

There the Bonnie Lassie Lives

- Excerpts from *A Fatal Feast* by Donald Bain, adapted and expanded by Anne (11.3.13)

Author's Note:

The title is taken from a line in Robert Burns' poem "Of a' the Airts":

*Of a' the airts the wind can blow
I dearly like the west,
For there the bonnie lassie lives,
The lassie I lo'e best.
There wild woods grow and rivers row,
And monie a hill between;
But day and night my fancy's flight
Is ever wi' my Jean.
I see her in the dewy flowers;
I see her sweet and fair:
I hear her in the tunefu' birds;
I hear her charm the air.
There's not a bonnie flower that springs
By fountain, shaw, or green;
There's not a bonnie bird that sings,
But minds me o' my Jean.*

Thanksgiving - it was of little consequence in Great Britain, except among the American ex-pat community, but I knew that in America itself it was a very important holiday to be spent, traditionally, with family and friends. And so when Jessica wrote to invite me to her home to share in her Thanksgiving, I was deeply touched and flattered.

I wanted to go - there was no question about that - but the logistics of the trip proved difficult to arrange. First there was securing the time off from the Yard, and then the challenge of travel arrangements. Altogether it was already November before I was able to tell Jessica that yes, I would definitely be able to come.

Once she had my answer, Jessica wasted no time in arranging things for me on her end. The next day, upon returning to my office from a meeting with the superintendent, I found an e-mail from her waiting for me in my inbox. Based on the time stamp, it was clear that she had sent it as soon as she had risen for the day, which portended some sort of news that she felt could not wait.

I was right; her short missive concerned my lodging arrangements for my upcoming visit. I had not expected that I would be staying at her house - by now I knew enough about the Cabot Cove gossip wires to realize that doing so would put her in an extremely awkward and uncomfortable position socially - but was not prepared for the alternative she suggested: staying at the home of Seth Hazlitt.

I went back and re-read the message twice more, just to make certain that I was reading it correctly. Her search for a hotel reservation had been fruitless, it seemed: between the reduced number of options available (apparently most of the town's lodging establishments had closed for the season) and the lateness of the date, it was impossible to find an available room.

This was my own fault, I realized: if I had committed to the trip sooner, it would probably have been no trouble finding a place for me to stay. But I had dithered, and waited too long to tell her I was definitely able to get away, and consequently now I was left with staying at Seth's or nothing.

Reading between the lines of her e-mail, I could sense Jessica's trepidation behind her words. It was more than just the suggestion that I stay in a friend's private home, an awkward thing to do in the best of circumstances and even more awkward considering that Seth and I were merely acquaintances. No; there was also an undercurrent of anxiety that pairing me with Seth, of all people, would entail courting a particular strain of discomfort for one or both of us.

She was right. When I first met Seth Hazlitt in London I immediately picked up on the fact that he had cast himself in the role of Jessica's guardian and protector, and that he viewed me with the same suspicious eye as a father appraising a questionable suitor for his daughter. Later, when he and Jessica and a contingent of their friends had come to stay at my home in Wick, I realized that Seth's feelings on the matter ran even deeper than that: not only did he view me and my intentions toward Jessica with suspicion, he also viewed me with a fair amount of jealousy. I remembered well a conversation I'd overheard them having one evening in the castle:

"It just seems to me that you and the handsome Scotland Yard inspector have an obvious mutual respect for each other. Anything beyond respect, Jessica?"

"Romance, you mean?"

"Ayuh. Always known you had pretty strong feelings for him. Knew that years ago when you met him in London. Fairly obvious to any astute friend. I know you pretty well."

"You certainly do. But do you know what, Seth? As much as I adore you - and you know I do - I really don't think whatever feelings I might have for George to be - of interest to anyone but me."

"Just don't want to see you get your feathers singed, Jessica. Only reason I bring it up."

"I don't have any feathers, Seth."

"Course you do. Every beautiful woman's got 'em. You're no exception. I'm sure Sutherland has noticed 'em."

