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THE CASE OF THE GOLDEN ORCHID

A NOVEL

BY

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PROLOGUE

A cold skiff of snow followed the girl down the street, swirling around her naked legs, causing her to shiver and curse the night. The Mission was still four long blocks away, and Jenny Lynn moved quickly, clutching the twenty-dollar bill she had just been given by her stepfather in her small fist as if her life depended upon it. Her discomfort would soon be over, when she reached the end of her journey, the place where dreams were born.

The streets in this part of Queens were dangerous after dark, but such knowledge did little to discourage those who came to the Mission seeking solace from their trials and tribulations. The Reverend Bigtime Bantome made everyone feel welcome, young and old, black and white. He was their true friend, always there in time of need.

Around a corner and two blocks in the distance there was the sign mounted on top of the house: Mission of St. Anthony. Jenny Lynn could not yet make out the sign, but she knew it was there, waiting for her.

A soft voice from a darkened alcove startled her. “Hey there, little sister, what you all hurrin’ and rushin’ for?”

Two black men stepped out on the sidewalk, blocking her way. She had seen them before, never inside the Mission, but hanging around. “You stay clear, you hear? The Reverend

Bigtime, he the daddy of my baby.” The girl pulled aside the flap of her coat long enough for them to see that she was several months pregnant. “You touch me, the Reverend turn your heads into watermelon mush. Now get out of my way!”

The men mumbled something and shuffled aside. Jenny Lynn smiled secretly to herself. It wasn't true about the baby; she didn't know who had given her that baby, but she knew she wanted it more than anything else. It was conceived close to her fourteenth birthday, around the time her stepfather told Jenny Lynn he expected her to give him a little loving now that she was all grown-up. Maybe it was his baby.

The Mission was in the upstairs floor of an old house built for railway workers a hundred years ago. The girl climbed the wooden staircase and pounded her knuckles on a freshly painted door. A gruff voice asked who was there. She called out her name and the code word: *Stringy*. The door swung open and the owner of the voice poked his head into the porch to glance around. Once inside, Jenny Lynn watched the doorkeeper slide a steel bar back into place. Her heart raced as the first whiff of acrid smoke seeped into her nostrils. There were about two dozen people in the first of four rooms that made up the Mission, and stepping between so many strung out legs, coming to greet her, was the Reverend Bigtime himself, the proprietor of one of the most profitable crack houses in New York City.

“Hey, there's my sweet Jenny Lynn, now how you doin' honey chile?”

The girl smiled, not minding his big hands rubbing her breasts. “I'm doin' good, Reverend, real good. I brought you something.”

The proprietor, an overweight, sad man who once had a brief career in boxing, looked down at the crumpled twenty held in her hand. He took it, removing the crinkles as best he could, then put his arm around the girl. “You in luck tonight, sweet thing. Just gotta a new supply in, stuff so good it gonna send you so high you ain't never gonna come down.”

Jenny Lynn nodded anxiously, aware of the powerful aroma of cocaine in the air. She was careful not to step on the people as she was being led into the next room. The Reverend selected an unused corner for the girl, near a rusty water-heated radiator that kept the place warm. He helped take off her tattered duffel coat, then laid it on the bare wooden floor for the girl to sit on. With no furniture in any of the rooms, clients were forced to lay out or sit up against a wall. Across from the girl sat a businessman, his dark suit and tie looking out of place, his eyes intently studying the ceiling. There was little talk, just occasional sighs, everyone except the Reverend

and his doorman either climbing, sitting up there in the promised land, or working their way down. Men with their women, other teenagers like Jenny, an old man, his face a gray shadow in the smoke, butane torches flaring and burning, turning minuscule pieces of near-pure cocaine into heaven.

The Reverend slid a glass pipe into her hand, and with the other hand Jenny took the small glass vial that contained the magic of her life. He laid the torch at her side, pinching her breasts one last time. “Sweet dreams, baby. Have a good one.”

Like the majority of addicts in New York City, Jenny had been doing jumbos for over a year, having slipped away from heroin and its derivatives because it couldn't compete with the wild rush of crack. There were chemicals out there that were even better, China White, Fentanyl in its various forms, ecstasy, weird designer drugs, new stuff hitting the street every week, but these were dangerous, and people died. She'd had friends who'd died, died horrible deaths. Jenny Lynn didn't want to be one of them.

She was on her way up, racing past the colored lights, heart pounding, head swelling, beginning to float...this was special, she knew it right away, good stuff, just like the Reverend said. The sudden rush was wild and free, faster and better than ever before, everything fine now, even the baby was climbing with her. *I want to stay here*, she cried inwardly, *if only I could stay....*

The man in the dark suit noticed the girl's convulsive twist, one sharp toss and then stillness. He motioned to the Reverend, who was patrolling the room checking to see who might be ready for their next hit. He followed the gaze of the businessman and knelt down on one knee to see if Jenny Lynn was okay. The girl didn't respond to his hand on her shoulder. He moved closer, close enough so that no one else could see, and rested his finger on her neck. Nothing. He checked the other side. Nothing.

The Reverend stood up, saying, “Sure thing, honey chile, you want to sleep away the night here in the Mission, you're welcome to it. I call you in the morning, make sure you're not late for school.” He nodded at the businessman, grinning a bit. “Little girl had a hard day, gonna stay and sleep awhile.”

Downstairs in his private quarters, the Reverend Bigtime mulled over his predicament. He'd have to wait until the rooms thinned out, then get the body into the trunk of his caddy and go past some old building they were wrecking so he could get a few chunks of concrete to weigh

down the body. He had to be careful, because the fastest way to shut down a house was for stories of bad shit to hit the street. Then he had an even bigger problem on his hands, trying to figure out if that whole supply was bad, or if any of it was bad. Perhaps it was the girl, problems with her pregnancy or something.

Poor little Jenny Lynn, he thought. A nice kid, quiet, respectful, let him feel her up whenever he wanted. She needed her dreams, she once told him. Why, he didn't know, but all junkies had their own private reasons; it wasn't his business to snoop. He just provided a service. "Poor little Jenny Lynn," he whispered softly into the night. "Ain't gonna dream no more....ain't gonna dream no more..."



