them. He couldn't see well enough to visit his collection any more anyway, so he didn't care. He thought it was funny."

"Ok, my turn," I said, "Where did you hide them?"

"I’m not going to tell you." she said.

CHAPTER 6

I was dumbfounded. Was she just being coy? Was I supposed to say please? Offer her money? She knew that the books had been donated on Mr. Honeycut’s death to the library. Why not tell me where she hid them? So I asked her.

"You have to help me find George Honeycut’s murderer."

She simply said that. She didn’t make it sound dramatic or emphatic. Of course, she had had a lot more time to accept the fact that the old man had been murdered than I had. In fact, I hadn’t thought of it much at all.

"Look, I don’t want to interfere in any way with Mr. Honeycut’s being murdered. I don’t care one way or the other. The police handle that kind of thing. I just want the books that he promised the library. Then I’ll run along home and you can find the murderer without my interference."

"I don’t want your interference. I want your help. I’m not going to get anywhere with the police, they’ve already made up their minds. He was an old man, and he had a stoke and he died. That’s it. But he was my friend and I don’t want Clinton to get away with it."

Clinton? Oh yeah, the boyfriend. A woman scorned, that’s what this was about. He got tired of her and made her mad. Although for the life of me I couldn’t see why anyone would ever get tired of her. Still, it was my turn and the only question I could think of to ask was the obvious one, "How do you know Clinton did it?"

"I don’t know how I know. I just know. Clinton wanted the books and couldn’t think of any other way to get them except by murdering George. Then he searched the house. Murdering George was the only way he could get him out of the house. George never left it any more, except to go out on the porch. Clinton was sure the books were in the house, and wanted to steal them."

Well, people do steal books, and the more valuable they were to the library, the more valuable they would be to a thief. But this was happening much too fast for me to keep up with it.

"So how am I supposed to help?", I asked.

"I don’t know", she responded immediately. "But I can’t think of anything to do by myself, and Clinton knows me. He will know if I’m trying to snoop around asking questions. He might not know you yet."

"He might not? Why would he? Have we met?"

"I don’t know. Probably not. But I do know he is watching this house and would surely have noticed your van yesterday. He still wants the books, and still doesn’t know where they are, so he still thinks they might be in the house, somewhere."

I was catching on to this zany conversation a little bit. A thought came to me. I thought it was about time. Why does she care if Clinton watches the house? For that matter, so what if he takes it apart board by board looking for the books? Because they are still in the house, that’s why. It was about time for something else, too. I knew one thing she didn’t know.

"I had a visitor last night. Somebody in the small hours tried the second door over there and all the windows on the ground floor. He wanted to get in."

This had the desired effect. Now it was her turn to ask the obvious question. "What did you do?"

"Cowered in my sleeping bag, shivering in fear. Look, you might want to get involved in a murder, with a murderer, but I am not cut out for that. I never even played sports in school. I'm not going to be your bodyguard."

"No, I don't expect you will."

She said that cynically, and perhaps a bit wistfully. I couldn't tell. She went on.

"It's just that I don't know what to do, and I thought that the two of us could maybe be more successful than just me alone. Your visitor was Clinton, I'm sure. He wanted to search the house, again. He probably guessed that you knew where the books were hidden and were taking them back to the library. He saw your van for sure."

"OK, here's what we do." I said, "We put a sign on a closet door saying we call the cops from across the street and they come and arrest him."

"And he gets maybe 30 days, and probably probation, for breaking and entering. What does that get us? Besides, I don't want to catch him stealing the books. I don't care squat about your books. I want him in prison for killing George."

I didn't like the part about my books. I did care for them. They were why I was here. I needed to remember that as all this progressed. We seemed to be getting farther and farther from the books. I said, "How did he murder George? You never did tell me."

"I don't know. But he did. And we're going to find out how he did it."

Same question. Same answer. I tried a different tack. "How did he do it?" I got the same answer as before. I tried my question again. "How do you make a guy have a stroke?" Same answer. This was getting pretty boring. But then I thought, what if we're asking the wrong guy? Asking each other won't help much, neither of us knows, but asking a doctor might. And I knew a doctor. I mean, I knew a doctor that I could talk to without insurance, or even an appointment, if I could catch him. I had a friend who was a doctor. We went to school together, up to a point. He opted for medicine, I opted for disappointing my family by going liberal arts. I could call him.