To this day I had no idea whether Jessica was aware of this thread of jealousy that Seth harboured towards me or not. I had no desire to stir up the pot, but felt that in my own defense I needed to make absolutely certain she knew about the friction between me and her best friend, even if she didn't fully recognize its source. I tried to phrase my response as gently and as vaguely as possible:

"Good morning, Jessica, although it's late afternoon here in London. Are you convinced I won't be inconveniencing the good Dr. Hazlitt? I realize there isn't much choice in where to stay considering the lateness of the situation, but I wouldn't want to be a burden. You're aware, of course, that Dr. Hazlitt and I have not had what you might call an easy relationship. Never anything overtly unpleasant, but our encounters have been a bit strained nonetheless. Do I see

your fine hand here, eager to smooth away the rough fabric between a pair of your ardent admirers? At any rate, I'm most appreciative and I hope you'll extend my sincerest gratitude to him for opening his home to me. I can't wait to see you again and to share your uniquely American holiday. I'm the envy of the chaps in my office.

Warmly, George."

She wrote me back immediately:

"I know we'll have a wonderful time together. As for Seth, he was delighted, absolutely delighted, to welcome you into his home. I know he'll be the perfect host when he isn't seeing patients in his office wing. We'll get together and make this a truly splendid and memorable Thanksgiving.

Fondly, Jessica."

Well, there it was. Either Jessica was completely oblivious to the situation or, more likely, she was overstating things a bit - perhaps quite a bit. But there was nothing for it. The die was cast: when I travelled to Maine, I would be the houseguest of Jessica's best friend, the man who viewed me as a rival for her affections.

It would be an interesting time, to say the least.

I spotted Jessica and Jed Richardson immediately as I emerged from the gate area. Jessica saw me right away as well; her beautiful face lit with a radiant smile as she saw me approach.

"My goodness, what a sight for these sore eyes," I said, placing my hands on her arms and looking into her blue eyes. Heedless of those around us, I pulled her to me and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. How I had missed her!

"Aha," I said, turning to Jed next. "The man who delivered Jessica safely, and will do the same for us on the way home."

"Inspector," Jed said, shaking hands with me. "Good to see you again."

"Good flight?" Jessica asked.

"Splendid, as usual." I replied. "Mr. Branson certainly knows how to run a top-notch airline."

"Let's head back," Jed said. "There's some nasty weather in the forecast."

Because Jessica needed to add to her hours of piloting time, I sat in the rear seat so her instructor could sit next to her in the front. As we soared along the coast of New England I took the opportunity to ask Jed questions about flying and operating this particular plane. He was able to answer in detail, for the weather was holding and Jessica needed little coaching to fly us back to Cabot Cove. She made a flawless landing, which I applauded from my vantage point in the rear.

Half an hour later Jed dropped both of us at Jessica's front door. I left my suitcase in the foyer and followed Jessica into the kitchen.

"I feel very much at home here," I said with a sigh.

"I want you to feel that way," Jessica said emphatically. "Cold drink? Lemonade? Coke? Something stronger?"

“I wouldn’t mind a wee dram of whiskey, if you have it.”

“Coming right up.”

With a whiskey in my hand and a lemonade in hers, we settled in Jessica’s cozy living room and caught up with the news of our respective lives. She listened with rapt attention as I related tales of some of the more interesting cases I’d been working on at the Yard. But when I asked what had been going on with her, her face darkened.

“Well,” she said, reaching for a piece of paper sitting on the coffee table in front of us, “there have been these.”

I took the paper from her and studied it: a single sheet of white paper, with five letters pasted upon it: an orange C preceded by a much smaller G, L, O, and T.

“There have been others?” I said.

“Four others, one for each of the four preceding letters,” she said. “I don’t know what to make of them.”

“Nor do I,” I admitted. “Where are the other four?”

“With Mort Metzger,” Jessica said. “After the fourth one arrived, he agreed to send them up to the state police crime lab in Augusta for analysis.”

“A prudent decision,” I agreed. Handing the letter back to her I said, “I know it’s easy to dismiss these as nothing more than some silly prank, Jessica, but I believe they deserve serious consideration.”

“You really think so?”

“I think you know me well enough to realize that I wouldn’t say such a thing if I didn’t mean it. I don’t know what these pasted letters represent, but someone is sending you a message that in itself should be heeded.”

She sighed. “Maybe the crime lab will come up with someone’s prints.”

“A possibility,” I said. I repeated aloud the letters that had arrived to date - “G, L, an O, a T, and now a C. Do you think, Jessica, that this is the end of the letters?”

“I hadn’t thought about that,” she said. “It could be. Tomorrow is Sunday, so we have no mail delivery. We’ll have to wait until Monday to see if there are any more.”