CHAPTER ONE

Lind Grenier was an adventurous man. Otherwise, he would not have agreed to spending two years of his life in an isolated forestry training center. But during the past fourteen months the island of Madagascar with its strange and haunting beauty had somehow managed to lay claim to his soul. A dedicated photographer, he in turn had captured on film, flowers and birds and butterflies found nowhere else in the world.

Now he was its prisoner, in more ways than one.

He had returned to Tsingy in an attempt to solve the mystery of his recording machine, but this time had become hopelessly lost, despite having carefully marked his progress through the maze with pieces of flagging. By the time he realized that the bright colors provided an irresistible attraction to a family of ring-tailed lemurs, it was too late. There was still enough light to see the animals spread out across the branches of one of the enormous tamarind trees found inside Bemaraha Tsingy National Reserve. Fortunately, he had brought along his ice pick, an old companion from his days of climbing mountains in his native Switzerland, otherwise he would not even been able to sit upon the razor-sharp limestone surface.

Located in the west central part of the island, millions of years ago Tsingy had been one massive limestone plateau of some six hundred square miles. Since then natural erosion had cut deep into the plateau, turning it into so many thousands of jagged peaks. As he bent down to

chip away a place to spend the night, Lind had to fight off a strong sensation that the wall of spires towering thirty meters above were slowly closing in around him. Pieces of rock flew in all directions as he scrambled to complete his task before darkness settled in. It would rain tonight, and perhaps another thunderstorm would add to his discomfort. At least down here at the base of one of the pinnacles he was safe from lightning. Constant storms on the westerly side of the island were responsible for a good number of deaths. Lind had good reason to be cautious, because he had come across them himself, small bodies of the Malagasy, not all that far from the boundaries of the reserve.

Near the perimeter he had seen two natives and called out, but they ran from him. Probably hunters or honey gatherers who mistook him for the law. Lind stood up and listened carefully. Another huge flock of bats swarmed overhead. An owl called from nearby. He was certain he heard voices this time, and experienced a sense of relief. They would know the way out.

It dawned on him then that the men were speaking German, which puzzled him. French was common enough in and around the commercial centers of Madagascar, but never German. They had to be foreigners, like him.

"Hallo, Guten tag?" he shouted.

No reply.

Lind called again, this time telling them he was lost and asking their assistance.

Still no reply.

After a few more attempts, he sensed no help was forthcoming from these foreign voices and bent over to finish off the last few ridges. In the morning he would travel east, toward the sunrise, and eventually he would find his way out. So he was not overly concerned as he laid out his jacket and pulled his poncho tight around him. At worst, he would spend a miserable night, a fitting punishment for being stupid.

After settling in, he switched on the tape recorder, wondering again if it were possible to trace the source of the unusual feedback he had picked up during his last trip. He had been playing back a number of bird calls at his friend's home, when Wilhem's dog, a mastiff, began to grow nervous. It didn't take Wilhem long to determine that it was something on Lind's recording machine that had caused his dog to react. A few days later Wilhem told Lind he was convinced the animal was reacting to an ultrahigh frequency feedback. At some point in his last trip to

Tsingy, Lind had been close to a powerful radio transmitter. Impossible, Lind told him. Not only was Tsingy closed to the public, but the park was all but impossible to penetrate. There were no roads, no trails, even access by air was impossible. Thick rubber soles were required to traverse the weathered razorback ridges. No one in Tsingy would have a radio transmitter.

Nevertheless, Wilhem had fixed up a sensitivity indicator on the recorder that he claimed would resolve the mystery. So Lind had returned, fascinated by Wilhem's absolute conviction that wherever he had recorded those particular calls, there also was a transmitter, or something of an electronic nature. Lind had done his best to retrace the route he had taken on his previous expedition three weeks earlier, but soon found that once inside the limestone labyrinth everything looked the same. He pushed the record button and slowly moved the unit in a circle, just as he had done all afternoon. The indicator light did not come on. The deep, slow roll of thunder in the distance confirmed his earlier suspicion.

With the first indication of a storm came the wind, tearing through the pinnacles and creating a peculiar chorus of sharp whistling noises. Lind reached out to shut off his recorder, but noticed the indicator light had come on. He stared at it for a moment in surprise. Then it occurred to him: with so many overtones of sound being created by the wind, was it not reasonable to assume that some could be beyond the range of human hearing? Of course. There was the answer, and perfectly obvious, he thought. So much for the electronic genius, upon whose solemn assurance he would now have to spend one damnedably uncomfortable night. Radio transmitter indeed, he grimaced, as he settled into his limestone nook to await the rain.

*

Some two hundred meters northwest and twenty meters underground, three men were engaged in a heated debate. The language was German. "This is no local native, Victor. Zap this one and you run the risk of an investigation."

The speaker was tall and gaunt, and had seen little sun in the last few months. Overhead florescent lights made his face appear even more sallow. The other two were seated, each holding a glass of sherry. Behind a single desk in the room sat the older of the two, Victor. At eighty-three years of age he was near bald and had been forced to wear thick lenses to compensate for his failing vision.

Victor tapped his desk impatiently and said, “An order is an order. Zurich knows who he is and a decision has been made. Which leaves us with no choice in the matter. Therefore I suggest you get on with it.”

The third man had his chair tipped back against the wall to the left of Victor. His name was Erich. “Perhaps Karl is reluctant, Herr Doctor; after all, this one is not a miniature piece of shit like the others. He is a Swiss forester, a man capable of putting up a good fight.”

Karl Schuster, a West German hired six months earlier to look after security, reacted by starting toward Erich. He felt the time had come to wipe the sneer from his face.

Victor jumped up before Karl reached the man. “Erich is young, my friend, and youth and arrogance go hand in hand. Do not waste your energy. Besides, he is the only chemist we have. As for the intruder, take two of your men and seal off the southeast passage. We will assemble the tubing. Call in when you have him or if you encounter difficulties.”



Lind rolled over as the first few sprinkles of rain fell on his poncho. He was having unpleasant thoughts about Wilhem. It was completely dark now, with the thunderstorm drawing closer. He listened to the ringtails nearby; they too were restless. Lightning flashed across the sky, releasing its primary charges. He heard noises, probably tamarind pods falling to the ground. He thought of Anna, and suddenly felt a deep longing for his mountain home and his beautiful wife.