I did so. His receptionist took a message. We waited. He called back. I asked him what would cause a stroke. He first wanted to know if someone was showing symptoms. I said no, then he said he was busy and what was this about. I asked him what could cause a stroke for sure, that could be relied upon to cause a stroke. He asked me if I meant something like a poison. I said yes, I guessed so. He said he would call me back.

He called me back again. Said there were any number of things that would act on the heart and very likely cause a stroke, especially in someone old and weak, but nothing for sure. I asked him what they would look like, powder, liquid, scary pictures. He said any of it could be in a powder form. I thanked him and told him I would call him back in a day or so to tell him what this was about, but that whatever it was, it wasn't happening in his state, so he had nothing to worry about.

When I hung up on my doctor, I told Rita, "Yeah, there are things in powder form that can likely cause a stroke, especially in the old and infirm. Is that useful? Did someone poison the old man?"

"Not someone. Clinton. And now I can guess how. Clinton was very keen on coming to the house to chat up George. The first few times he pumped George about his book collection, then the last couple of times he seemed not to care about that any more, and we just talked about things in general. We had coffee and George liked his with milk and sugar in it."

"He made a mess trying to spoon the sugar once and after that we used little packets of sugar. Clinton could have put his own doctored packets in the sugar bowl while I was out of the room and George would have never noticed. He wouldn't have noticed it when he used them, either. The last month or so he really was pretty blind. We have that last cup of coffee, George takes one of the doctored packets, Clinton says goodbye and leaves. I go up to bed and the next morning George is found dead in his chair. Pretty neat, isn't it?"

Yeah, it was neat. And perfect. And Clinton wasn't going to get caught.

"We can guess that. We can guess forever, but we can never prove it. George did die from a stroke. The evidence is long gone. If Clinton did do it that way, he has had plenty of time to throw everything away. We aren't going to look for tainted sugar packets in his trash, are we?"

CHAPTER 7

But Rita had a plan. And what a plan! It was hours before she could talk me into it. As it happens, the plan blew up, almost taking us with it. But here's how the plan went:

Clinton didn't know me, we hoped. Or at least, I hoped. I was to contact Clinton and tell him I might make a deal for the book collection. He was to come over to the house and we would talk about it.

I kept telling myself that it wasn't going to work, but it was so near the truth that I could say it all with a straight face. I even practiced telling myself that it was my own plan after all. That is, that I was betraying Rita and going for the books on my own.

"How do I find Clinton to tell him all this?", I asked, foolishly as it turned out.

Rita looked at me sort of hopelessly. "I told you I dated Clinton. I even know where he lives. You will know him when you see him. I know where he hangs out. You hang out where he hangs out and you find him. I can describe him to you. I promise. Once you spot him, you walk up to him and get him to come here. Then I take over."

"Is he supposed to just take one look at you and confess?"

"Leave that to me."

So the next evening, I went bar-hopping. Pleasant Grove isn’t that big of a place. In point of fact, there is only one bar. It was called a lounge. I havenât had much experience with bars. When Iâm alone, Iâm reading. Itâs too dark to read in a bar. Could I bring in a flashlight? Probably not. In the end I just went in through the front door, sat down by myself at a table where I could see most of the other people in the bar, ordered a glass of iced tea and looked around. Thank the heavens above it didn’t take long. I couldn’t have done that scene for very long.

He looked exactly as Rita had described him, tall and dark with longish hair and expensive taste in clothes. Handsome, in a way, I suppose. I walked up to his table.

"Are you Clinton?", I asked, "My name is John Goodwin, and I would like to talk to you."

Nothing like the direct approach. It sounded lame, but it was the best I could do. Clinton must have thought so too.

"What about, Mr. Goodwin?" He smiled.

"Books." It was all I could think of to say. Surprisingly, it worked. He excused himself from his two friends, who didn’t seem to be surprised at all, and came with me to my table.

"What about books?"

"George Honeycutâs rare book collection. He donated them to the University Library. Iâm from the library. I was sent here to collect them."

"Why talk to me? I havenât got them."

"I think you are also interested in them."

"Now why would you think that? Oh yeah, Rita told you. She probably had some things to tell you about me, too, didn't she?"

I tried to sound cold and business like. Or at least cool and uninterested. I didn't have much hope for either affect.