“We have people at the Yard who specialize in deciphering obscure codes,” I told her, gesturing toward the letter. “Of course, your FBI is good at that, too. Have you contacted them?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I didn’t think it warranted getting the FBI involved. There haven’t been any direct threats.”

“Well, no need to create a kerfuffle just yet. Let’s keep it in your pocket for the future.” In spite of myself, I yawned.

Jessica smiled. “You must be exhausted with the time change and all. I think it’s time I delivered you to Seth’s house.”

“I must look like I came home with the milk,” I admitted, rising. “I’m knackered. I hate to end this conversation. We see so little of each other as it is, and I relish every moment.”

“I do too, George, but I want you to get settled in for a good night’s sleep,” she said. “I’ll call Seth to tell him we’re on our way, and then I’ll call a cab.”

To Jessica’s surprise, Seth offered to come around personally to collect me. When he arrived some fifteen minutes later, we greeted each other warmly - whether the warmth on his part was genuine or affected for Jessica’s sake I could not be sure, but I was too tired to worry

overmuch about it. The three of us walked together to Seth's car, where I deposited my suitcase in the boot.

"What's the schedule tomorrow?" I asked. "Will I have time to hire a car? I don't want to keep badgering my generous host here."

"Not really a problem," Seth said.

"We should have plenty of time," said Jessica. "I thought it would be nice to just hang out, as the teenagers like to say. A pancake breakfast at church, and then a walk around town. There's a rental agency near the docks."

"Sounds good to me," I said.

"I brought in some dinner for George and me," said Seth. "Nothing special, already cooked. Just needs to be heated up. Join us, Jessica? I brought plenty."

"I'm tempted," she said, "but I'll pass. I'll let you gentlemen become reacquainted over your dinner, and George, I'm sure, will want to head to bed early."

I was disappointed by her decision - her presence would have acted as a welcome buffer between Seth and myself - but then decided that if there was to be any difficulty between us, better to get it out in the open right away, without her watching.

As Seth slid behind the wheel, Jessica and I embraced - she was tense, which told me that the awkwardness of this gesture in front of him was not lost on her. But Seth made no comment as I let her go and joined him in the passenger seat of his car.

"I'll drop Inspector Sutherland here at eight, Jessica," he said to her. "That too early for you?"

"Not if it isn't for you and George," she replied. "See you then."

Seth took me on a tour of his surgery, after which we dined on the pre-made lasagna Seth had heated up. After dinner we sat down to conversation over a game of draughts. I was not in my best form, and distracted whenever the topic of conversation strayed to Jessica. Consequently it was a brief but decisive game as Seth handily defeated me.

"A rematch?" he asked.

I stifled a yawn and looked at my watch. It was nine o'clock, two in the morning back home. "I'm afraid I must beg off," I said. "Tomorrow, perhaps, I can rally to give you a better game than I gave you tonight."

"It'll be an early day tomorrow anyway, if we're meeting Jessica at eight," Seth said, rising with me, "so I guess I'll call it a night as well. You saw where the bathroom is, down the hall from your room?"

"Aye. Thank you again for putting me up."

"No trouble at all. Anything you need?"

"Not a thing. Good night, Seth."

"Good night, George."

Stars had been peeking through rents in the fast-moving clouds when Seth and I retired for the evening, but around three o'clock the next morning the storm front Jed Richardson had forecast arrived, with wind and fury and apocalyptic rains. The squall passed as quickly as it had

arrived, but for me the damage was done: I was awake, and still on London time, where it was already past eight in the morning. Like it or not, I was up for the day.

I wasn't entirely certain what to do with myself. I was loathe to take a shower and go downstairs, lest I wake my host, nor could I go for a walk because although the downpour was over, a light drizzle was still falling. In the end I satisfied myself with sitting in the window seat in my room, watching the storm pass offshore. What was Jessica doing at this moment, I wondered idly. She had probably been awakened by the storm, as I had, but undoubtedly she'd gone back to sleep, wreathed once more in what I fervently hoped were pleasant dreams.

I sighed at the image my mind conjured up of Jessica asleep in her bed, her face serene and her form completely relaxed. I had not yet been granted the opportunity to watch her sleep - our relationship was not yet at a point to allow such an intimate thing as that - but my imagination had no trouble filling in the gaps. In my mind I happily gazed upon the vision of my dreaming love as the dark clouds gradually receded away into the east, revealing pale stars in a gradually lightening sky, until the breaking dawn colored the last remnants of the storm in bright shades of orange and rose.