The eerie, haunting call of the giant Indri, the largest of Madagascar’s lemurs, echoed in and out the spires. The Malagasy believed these animals were known to strangle humans in their sleep. They also claimed Tsingy to be a sinister place, and that the spires were the devil’s teeth, which chewed up intruders and then swallowed them. Lind knew these were just stories the typically superstitious natives made up. All primitive cultures had their evil omens and such. Even so, he began to feel an unaccountable sense of being afraid.

*

Karl had learned to traverse the reserve in the dark. The area surrounding the project had been aerial mapped the previous year by ZIAN and each spire assigned a number. The Swiss had scraped out a spot to spend the night near the base of 137. Karl would approach from the north, from behind 139. He eased back the safety on his MP-44 assault rifle. Then a lightning flash

created daylight for a split second, just long enough for him to see that his quarry was sitting up. This alarmed the German, and he suddenly wondered if the man was armed.

But the lightning had also exposed Karl. Seeing a man approach with a weapon held at the ready, Lind snatched up his ice pick and bolted around the limestone base.

“Herr Grenier, please do not run. You have nothing to fear and you will only slip and fall on the razorbacks.”

Lind stopped dead at the sound of his name spoken in German. Confused, he called out, “Who are you?”

“Please remain where you are, Herr Grenier. I will explain in a moment.”

Lind was startled when two more armed men approached from behind. “Do what the nice man says, Herr Grenier, and you won’t be hurt. And drop that nasty little toy.”

He did as he was told and waited. Seconds later a powerful light beam scanned his face, forcing the Swiss to avert his eyes.

“You are to be congratulated, Herr Grenier. Only a handful of foreigners have dared to enter the maze, and none so deeply as you.”

Lind did not care for the rough hands searching him for weapons. “To my misfortune, it appears.”

The tall man who had called to Lind passed his light to another and spoke into a hand radio as the sky flashed its anger in a great sweeping arc. “All clear. We are returning to base.” To the same man he said, “Pick up his effects and be certain to check the area completely. And now, Herr Grenier, I will assist you to our humble little shelter where you will have a good bed and a decent night’s sleep. So much better than trying to sleep on these damn limestone ridges.”

After some ten minutes of stumbling along between the two men, Lind was astonished to see a brightly-lit doorway appear ahead of them. Once inside, the door closed automatically as they began to descend a steep staircase cut into the rock. A powerful chemical odor, strong enough to make him rub his eyes, rose up to greet them.

They arrived at a landing, where a rough wooden floor had been laid down over the limestone. The excited swoosh of many small wings high above made him realize some of the pinnacles were hollow.

“Hell of a stink, isn’t it?” said the tall man leading the way. “Takes some getting used to.”

He paused to reach behind a door for a towel, then gave it to Lind with an unexpected smile. "I suppose I should have stopped to let you pick up your rain gear, but lightning makes me nervous."

The man behind Lind chuckled. "I don't wonder," he said. Their destination was a large, office-like room with a couch, a desk, and a few chairs. An elderly man behind the desk rose upon their entry. "Well done, Karl. Delighted to have you join us, Herr Grenier. So few visitors drop in these days and you have no idea how lonely it can become down here. Please have a seat and tell us all about yourself. Erich, a sherry for our guest."

Lind shook his head, wondering if it was all a dream. Could he really be sitting in an office beneath the most forbidding piece of real estate on the face of the earth? He leaned over the old man's desk. "A few questions are in order, it seems. For instance, who in hell's name are you, and just what is it you are doing in Tsingy?"

Another man entered the room, carrying Lind's shoulder pack with his camera equipment and tape recorder. He laid the recorder on the desk. "Take a look at this sensitivity indicator. What do you suppose it is intended for?"

The old man's eyes narrowed as he ran his fingers over the crudely mounted dial. He looked coldly at Lind. "Perhaps Herr Grenier will be kind enough to tell us."

But Lind remained silent, because in a darkened corner of the room he had spotted a sophisticated radio transmitter. He apologized to Wilhem in his mind, at the same time realizing that he had apparently uncovered some kind of criminal activity.

But what kind?

The younger man in the room, Erich, wore a Cheshire grin as he studied the Swiss. "It seems our guest is not going to cooperate after all. A little sport would go a long way to alleviate the boredom of this enterprise. What do you say, Victor?"

The old man scowled. "Shut up, Erich." He pushed a button on his intercom. "How much time before this one passes over?"

"No more than fifteen minutes," a voice answered in German. "There's a follow-up due in around four."

Victor glanced up at the tall man who had brought in Lind. "Do we have a problem on our hands or not?"

Karl looked down at the tape recorder to study it for a moment. He turned it on, pushed REVERSE and then PLAY. Several birdcalls filled the room, lemurs chattering away, a faint roll of thunder. Immediately after the thunder, the indicator light came on for a few seconds, followed by the familiar sound of wind whistling through the spires. The security chief continued to stare at the recorder for a full minute before glancing at his watch and then at the radio transmitter.

He finally turned to the Swiss forester with a somber look.



CHAPTER TWO

Lieutenant Charlie Bannerman sweated a lot. At five eight, he was two-twenty and growing. A constant diet of bagels, pizzas and doughnuts had turned his body into a disaster, a fact his superiors frequently brought to his attention. Problem was, he had developed the same tenacious attitude toward his food as he had toward his job: when he bit into something he never let go. In the majority of homicide cases, this trait was beneficial to the Department. Occasionally, like right now, it was a pain in the ass. Captain Harry Ulansky was fast running out of patience as he listened to Bannerman ramble on.

“Come on, Harry, we know there’s lots of bad shit on the streets. Too much. All I’m saying is we got enough similarities going to make a rational assumption that some of it is being put out there for a specific purpose. And that purpose is to kill.”

Ulansky jammed his eyes shut, but when he opened them, Bannerman was still there. “Charlie, Charlie, there is always bad shit on the street. This is not news. Bad shit kills. This is not news. But you’re asking me to believe the pushers are doing away with the source of their income—which is bullshit. So we got twenty-two stiffes in a couple of weeks, nineteen of which show cause of death as aggravated heart failure. Sure, I’ll admit the pattern is similar. So what?”