"Look, Clinton, Iâm only interested in acquiring the books. I donât much care how I acquire them. Iâm representing the University in this. Honeycut left them to the University. But I donât know where they are any more than you do. Only Rita knows where they are. But she will deal, she says. So if we could just meet with Rita, chat her up a little, make some sort of deal with her, until she shows us where the books are. Then you and I can come to some sort of an arrangement whereby you sell the books to me. I can offer some money from the University to buy the books, and Iâm pretty sure you donât want the books themselves."

I surprised myself, saying all this. I never thought of myself as such a good liar, although I have had lots of practice. I not only could not spend one dime of the universityâs money without at least two signatures, but I probably didn't even work there any more. The last time I had called the office they wanted to know when they were going to get the library van back. They had apparently forgotten about the books and certainly hadn't shown any desire to have me back, only the van. Clintonâs expression was somewhat of a puzzle to me.

He seemed confused as to whether to believe that I was really that stupid, or was trying to trick him with all the subtlety of a three-year-old. In any case, all he really heard was the part about Rita knowing where the books are and that I wanted him to meet with her. That was exactly what we wanted him to hear. He agreed to meet us the next evening at the house.

The next day Rita set the scene for the big meeting. She found some broken down chairs, a table lamp, and a cocktail table from the â50s. On the top of the table was a more or less complete coffee service. There was a carafe for the coffee, a sugar bowl, a cream pitcher which matched, and three coffee cups and saucers, which didn’t.

"Where did you get all of that, and whatâs it for?", I asked.

"When Clinton came courting, George always insisted on coffee. Clinton hates coffee. But he drank the coffee so he could stay and talk to George, and occasionally me. Iâm going to remind Clinton of those wildly romantic evenings he spent here." She said, enigmatically. Then she went upstairs with her backpack to get dressed.

It was an entirely different Rita who floated down the stairs an hour later. I already knew that she was a really beautiful woman, but I never realized the difference between a beautiful woman who isn’t trying to be beautiful and a beautiful woman who is. She looked cool and sophisticated, every hair in place, perfect face, perfect figure, perfect...well, just perfect.

I gaped, mouth slowly opening and closing like a guppy in a fish bowl.

"Whatâs wrong?", she asked, innocence oozing from her now painted lips.

"Nothing at all," I replied. "Why...I mean, why are you...why did you dress like that?"

"Whatâs wrong with dressing like this? You donât like it?" She smiled.

She was teasing me. I didn’t say anything, just tried to control the spasmodic gulping. She turned around slowly to give me the full treatment. "Itâs my power outfit. Itâs supposed to keep Clinton off guard, unbalanced. Do you think it will work?"

So help me, I am not lying, she blinked. She blinked her eyes at me. Sort of a double wink. I tried to speak, but nothing came out. All I could do was nod my head up and down.

"When Clinton comes, Iâll answer the door. Then we will all sit down and have coffee and see where the conversation leads us."

"You seem to have this all planned. What do I do all this time?" I found that if I didn’t look directly at her, I could think a little bit. It was a good feeling, being able to think again.

"Mostly youâre just here. I donât want to be alone with Clinton. You being here changes the environment. Itâs all about atmosphere. I have some very serious things to say to Clinton, and I want somebody here when I say them."

The doorbell rang. Rita went to answer it.

"Hello, Clinton, come in. Sit down." Her voice was low and sultry, quiet with confidence.

Clinton started to say, "Hi Rita", but changed his mind and said "Hello, Rita" instead. It was comforting to see that she had approximately the same effect on Clinton as she had on me, although Clinton did manage to keep his mouth closed. We all walked over to the table and sat.

"Have some coffee, Clinton," Rita said as she poured a cup from the carafe and handed it across the table to him. "We havenât had coffee like this since George was alive, have we? Remember how you used to come over to visit with old George before taking me out? That was very kind of you, spending time with a lonely old man. You used to talk about books. You really know a lot about books, donât you Clinton? Not nearly as much as George did, of course, but a lot. I believe you were very interested in Georgeâs collection, weren’t you? Did you ever get to see it?"

Clinton came to life, slightly. "No, Rita, I never saw the books. Nobody has seen the books since George died. Miss Honeycut hasn’t got them. I saw her book collection. She never knew about the real one. Only you know about the real one, donât you? What did you do with them?"

"You went to see Miss Honeycut? How interesting! I wonder if thatâs why she changed the locks. That wasn’t very smart, was it Clinton? And why would I have the books? The University Library, represented by Mr. Goodwin here, should have them, according to the terms of the will. Do you have them, Mr. Goodwin?"