Not long after that I heard Seth up and about, and knew it was safe to start my day without fear of disturbing him. I showered, dressed, and met him downstairs in the kitchen for the first cup of coffee of the day.

"Storm wake you up in the middle of the night?" he asked me.

"Aye," I said. "It reminded me of the ones we sometimes have back home on the North Sea."

"Well, it seems like it's blown itself out, and we can look forward to a fat day."

I looked at him in confusion. "A ... what?"

"Fat day," Seth repeated, looking at me as if I were daft. "You know - lots of sunshine, warm temperatures, not much wind?"

"Oh," I said, nodding my understanding. "Yes - a fat day, indeed." Clearly this was a local expression. I wondered how the phrase had come by its origins, but decided not to ask.

Jessica was already outside and waiting for us when we pulled up in front of her house a little while later. I could see a shadow of anxiety in her expression, and knew she worried - not for nought - over how our evening had passed after we left her company.

"What did you two do in my absence?" she asked as I got out of the car to graciously hold the passenger door open for her.

"Seth gave me a tour of his surgery," I replied as I climbed into the backseat, "or rather 'doctor's offices' I believe is the correct term here."

"For awhile there, I wasn't certain we were speaking the same language," Seth said with a chuckle as he put the car in reverse and backed out of the driveway. "Served him one of Charlene Sassi's pies for dessert and he thanked me for the 'pudding.' And later he wondered if I played 'draughts.'"

"Draughts?" Jessica asked.

"That's checkers," Seth said.

"Of course," I added, "I didn't last long after dinner."

"I didn't know whether he was tired from the trip, or was bored with the conversation," said Seth, giving Jessica a grin.

“I assure you it wasn’t boredom,” I quickly assured him. “I slept like a baby. It’s a lovely flat, Seth, and I hope you know how much I appreciate you taking in this weary traveler.”

“My pleasure,” Seth said, sounding as though he meant it. I saw Jessica visibly relax as she decided that things had turned out all right in spite of her earlier fears.

“George was telling me about the psychological training Scotland Yard offers,” the doctor told her. “They’re teaching their staff how to judge whether or not someone is lying.”

“How interesting,” she said. “Is it usually accurate?”

“Spot on,” I said. “It requires careful observation, but I’d say it’s close to infallible, although there are always exceptions. If the criminal element know the same signals we do, they can always find ways to outsmart the system.”

“Still, the information could come in handy in my practice,” Seth mused. “Patients are not always straightforward with their doctors.”

“Did he teach you?” Jessica asked him.

“A few tips.”

“I’d love it if you’d teach me, too,” she said, glancing back at me. “I can use it in one of my novels.”

I daresay you’ll use it for more than just your novels, I thought to myself, but all I said was, “Happy to.”

Seth dropped us at the church, where after the service we enjoyed a community pancake breakfast served up by members of the congregation.

“I’m ready for that walk,” I announced as we stepped outside, “and let’s make it a brisk one. I never should have had that last pancake.”

We set off for downtown, saying little and enjoying the bracing fresh air blown in off the Atlantic. Inevitably we ran into friends of Jessica’s who were also out and about, and Jessica graciously introduced me to them. She had many friends, and it warmed my heart to see that she was so well-loved in her home town.

As promised, we stopped at the car rental agency where I arranged to pick up a car later that morning. Having accomplished this task we then wandered to the docks, walking out to the end of the longest one, the public landing. We stood there surrounded by the comings and goings of a genuine working waterfront, with commercial fishing boats as numerous as the pleasure craft.

“What a charming place this is, Jessica,” I said after lighting my pipe. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jessica smile as though with a fond memory. Frank had smoked a pipe on occasion, I recalled her telling me once.

“Living here as I do, it’s easy to forget how wonderful it is,” she said, rousing herself from her memories. “I’m afraid I sometimes take it for granted. It takes a visitor from out of town to remind me of its charm.”

“It’s so ...” I searched for the right words - “it’s so quintessentially American.”

“Just a slice of America,” she said, “but a precious one.”

I rested my hand on Jessica’s arm as we continued to gaze out at the sparkling water. At one point she turned, and I instantly felt her tense.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“No, it’s just that -”

I followed her eyes in the direction she'd been looking. "Is it that bloke?" I asked. "The one who looks like a tramp?"