The veteran officer rolled his head around. “I didn’t say it was the pushers. I’m not crazy enough to believe that. Look, just give me a few days, I’ll get Rizzo and Little Sammy Carletti started on it. I’ll feed the whole enchilada into the computer. I’ll get the lab boys to—”

“Goddamn it, Bannerman, don’t fuck with my life!” With that Ulansky stood up, a full five inches closer to the ceiling than his subordinate. “We have the best forensic people in the business and they’re telling us any combination of this shit can kill. Yeast, baking soda, valium, a whole menagerie of amphetamines, fuckin PCPs, a bunch of that synthetic crap like Fentanyl, even heroin, all mixed in with pure cocaine! And you wonder why we got so much crow bait floating around. What I don’t understand is why the number isn’t ten times as high.”

He sat down again, pissed off at himself for getting upset so easily. Bannerman had that effect on people. “Let’s not read into this sudden splurge of corpses some evil plot against New York City. The ones classified as homicide are ours. How many you got there—four? The ODs are accidental or suicide—out of our hands, finished. The narcs have the whole shemozzle on their plate, so let them play with it. It’s their baby, okay?”

Bannerman rolled his head around some more. It was a particularly annoying mannerism of his, since it was impossible to tell whether he was agreeing or disagreeing. He had been standing the whole time in front of Ulansky’s desk holding the four files in his sweaty palms as if he were making an offering. “Look, Captain, I think the reason our guys can’t find anything out of the ordinary is because it’s beyond their capability. Things out there are moving too fast for them to keep up.”

When the senior official began to grit his teeth, Bannerman added quickly, “Okay, forget Rizzo and Carletti. Just fix it so I can get my hands on the autopsy reports and samples of the recent stuff that’s come in. Dolman told me about this computer whiz in the biology department over at Columbia. He says this guy created a program that can break down the components of any substance in the world. What do you say, Harry, that’s not so much to ask.”

Ulansky buried his head in his hands. With anyone but Bannerman, he could stare the man in the eye and discuss things rationally. He looked up to see the hangdog look, the face the guy wore when he was trying to wheedle something out of his superiors.

“When you came in here this morning I felt great, organized, in control of my life. You have succeeded in giving me heartburn, a headache, and a sense of insecurity. There is now some question of my ability to carry on as head of this department. What is this aversion you

have to the word ‘no’? Charlie, it is a simple word, it means you are to stop, that you must not go on, that this particular phase of your life has come to an end. And it means if you insist on pursuing this line of reasoning, I will personally tear out your fucking balls and stuff them down your throat!”

“Gosh, Captain,” said Bannerman, backing away. “You never told me there was Arabic blood in your family.”

Ulansky’s voice followed the detective as he made a quick exit. “You are dead! Do you hear me, *dead, dead, dead!*”

“Having a disagreement, are we?” asked Nancy McIvor, whose desk was closest to Ulansky’s office.

Charlie paused at her desk, the four homicide files now tucked under his arm. “It’s not good for his health, you know, to get all worked up like that.”

McIvor looked up, smirking. “It’s only with you, Charlie. Somehow, you manage to bring out the best in people.”

Bannerman made his way down a flight of stairs, wondering how he was going to get his hands on the exhibits. At the end of a long hallway, he pushed through the double doors into the police laboratory. He went to see Dolman first.

Dolman took in Charlie’s crumpled suit, saying, “Lieutenant, I heard they’re redoing Jake and the Fatman, and you’re gonna play the Fatman. That true?”

The officer’s eyes flickered, but he said nothing. It was hard to tell with Charlie whether all the kibitzing got to him or not.

“What do you have on that professor at Columbia?”

“A name, Lieutenant, just a name. And a telephone number.”

He took down the information, then stood by Dolman’s desk for awhile, thinking. It was something he did on a regular basis anywhere in the building, so Dolman paid no attention.

Finally Charlie asked, “Frank, how many crack exhibits we got on hand?”

“Hell of a pile at the moment: over a hundred.”

“I need a dozen, the most recent we took in.”

Dolman looked up from his telescope. “So, get the Captain’s John Henry on the bottom line, they’re yours.” Catching Bannerman’s pained look, he added, “Ulansky won’t go for it?”

“He prefers to believe that nineteen ODs with exactly the same type of heart failure is a natural result of some new chemical shit they’re adding in.”

Dolman pushed his chair back, taking off his glasses to rub his eyes. “Which could be the bottom line, who’s to say otherwise?”

Bannerman stared down at Dolman’s bald spot for a bit before answering. “I gotta bad feeling about this one, Frank. Something different is going on out there.”

Dolman nodded. Charlie’s gut feelings were legendary around the Department. “Okay, Lieutenant, what do you want me to do?”

*

“Dr Carswell?”

“Yes, speaking.”

“This is Lieutenant Bannerman of the NYPD, Twenty-First Precinct, Homicide Division. Heard about your new program. I believe it might have some application in a case I’m working on.”

“This comes as a bit of a surprise, Lieutenant. I hadn’t realized word of BTI had leaked out. If you can give me some indication of the problem, perhaps I can tell you if I can be of help.”

“This isn’t something that should be discussed over the phone. What are the chances of coming over to see you right away?”

“I’ll be free at two forty-five. You know your way around Columbia?”

“Yeah, you’re in the Sherman Fairchild Center, aren’t you? Park under the Computer Science building and take the stairs?”

“Or the service elevator. Check in with reception, the girl will direct you to my office.”

“Gotcha. By the way, what does BTI mean?”

“It stands for Biology to Infinity, just my way of telling God I’m hot on his tail.”

*

It was mid-November and the first few wet snowfalls had already come and gone. The last leaves on the oak trees lining Fifth Avenue were beginning to die. Bannerman had spent most of his life thinking about death in one form or another. His old man had caught it in Iwo Jima—a hero, with two Silver Crosses sitting atop a whole mess of other decorations. Bannerman was not a hero. He didn’t have a taste for violence, and had yet to fire his revolver in

a real life situation. But he had friends in the force who bragged about how many people they'd blown away—killer cops. Bannerman knew these guys were necessary, because there was always scum on the streets ready and willing to turn their corner or their block or their district into a jungle.