"Uh no," I said, "they seem to have gone missing. If we find them, when we find them, they belong to the University Library. I would be willing to, ahem, cooperate in their return, if either of you know where they are."

"I donât know where they are," Clinton said, "but you do, donât you Rita? You lived with the old man. You knew his secrets. You’ve got the books hidden someplace, donât you. I want them. Goodwin, here, says you will deal."

"My goodness, you havenât touched your coffee, Clinton. But then you always used sugar in it, didn’t you? Have some sugar. I got the little packets just like George used to use. You always use sugar in your coffee, don’t you Clinton?"

Rita was smiling at him as though he was the final judge in the Miss America Pageant. I have never heard a voice sound like that in my admittedly short life, not even in an airplane terminal. And I never expect to hear one like that again.

I was watching Clinton closely. He seemed hesitant, as though he had forgotten what he had come for. I could certainly understand that. But he also seemed very reluctant to take the sugar packet Rita was offering him. He just looked at it, lying there lightly on the palm of Ritaâs hand, just under her smiling, innocent face, then turned it down, saying nothing.

Ritaâs voice hardened. Still softly, but with real iron in her voice, she said, "Why not, Clinton? Why not put one of the sugar packets in your coffee? Just taste one. Any of them. They’re all alike. But you know what’s in them, don’t you? You know how Mr. Honeycut used sugar packets because he couldn’t see well enough to spoon sugar any more. All you had to do was doctor a few packets and the old man would eventually use one of the doctored ones and then die of a stroke."

"But guess What, Clinton. The poison you used is traceable. Now that we know for sure George was poisoned, we can get an exhumation order and find the poison."

Clinton didn't seem to be budging, so I burst out in a sort of hail Mary pass, "We found some of the packets, Clinton."

CHAPTER 8

"No, you didn't!", Clinton shouted. Then he stopped. Then began again. "OK, this has gone on far enough. I came here to talk about books. If we can't deal one way, we'll deal another. I want to see the books. Now. Which one of you is going to take me to them?"

The situation had changed a great deal in the previous five seconds. Clinton now had a gun in his hand. It must have been in his jacket pocket. He was waving it from one to the other of us. From some secret well of courage I didn't know I had, I took the floor.

"I don't know anything about them. Only Rita knows where they are."

Clinton swung the gun towards her and said something abut her taking him to them or him shooting her or something to that effect. I realized what I had just done to Rita and tried to make up for it by leaping over the coffee table at the temporarily distracted Clinton.

I have no idea what would have happened had my leap worked.

But as it was, I had one foot behind a chair leg when I jumped, so the great leap didn't go as planned. The chair went over backwards and I landed flat on the coffee table, which shattered into fragments. Clinton whirled back towards me and the gun went off just as the lights went out.

Rita had carefully arranged all the lighting in the room for effect. The only light turned on was a small cocktail lamp on the coffee table. This was so we could see Clinton's face clearly while we accused him of murder. He was supposed to give himself away. It even worked.

But now the lamp was on the floor with a broken bulb and I was on the remains of the coffee table and all I was thinking about was the terrific roar of the gunshot. I never realized how loud those things are. Then I felt something warm and wet trickling down my back and side. "Oh my God, I'm bleeding. I've been shot." I thought, "So this is what it feels like to die."

Then the ceiling light went on and I could see Clinton at the switch by the stairs. He ran up the stairs after Rita.

After a few moments, I realized that I wasn't dying, and that other than a few bangs and bruises I was OK. I got up from the broken coffee table and pulled my shirt around to see the bloodstains. It was coffee. I was quite relieved and eventually, once more, thought of Rita and the guy with the gun.

What could I do without endangering myself? Call the police! Search for the cell phone! What was the number for the police in this town? Oh, yeah. 9-1-1 I called it.

"There's a guy with a gun trying to shoot us! Please come quick!"

"Where are you, sir?"

"I don’t know. Wait. Do you know where George Honeycut lives? Or rather, lived? In a big old empty house. Close to downtown."

"I have a George Honeycut living at 327 Pine Street. Would that be it?"

I still didn’t know. But I told her, "Yes. And please hurry. He is going to shoot Rita. He is going to shoot me, too. He already shot at me!"

"We have an officer en route right now, sir. Is anyone hurt?"