"Yes," she said, then amended, "Well, no. He's not a tramp. He lives in a rooming house near one of our industrial parks. He's new in town. His name is Billups. Hubert Billups. He seems to spend a great deal of time watching me."

"Watching you?" I scowled in the man's direction, not at all liking what I was hearing. "Has he threatened you?"

"No. Never," Jessica hastened to reassure me. "I haven't even spoken with him, but he has been spending a lot of time on the road across from my house."

Hmmm. "That's a bit sticky."

"Probably not," she said, trying to shrug the situation off. "He's harmless enough."

"How do you know that?" I asked her.

"I don't know. I -"

"Is your Sheriff Metzger aware of this?"

"Yes. I mentioned it to him."

"And?"

"He said he'll send one of his officers to speak with him if he causes me any trouble."

Hmmmmmm. "I'm not persuaded we want to wait until he causes trouble."

"I don't want to create problems for someone unnecessarily," she sighed. "I know when to call for help." Jessica smiled up at me. "I've been taking care of myself for a long time."

"So you have," I replied, looping my arm around her shoulder in a protective gesture that fortunately she did not take amiss. I returned my attention to the harbor as I mulled over what she had just told me, taking contemplative puffs on my pipe as I did so. One of the constants about Jessica, it seemed, was that danger never seemed far from her ... not even here in Cabot Cove, her home, where she should have been safest of all. The thought made me uneasy.

"Let's continue our walk," Jessica suggested after awhile.

We were leaving the dock when we encountered a nervous woman that proved to be Jessica's new neighbor.

"Hello, Linda," she said.

The woman seemed to be in something of a rush but paused long enough to return her greeting.

"I'd like you to meet my friend, George Sutherland," said Jessica, introducing me to her. "He's with Scotland Yard. He's visiting Cabot Cove for the holiday."

"Oh. That's nice," Linda said, her face devoid of any emotion.

"A pleasure meeting another of Jessica's friends," I said.

"We're not," Linda said. At seeing me taken aback she amended, "I mean, we just moved here recently." She checked her watch. "I'd better get home. Victor is waiting for me."

As she hurried away I laughed and said, "Is she always in such a rush?"

"It seems that way," Jessica said with a shrug. "I don't know her that well. She and her husband bought a house down the road from me a few months ago. I invited them to join us for the holiday dinner on Thursday."

"How large a gathering will it be?" I asked.

She sighed wearily. "Twelve."

“And you’re doing all the cooking?”

“Not all of it,” she said. “Linda is going to bring a pie, and Sheriff Metzger’s wife, Maureen, is helping.”

“Nice lady,” I said. “I remember her from when you and your friends visited my family homestead in Wick.”

“And a wonderful visit it was, I might add.”

“A shame that a murder took place while you were there,” I said, shaking my head, my earlier thoughts resurfacing. “You seem to have a penchant for being where murders occur.”

“Don’t remind me,” Jessica said, laughing. “Come on, let’s go pick up your car. I think we’ve walked off those pancakes.”

“I’m so glad you and Seth had a nice evening together,” Jessica commented as we settled at her kitchen table. She had brewed a pot of fresh coffee, served in a pair of mismatched mugs.

“He’s a fine gentleman, Jessica,” I said. “He’s certainly fond of you.”

She smiled. “And I of him.”

I knew Jessica was anxious to know how we had gotten on the previous evening, but decided to ease into the subject. “He seems quite concerned about you.”

“Oh?” she asked. “What’s he concerned about?”

I took a sip of my coffee. “Me, I suspect.”

It took a moment for Jessica to grasp at what I was getting at. “You mean he’s afraid that you and I might run off together?”

“He never said so in so many words,” I said, “but it’s obvious that it’s behind his concerns.”

“Oh, dear,” Jessica sighed, sitting back and shaking her head. “Did you say anything to him on that subject?”

I paused. “I was tempted to but decided it was not my place to reassure him,” I said at length.

Jessica fixed me with a curious look. “If you had said something, what would it have been?” she asked.

Her question caught me off guard. “A good question, Jessica,” I said, taking time to consider my words carefully. This was a delicate subject, and a perilous one. “Had I been honest, I would have said that the vision of us running off and marrying is, indeed, a pleasant one to contemplate.” I smiled. “But you already knew what my answer would be.”