He glanced at his watch and pulled in beside a street peddler to pick up a few bagels. Charlie never did marry. He had quit school in grade nine to help his mother support the family. On the docks he'd met Sofia, and fell hopelessly in love. He bought her a ring, using every cent he had saved up. While strolling along the banks of the Hudson one evening, Sophia ripped off her engagement ring and threw it in the river. She had a fiery temper, something that only added to her appeal up till then. Charlie watched the tiny ripples disappear, turned around, and walked away. Sophia was the beginning and the end of serious women in his life. The following spring at the age of nineteen, he joined the NYPD.

At the service entrance off Amsterdam, he flashed his badge at the black guard leaning against the stone wall. He found a parking spot close to the staircase, locked the door and brushed the crumbs off his blue serge suit. He made a fruitless effort to button it up while climbing the inside steps. The receptionist told him to keep on climbing. Carswell's office was seven doors from the head of the stairs on the fourth level.

Inside he found a bearded young man wearing a gray turtleneck sweater perched on a highchair before a green chalkboard with his runners hooked over the lower rungs, elbows on his knees, and head resting in his hands. He raised his eyes at Charlie's unannounced entry.

"Lieutenant Bannerman, I presume?"

"Right. You're Carswell?"

"The very same," he answered, jumping off the chair with a sudden leap. He stretched and groaned for a bit before sliding into an armchair behind his desk. "It so happens that I like mysteries, Lieutenant. Do you have a little mystery for me to solve?"

Bannerman nodded, sensing the vast amount of energy in the guy. "Got one sure enough. But I doubt if it's going to be solved that easily, maybe not at all."

Carswell grinned, creating a hole in the wall of dirty blond hair on his face. His blue eyes sparkled. "If it was easy it wouldn't interest me. Let's see what you have in the briefcase."

He placed the case on his knees, took out the exhibits Dolman had signed out from Property and laid them on the desk. "This is street junk, crack. It's got all kinds of shit added to

it, most of which is capable of killing if the dosage is high enough.” The biologist fingered the little plastic bags while Charlie removed the autopsies and other paperwork. “These are the case files on nineteen drug-related deaths that occurred within the limits of the Twenty-First over a two week period. During the same time frame every other Precinct who deals with our type of serious drug problem reported a similar increase in their ODs. Most, but not all of these deaths were caused by severe paroxysmal tachycardia, meaning their heartbeat went crazy. Since various types of amphetamines have been around for years, paroxysmal tachycardia isn’t news to us. But even with the most severe case of rapid heartbeat the victim usually recovers. Now all of a sudden we got a hundred junkies wiped out because their hearts went out of control.”

“Has there been a comparative study done of the victims’ blood and urine samples?”

Charlie rolled his head around. “Sure, the usual studies were carried out, and the lab found everything you can imagine, but nothing we hadn’t seen before. The kicker is—in every single case crack was used, and for the most part the buys were made at the local crack houses. Naturally the bodies were removed from the premises and dumped on the street, or in the river. Some were even weighed down.”

“Which makes it homicide.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. The houses have their reputations to protect. They get rid of the bodies as best they can. If the victim is known to frequent a certain place, the owner won’t want his name linked with that death because his regulars might suspect he’s selling them bad shit.”

“So your victims could come from any part of the city?”

“They could.”

Carswell swung his head around to study the figures on the chalkboard. “And you want me to try to determine which substance or combination is killing them.”

“Something like that.”

“You think it’s being done deliberately?”

“I do.”

“A sort of gang warfare, one faction trying to knock the other out of business?”

“That occurred to me, but I’m having real problems seeing the logic, because, well, nobody wins. By the way, these exhibits got nothing to do with the cases. They’re examples of the current stuff coming off the street. If you could look over the autopsies and lab reports, and then run an in-depth analysis on the samples, it might tell us something.”

“Looking for some common thread.”

“A common thread, yes—but one that kills.”

Carswell took in Charlie’s mournful look and the sad state of his attire. “You the investigating officer in all these cases?”

“Only four have been classified as homicide. They’re mine. The files on the others are closed or about to be. I’m conducting this research on my own.”

“I see,” said Carswell, pulling the crack samples toward him.

Bannerman laid his stack of files on the desk. “You can have these until noon tomorrow.” He watched Carswell open one package and then another. “Try not to mix up the contents, although I doubt if anyone would know the difference. What do you think, Doc, can your program handle it?”

Carswell didn’t bother to look up. “You know what a gigaflop is?”

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s a term used to describe the performance of the big new mainframes about to hit the market. A gigaflop is the ability to conduct trillions of floating-point calculations every second. Downstairs we have a pair of interfaced Cray Y-MPs with a nine gig potential. In them is stored the known data on all the world’s natural elements.”

“Natural—”

“Just a moment, Lieutenant, I’m not finished. All that information is stored in memory. What do you know about AI?”

“Artificial intelligence as applied to computers.”

“Good. That is exactly what it means.” Carswell popped up from his desk holding one of the exhibit bags in his hand. “No matter what is contained in this little bag, BTI will sniff it out. If it is a completely unknown substance, the program will conduct its own research and tell us what it is in generic terms. Even so, under these circumstances that may not be good enough. You’ll want to know where it comes from, and I can’t guarantee we can provide you with that information.”

Charlie used the edge of the desk to help himself up. “Over the years I’ve found that correct identification is the first requirement in these sorts of oddball cases. You tell me what we got and I’ll take it from there. Here’s my card. I’ll get back to you in the morning—and Doc, I don’t have to tell you this is super-confidential.”

Gary Carswell smiled, offering his hand. "You don't, but you did anyway."

*

Charlie Bannerman's Brooklyn apartment was not an exotic setting, yet it was much neater than its occupant. This was due to Charlie's three older sisters who had given up recommending eligible women for his consideration and taken on the job themselves of keeping their brother's place in order. They also did his laundry and ironed his clothes; problem was that Charlie tended to live in the same outfit for days at a time. If he had a hobby at all it was reading everything he laid his hands on, most of which he stored away somewhere inside his head for future reference. He never smoked, had only an occasional beer, and still went to church from time to time. His private life was a counterpoint to his public life and Charlie was content, or at least thought he was.