Just then I heard another one of those ear splitting bangs pistols make and dropped the phone.

I didn’t want any more to do with that gun, but if Clinton thought I was dead, maybe I could sneak up the stairs behind him. I looked for something to hit him with and found a coffee table leg, broken off in the collapse. It didn’t seem like much, but might at least distract him. Who knows?, maybe I could hit him twice with it? So holding my short club in the very best club-holding manner, I tiptoed up the stairs.

I just made it to the top and was peeking around the corner into the hallway when I heard Clinton screaming at Rita, "Show me the books, right now."

That’s exactly when we all heard the siren. Clinton whirled around, saw me, and fired off that damned canon of his. He was quite getting into the spirit of the thing, but I was getting used to it. He was coming right at me through the smoke and I dived down to avoid being shot and was crawling back down the stairs. I had my eyes closed when he kicked me. Actually, He wasn't trying to kick me. He stumbled over me and was falling down the stairs when the police came through the front door, guns drawn. I stayed very still, expecting more guns going off, but it didn't happen. At last, when I opened my eyes, I saw Clinton lying on his stomach on the living room floor with those plastic handcuffs on his wrists behind his back and the police were looking every direction for more people with guns.

Later on, after more police had arrived, we were all gathered into the living room to explain what had happened. Basically, it boiled down to we accusing Clinton of poisoning some old man and Clinton trying to shoot both of us over it. The police had calmed down quite a bit once the inventory of guns was completed at exactly one, belonging to Clinton, now in in their possession. Clinton wasn't saying much, but he was sure mad!

The police were just starting to acquire some interest in the book story, and wondering what that was all about when I cut in and asked Rita.

"OK, Rita, I did my part. Now where are the books?"

She said, "Follow me." and we all trouped up the stairs again. She walked to the center of the hallway, pointed to the wall, and said, "in there."

"In where?" I asked.

"In there. Behind the wall. There is a middle bedroom behind this wall. I covered the doorway with sheet rock a couple of months ago. Anyone got a hammer? Or a wrecking bar?"

A policeman was sent to get a small wrecking bar out of his cruiser. When he returned, she took the wreaking bar from his hand and whacked the wall very professionally, making a six inch slice in the sheet rock.

I shall never forget the scene. A beautiful woman in a slinky cocktail dress knocking holes in a painted wall with a wrecking bar, and looking like she was enjoying it. When she had the hole big enough, she reached into it and pulled out on the edge of the sheet rock panel. It came off in several large pieces revealing a wooden door. "I had to take the knob off to make room for the sheet rock. The molding, too. The knob is in a drawer in the back of the storage shed."

The same officer who got the wrecking bar was sent to get the knob. While he was gone, I asked Rita how she had done such a good job hiding the doorway. After all, the house had been searched thoroughly several times, and most of the furniture had been removed by movers, so everyone had had plenty of opportunity to see the tiniest imperfection.

"I used to be a sheet rocker. Actually, only a helper, but I learned how to do it. I did pretty good, too. If you're careful you can hide the seams. I painted the whole hallway to cover my tracks. I knew Clinton was up to no good, and that George was blind in more ways than one. When I told George what I was going to do, He laughed. He thought it was funny, my doing that. I think that's half the reason he wouldn't talk about the books to Clinton. He wanted to see if Clinton could find the books. He just didn't believe I could get away with it."

The officer had returned with the doorknob. Rita shoved the shaft into the square hole in the latch hole and opened the door. When she reached just inside the door to turn on the lights, we saw a room full of books. There were leather bound volumes in glass fronted bookshelves on all four sides of the room, wherever there was wall space for them. One of the bookshelves matched the bookshelf in the photograph.

Clinton didn't go to prison for killing George. Rita had made up all the stuff about exhumation orders and traceable poisons, and I admitted we hadn't found any poisoned sugar packets. But he did go to prison for trying to kill both Rita and me. The books turned out to be very valuable indeed, and the jury was convinced that Clinton really would have killed both of us for that much money.

The story turned out pretty good for me. The way the media told it, I had disarmed Clinton, and probably saved Rita's life doing it. Rita knew better, but for some reason made no attempt to tell the story any other way. I have always appreciated that, and was pleased to learn that the story about the covered door got her hired in construction again. Anthony was pleased with the books, Monica only knew what she read in the papers, and so I still have both my job and just a tiny bit of in-house recognition as the man who, "always gets his books."

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