She nodded.

“Of course,” I added, “that doesn’t necessarily reflect what your answer would be - should you be asked, of course.”

As had happened on the few previous occasions that the topic of marriage had come up, Jessica quickly retreated behind her emotional shields, her discomfort clearly evident. “The truth is George, it’s a pleasant contemplation for me, too,” she said, her words coming out in something of a rush. “But we’ve had this conversation before.”

I held up a hand. “I’m not trying to raise it again, Jessica,” I assured her. “But you asked.”

“And you answered honestly.”

“I’ve accepted the conclusion we’ve come to, that we are both busy, independent people, who while we obviously have feelings for each other, have decided to leave things the way they are in our respective lives, at least for the near future.” I couldn’t help but smile. “But - you did ask.”

“I know,” she said, softening a little. She placed her hand on mine. “Maybe one day, George, I’ll see things differently, but for now I just want to enjoy your company in the time you have here.”

“In other words, as your old adage sums it up, ‘If it isn’t broken, don’t change a thing.’”

“Actually,” she said, a twinkle in her eye, “the saying is: ‘If it *ain*’t broken, don’t fix it.’”

“I know, but Brits always like to correct American English.”

We both laughed, and Jessica quickly changed the subject.

“Seth said you taught him a few tricks about how to tell when someone is lying,” she said after she’d set out sandwiches for our lunch. The afternoon was open to spend as we pleased; in deference to my needing to adjust to the time change, Jessica had not scheduled any activities.

“Yes, it’s been quite an education delving into a liar’s psyche.”

“Tell me one of the rules,” she said. “Are we talking about body language, or the way someone says something?”

“Bits of both, actually,” I told her. “I’ll give you an easy one. Be suspicious when someone prefaces what he is saying with an assurance that he’s about to tell the truth. People who lie often begin with statements like, ‘The truth is,’ or, ‘I’ll be honest with you.’ When you hear that, your antennae should go up. He’s either colored the truth already, or is preparing to. Or he may not answer your question directly; he changes the subject altogether.”

Jessica nodded. “What else?”

“Well, body language can be very revealing. One’s eyes may wander to the left when one is making up a story.”

“Do you think that happens to me when I’m writing?” she asked with a wry grin.

I smiled back. “It very well may.”

“I’ll try to be aware of that when I work on my book. Tell me more.”

“It all has to do with the discomfort most people feel telling an untruth,” I continued.

“Liars may speak quickly, chatter as it were, touch their face, scratch behind an ear, cover their mouth when they’re not telling the truth. And they often hide their hands.”

“It all sounds reasonable,” she said, “but that can’t be foolproof.”

“No, of course not, but when combined with other signs, a faithful picture emerges. Of course,” I allowed, “a professional criminal or a pathological liar, once aware of the indicators, can control his movements and defeat the system. For example -”

I was interrupted by the telephone; the caller was Seth, reminding Jessica that he had made dinner reservations at one of the restaurants in town.

“The Metzgers will be joining us,” she said as she resumed her seat at the kitchen table. “Mort is looking forward to seeing you again.”

“I, too, would enjoy an opportunity to speak with the good sheriff again,” I said, stifling a yawn. “Forgive me - please don’t take that as a commentary on your company.”

“Of course not,” Jessica said. “I know how it feels to have to deal with jet lag after a trans-Atlantic flight. Tell you what: why don’t I give you a chance to put your feet up while I take a little time to work on my book?”

“Well,” I admitted, “I wouldn’t mind taking in a football game if I can find one on the telly - if you’re sure you don’t mind.”

She smiled. “Of course not.”

I didn’t think the chances were very good for finding European football on American television, but as luck would have it, the regional sports channel was broadcasting a match between two universities in the Boston area. I settled in to watch but had scarcely gotten comfortable before I was fast asleep.

When I awoke the match was long over and so, apparently, was Jessica’s writing session, for she was curled up in a chair nearby reading a book.

“Oh,” I said when I looked at the clock and realized how late the hour was. “Forgive me, Jess - it was rude of me to sleep away the entire afternoon.”

“Not at all,” she said, waving away my apology. “When you’re tired, you should sleep. Now you’ll have to excuse me for a little while. I have to get ready for dinner. I won’t be long.”

“Take your time,” I said. “I’ll be fine. I’m a dab hand at waiting.”