That evening he killed two Budweisers while mulling over some loose ends in one of his current cases. He fell asleep with the light on and the case file in his hand. The telephone rang at 3:37. He glanced at his clock before answering it.

"Bannerman."

"Gary Carswell, Lieutenant. I have something to show you. Can you come over?"

"Right now?"

"If you can make it."

"Give me an hour."

*

A note pinned to one of the glass doors provided directions to the computer room. Carswell was all alone facing two oversize computer screens each displaying a series of random numbers. He shoved a chair across the floor for Bannerman.

"A little test for you, Lieutenant." He punched a few keys and the screens cleared. A few more keys and both screens showed a pear-shaped ellipsoid. Inside was a configuration of numerous hexagons, much like a honeycomb. "What I've done so far is isolate the foreign elements from each of the samples you gave me. I must commend your people on an excellent job, because their reports list every trace element Dan found."

"Dan?"

“This is Dan,” he answered impatiently, throwing his arms in a sweeping arc to take in all the computer apparatus. “Both monitors are showing us, in graphic form, the chromosome breakdown of a single cocaine cell. Can you spot any difference between them?”

Charlie squinted at the screens for a moment. “Uh, uh,” he answered.

“I’m going to take the right display and overlay it on the left one.” This he did and turned again to Bannerman. “Pull your chair in and take another look.”

This time Charlie took a bit longer. “I can only see one figure.”

Carswell took a magnifying glass from the desk and passed it to Charlie. He placed the tip of a pencil on the screen. “Tell me what you see here.” Bannerman moved the glass back and forth until he focused exactly on the pencil point. What he saw was a slight bulge in one of the hexagon sides.

“A bulge, is that it?”

“You got it—just the tiniest bulge.”

Bannerman rubbed his eyes. “Christ, how did you manage to find that?”

“I didn’t, Dan did. From the dozen samples you left me I took a few grains from each. Four samples showed an identical bulge in the same chromosome, and the odds against that being done artificially are in astronomic proportion.”

“Shit,” said Charlie. “So we’re talking about a natural alteration, some environmental quirk in the development of the coca leaves.”

Carswell stared at Bannerman for a moment, nodding finally. “You’ve drawn the obvious conclusion, but not the correct one. You mentioned the environment. After Dan pointed this out to me, I sent him on an environmental scan of the various pollutant factors spread throughout the atmosphere. We can be reasonably assured that two of these samples came from south central Bolivia, one from east central Peru, and the fourth from northern Bolivia, close to the Brazilian border.”

Charlie scratched his head. “But didn’t you just get through telling me—”

Gary Carswell grinned. “Fascinating, isn’t it? So we know it isn’t something that happened in the development stage of the plant. And because of the variety of impurities and the amounts added, we also know these particular samples were cooked up in different locations—three, to be precise.”

Feeling a touch of frustration, Bannerman said, “You tell me it has to be something natural, then you tell me it can’t be natural. Where does that leave us?”

“Dan is presently conducting a geographical analysis of our mystery chromosome. Let’s have a look at his progress.”

Carswell went to work at the keyboard again, causing the screens to revert to rows of numbers. He studied them for a moment before keying in further instructions. “The BTI program allows Dan to put our scanning electron microscope to work. I’ve asked him to let us view the DNA configuration on the right screen.”

This time the screen showed an array of colors, twisting and turning into the double helix that signifies the basic genetic code of all life forms. “Now I’ll ask him to circle any parts of the helix that have been affected by the altered chromosome.”

Three small black circles appeared on the screen, moving along with the intertwining arms of the pretzel-like three-dimensional image. “The numbers on the left is the computer utilizing its AI capability. All we have to go on so far is a peculiar mutation which took place at the molecular level. Dan is using his own logic and knowledge to formulate a solution, or a series of solutions. While he’s doing that, I’ll ask him to note the eccentricities in the DNA molecules and tell us whether such modification is capable of combining with pure cocaine or any of the foreign elements we found, in a form that could have a spasmodic effect on the heart.”

About ten seconds after Carswell had keyed in that particular set of instructions, the colorful twin spirals of the helix gave way to lines of text made up primarily of chemical symbols and numbers. Then the screen began to scroll, allowing Carswell to read the output.

He stopped the scroll and highlighted two lines. “Define!” he said and touched a single key.

A long set of chemical symbols raced across the screen and froze there. Carswell studied them intently. “Don’t jerk me around, Dan. Redefine!”

The screen cleared for a few seconds before another set of symbols appeared. To Bannerman they looked identical to the first set. “Problem?” he asked politely.

Carswell stood up and pulled the gray turtleneck over his head. “I’d say that Dan has overlapped my initial cellular search command with my second command to cross reference the eccentric DNA molecules. He was apparently unable to find a direct correlation and used his own initiative to presuppose a solution. What he’s given me is a formula for a nonexistent

substance which I can only surmise is a macro-amphetamine. The symbols jive, but the proportions are wild. This is rocket-booster stuff he's showing us, a drug capable of rupturing the heart muscle in seconds."

"But isn't that possible? That's not too far removed from the actual cause of death."

"No way, Lieutenant. Don't forget, only a single chromosome has been altered." He walked over to a small table and plugged in a kettle. "It doesn't matter whether we're talking natural or artificial modification, this scenario is just not possible." When he turned around to face Bannerman, again he wore a pained look on his face.

"I just had a perfectly disgusting idea. Ugh! I hate to even think of it. You drink tea?"

"When I have to." Charlie stood up, stretched, and removed his jacket. "Are you getting anywhere?"

Carswell glanced at a wall clock. The time was 6:03. "When do you have to be at work?"

"I usually arrive around seven-thirty. Why?"

"Do you have access to the morgue?"

"Sheesh! You want a sample from one of the victims, right?"

Shaking his head as he unplugged the kettle, Carswell said, "You're pretty fast on the draw, Lieutenant. Specifically, the heart from one of your victims. Can you think of a better way to disprove Dan's conclusion?"

Charlie watched two tea bags sink into a cup of boiling water. "Have you ever considered, Doc, that you might have bugs in your program?"

Carswell set his mouth under the blond hair that covered it. "This program has an elaborate set of checks built into it. If a mistake has been made, Dan will let me know. He honestly thinks the answer he gave us is correct."

"Which you say is impossible."

For the first time, Bannerman thought he detected a tiny crack in the biologist's armor of self-assurance. He passed the second cup to Charlie and returned to the keyboard. "I'm going to ask for a status report on how the cell search is progressing."

While the left screen continued to run what appeared to Charlie to be random numbers, the right screen listed a set of headings down the left side: GROUP, ORDER, FAMILY, SUBFAMILY, TRIBE, SUBTRIBE, GENUS, SPECIES.

“Ah, so it is natural! This is the classification order of angiosperms, or flowering plants. Good boy, Dan. Now let’s see how far you’ve taken it.”

The computer immediately listed *Monocotyledonae* after GROUP, and *Liliiflorae* after ORDER. There it stopped. When Carswell prompted it, the left-hand screen flashed INSUFFICIENT DATA.

Carswell ran his fingers through his unruly hair. “Damned unusual. It got us as far as a flowering plant of the *Liliiflorae* order, and stopped dead.”

Bannerman asked, “What do all these random numbers mean?”

“You’re looking at the cell search being carried out in binary code. The screen is showing you how Dan thinks. Lieutenant, this is going to take somewhat longer than I anticipated. What about the morgue—can you borrow a specimen or not?”

“They won’t like it. Relatives get wind of something like that, they go bananas. How long will you need it?”

“At least twenty-four hours, maybe longer. From a male of good physical stature, if you can. I’ll have to bully my way into the electron scanner, but I have seniority. Can you run it back here before you begin work?”

Bannerman smiled, a reasonably rare occurrence. “I began work in nineteen fifty-six.”

*

By the time he reached the morgue it was seven forty-five. Several arguments later he was on his way back with a cold, unpleasant package. The receptionist informed him that Dr Carswell had called in sick and wasn’t expected in today. This threw Charlie into a tailspin for a moment, until he realized the obvious. The door to the computer room was locked and he had to identify himself before Carswell let him in. Bannerman could tell from his eyes that something was wrong.

“I had to force the next two classifications. So far we have the plant fixed in the *Orchidaceae* family, in the subfamily *Epidendroideae*. We know it is an orchid.”

Bannerman deposited his package on the computer desk, happy to be free of it. “An orchid?”

Carswell nodded, rubbing his eyes. “An orchid, but apparently one unknown to Dan, which by definition means it is an unlisted species. But something in the makeup of that chromosome is preventing the computer from using its logic to continue the identification

process.” He hoisted the package, feeling its weight. “I’m going to place this in the scanner and allow Dan to do a complete analysis on his own. The computer is off limits for the day. No one has access.” He yawned. “That will piss off a lot of people.” He glanced at the wall clock, adding, “My wife, especially.”

“What about the exhibits?”

“Everything is in the computer. I don’t need them anymore. Look, there’s no reason for you to wait around, since I really have no idea how long the process is going to take. If I don’t get back to you sometime today, how about dropping around early tomorrow morning?”

“Sure thing, Doc. Do I take it you’re impressed with the little mystery I brought you?”

“Lieutenant, I called you early this morning because I was certain that I would have the answer by the time you arrived. Once the parameters were defined Dan should have been able to spit it out in a matter of seconds. Instead, he’s completely stumped. So yes, you definitely have my attention.”

*

The call came just after four in the afternoon. “You better get over here, Lieutenant.”

“On my way, Professor.”

Carswell was biting his nails when he let Charlie in. He seemed on edge. “What’s up?”

“Come and have a look.”

The right screen showed the faded image of a delicate golden flower attached to a twisted brown stem. Bannerman studied it for a minute. “Is that our mystery orchid?”

“It is.”

Bannerman noticed the image was faded. “Anything you can do to make it sharper?”

Carswell looked hard at the police lieutenant. “That is as far as Dan will go on his own. Watch what happens when I command him to enhance the image.”

As the colors grew more vivid, in the background a pair of coal-black wings began to take shape and actually fluttered on the screen. Bannerman sat down and stared at the picture in awe. The divided wings appeared to be hovering behind and level with the top of the flower.

Both men watched for a few minutes before Carswell broke the silence. “It scared the living hell out of me when it first came on. For some fucking reason Dan seems unable to correlate the wings into the display—until I call for enhancement. And when I ask him why, all I get is the old incomplete data sing-song. In some weird manner that I can’t pin down on the

program, there's enough info available to partly ID the orchid, yet not enough to even acknowledge these goddamn wings!"

Charlie glanced at the biologist, wondering why he seemed to take it so hard. "How do you interpret all this?"

"It's like Dan doesn't even know they're there. I suppose the wings could represent a moth or a bird feeding on the nectar. But the bottom line is what you see taking place in front of you is...is inconceivable." Carswell turned away from the screen. "We started out looking for a chemical and wound up with a chromosome. I hate to admit it, Lieutenant, but this is getting over my head. My field is really biotechnology, not botany. I put in a call to Sam Bloom, but he can't make it until Sunday evening."

"Sam Bloom?"

"Your orchid is an unlisted species, from the island of Madagascar. Dr Samuel Ignatius Bloom is one of the world's leading botanists, and he *is* the leading expert on exotic orchidaceae. I believe it's imperative to get him involved without delay."

Bannerman picked up on the tone. "Something else you should be telling me?"

Gary Carswell ran his fingers over the keyboard, wiping clean both screens. "Dan didn't make a mistake this morning. His analysis of the super-amphetamine was correct. There's no longer any doubt that the majority of your victims died when this stuff, whatever it is, entered their bloodstream."

Charlie slumped in his chair, feeling no real sense of triumph. Instead, a great weariness seemed to take hold of him. Quietly he said, "It's being done deliberately."

"That's the only answer there is, Lieutenant."

"But it makes no sense. Would anyone really go through so much trouble just to knock off a bunch of junkies?" He rolled his head a little, puzzled. "Christ...Madagascar. You sure about this?"

"The ratio is eighty-seven percent certainty, odds high enough to bet your pension."



CHAPTER THREE

“There is a Monsieur René Simard on his way up to see you, Dr Grenier.”

Anna looked up from her desk at Marie, her gray eyes widening. “René? My cousin René?”

Marie shrugged her shoulders. “I doubt if the security guard asked him *that* question. Do you wish to see him or not?”

After all her years in Geneva, Anna was still put off by the unnecessary abruptness of the French. She had been with the World Health Organization almost since the completion of her internship in Zurich. But unlike Zurich, where the real Swiss lived—she would never voice that opinion aloud—Geneva was French, and the majority of the staff at WHO headquarters French. She nodded at the sullen-faced girl. “I’ll see him right away.”

She rose from her seat, feeling a small tingling of excitement. The past came flooding back to her: René, on the banks of the Limmat River, he was thirteen, Anna fifteen, locked in passionate embrace; René, so handsome, so aggressive. Below her fourth floor window, the maples were at the peak of their crimson glory. The gleam of Lac Lemman that usually greeted her in the summertime was now shrouded over by the fall mists. She had barely managed to escape with her virginity intact that last year.

Smiling, she caught part of her reflection in the window, and wondered what he would think of her now. People claimed she had a fine presence. Certainly she had inherited her mother's looks, a sort of Catherine Deneuve with cheekbones. By engaging in a relentless struggle to keep her weight in line, the final product was a moderately tall, well-built, attractive woman thirty-five years of age.

She had last seen René during the summer of sixty-seven. During that winter his family moved back to Paris, and he never again came to spend his summers with Anna and her brothers. They met only once since then, at her father's funeral, and Anna had been too distraught to even remember him.

When the door opened and Marie stepped aside, Anna caught her breath. "René? My God, is it really you?"

René returned her smile and quietly closed the door. Anna shook free from her shock and ran the short distance between them, throwing her arms around his neck. She could feel the tears sting her eyes. They kissed with an intensity that left her breathless.

"Anna, Anna, my smart, sexy, older cousin," he said into her hair. "I never guessed you would become so beautiful, nor so successful. A physician yet." He held her at arm's length. "Let me look at you."

She instinctively reached up to wipe her eyes, then broke free and punched him hard on the shoulder. "We were friends, damn you!"

"Almost lovers," he added, rubbing his shoulder.

She took in his features, seeing how they had changed, but recognized that same seductive glimmer in those same beautiful brown eyes. "Almost," she agreed, moving again into his arms. "All those years, René, couldn't you have at least written to me or called when you came home to visit your mother?"

"You were married. I met him at the funeral and felt insanely jealous, even if you were my cousin."

Anna broke free again. "That is hardly an excuse. I often told Lind about my handsome French cousin. You should have come to see us. Where have you been all this time?"

René pulled back, his smile dazzling. "Seeking my fortune out there in the big, bad world."

"Have you succeeded?"

He sighed. “Lady Luck and I did not get along so well. I did attempt university, but I am ashamed to tell you that it did not hold my attention for long. Eventually I became a simple government peon, just one of the masses, and made my home with the Bureau of Statistics, in Paris. Not very romantic.”

Anna led him to a chair, then took her own behind the desk. She leaned across, reaching one hand toward him. “It is so wonderful to see you again, René. So tell me, what brings you here, after all those years?”

He took her hand in both of his. “I was just down the street, at the U.N. building. I have a few days to kill, and thought I would begin by taking you and Lind out to dinner. How is Lind, by the way?”

Anna smiled. Her husband was perhaps the healthiest man she knew. “Lind is wonderful, but he just happens to be in Madagascar at the moment, so he will have to gracefully decline your invitation.”

René pursed his lips and was silent for a moment. Studying him, Anna concluded that his classic French looks would melt the heart, and the pants, of most any woman.

“Too bad. I had looked forward to finally getting to know him. However, my invitation stands. An evening at some quiet restaurant to renew old times. What do you say?”

Anna slowly withdrew her hand. *Damn you, Lind*, she said silently to herself. Her husband was just over half way through a two-year contract with a Swiss-sponsored forestry-training program on the island of Madagascar. During her frequent trips to the WHO HQ in Brazzaville, she did manage to stop off for a few days now and then. But in the last few months she had missed him more than ever before. After this project, they were to finally begin the family that Anna had longed for so desperately. She was well aware of the dangers of going to dinner with René.

“I would be delighted. Now tell me, it’s been twenty years, what have you been up to for twenty years? The last time I spoke to Aunt Giselle, you still had not married. And now?”

René rubbed a hand along the side of his face, feeling the dark shadow of whiskers. “I drove direct from Paris and arrived only a couple of hours ago. Would you be greatly offended if I went now to check into my hotel? There’ll be time enough during dinner to cover the past.”

Anna stood up, smiling radiantly. It was so good to see him again. “Of course not. And if Lind was home I would invite you to....”

René held up his hand, rising gracefully from his chair. “I understand perfectly. Write down your address for me and I’ll come by at, what, around eight?”

“Eight will be fine.” Anna jotted down her address, then walked around the desk to link her arm into René’s. She could feel the electricity between them, and it excited her.

*

She was surprised to find that René was staying at the *Hotel de La Paix*, a luxurious and expensive hotel on the lake. This is where he chose to take his cousin for dinner, a two and a half hour affair in the golden dining room with a bill of 240 francs at the end of the evening. Anna did not wish to inquire into the whys and wherefores of how an ordinary civil servant could afford such luxury, but the thought crossed her mind that he may have been trying to impress her. She was also surprised and a little disappointed when the meal was over that he did not invite her up to his room. Instead, they took advantage of the unusually warm mid-November evening to stroll along the lake and up Rue de Mont Blanc. They looked into the shop windows at the great variety of timepieces for which Geneva was famous, joking and giggling like teenagers at the wild price tags on the Cartier bags and Lacoste shirts and the other expensive items displayed along the city’s major thoroughfare.

They took a different route back, through the small red light district that had grown up in recent years along Rue de Berne. René asked a tough-looking blonde how much to spend the evening with both of them, but the woman knew he was joking and walked away mouthing a few classic French phrases. By now, Anna was beginning to come out from under the giddy effects of the champagne. A wind had started off the lake and she snuggled close to René as they rounded the corner of his hotel. Directly ahead, the crest of the *Jet d’eau* exploded into tonnes of spray as its pressure surrendered to the wind.

He paused near the front entry. “Home?”

Anna nodded reluctantly. It was all for the best, she knew, yet at the same time felt somehow cheated. She was convinced during dinner that he would at least try to seduce her.