She disappeared upstairs and I drifted toward the front window. Standing across the road was the stranger, Hubert Billups, standing still as a sentinel at his post. A feeling of unease rippled through me.

Jessica was not long in changing, and came downstairs dressed in a cornflower silk blouse, navy blue slacks, and a matching jacket.

“You are very nicely toggged up, if I may say so,” I said, smiling.

“You may,” she said, joining me at the window and following my gaze to the mysterious Mr. Billups.

“Has he been there long?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just started watching him.”

As if he suddenly was aware that he was being watched in return, Billups abruptly gave up his vigil, heading toward town with a backward glance or two over his shoulder.

“I should go out and have a word with the chap,” I said.

Jessica placed a hand on my arm. “Please don’t.”

“You may be taking him too lightly,” I said as Billups disappeared from view.

“We can discuss that later,” said Jessica. “You’re about to get another chance to drive on the right side of the road.”

I looked at her in mock surprise. “I didn’t fare too badly this morning.”

“Well, you didn’t run anyone down,” she said as she reached up and straightened my collar.

My hand settled over hers. “I like it when you look after me, lass,” I said warmly. “Is the tie all right?”

“Perfect.” She smiled up at me. “Let’s go. We don’t want to be late for dinner.”

We caught sight of Billups on the road, and as we drove past him I looked back at him through the rear window, frowning.

“Please,” said Jessica, reading my thoughts. “let’s ignore him. I don’t want to let him spoil a wonderful evening.”

I tried to put the stranger out of my mind, but the fact was that I could not ignore anyone who potentially posed a threat to Jessica. He was not far from my thoughts all evening, and when I dropped Jessica at her house after the evening was over, it was with a parting warning to her to make certain that all her doors and windows were securely locked.

“So - what’s this about letters?” Seth asked me as soon as I walked in the door.

I’d had a brief discussion about Jessica’s mysterious letters with Sheriff Metzger at dinner during a moment when both Jessica and Mort’s wife were away from the table.

“You overheard that?”

“Ayuh. What’s going on?”

There was no point in denying it. “Jessica showed me a series of letters she has been receiving over the past several days,” I said. “There is no return address on the envelopes, and the postmarks are from out of state. The first letter contained a plain piece of paper with no writing, just a ‘G’ cut from a magazine pasted to the middle. Subsequent letters have shown up with an ‘L,’ an ‘O,’ a ‘T,’ and most recently, a ‘C.’ The new letters show up with the previous letters also pasted on, but with the new letter bigger than the rest.”

“What do you think it means?” Seth asked.

“I haven’t the faintest. I do know that Jess is unsettled by it, despite my suggestion that it might be a simple prank.”

Seth looked grim. “Do you really believe that - that it might be ‘just a prank?’”

I paused before answering. At length I said, “If I thought that Jessica was in any real danger, I would never have left her house. The letters are disconcerting, certainly, but as yet they have conveyed no threat.”

“What’s Metzger doing about it?”

“He’s taking her concerns seriously, and has offered to have the letters tested at your state crime lab, though he doesn’t hold out much hope that they will find anything.”

Seth removed his glasses and rubbed his temples. “I’m going to pour myself a brandy,” he said. “Can I interest you in one as well?”

“Definitely,” I said.

He poured two tumblers and handed one to me. “To Jessica,” I said as we clinked glasses.

“And to those who watch over her,” Seth replied. He looked at me and smiled, and I smiled back. On one level, perhaps, we were still rivals - but on a much more fundamental level we were much closer allies.

I drove to Jessica’s house early the next morning, and found her in the kitchen setting the table for breakfast for two, in anticipation of my arrival.

She looked up at the sound of my footsteps and smiled. “Sleep well?” she asked.

“Yes, I did,” I said, hugging her briefly, “after the good doctor and I sat up rather late solving the world’s problems.”

Jessica laughed. “The world owes you a debt of gratitude.”

“Unfortunately, we didn’t come up with any good answers,” I admitted. “Seth is a fine man, Jessica. He has a full slate of patients today. I thought it best to absent myself. Does he ever talk of retiring?”

“All the time,” she said, “but thank goodness he never gets around to it. His patients will be terribly disappointed when, and if, he does.”

We had a pleasant breakfast - Jessica’s offerings of bacon, eggs, toast, and tea had me feeling quite at home - after which I insisted that she go about her usual morning routine without interference from me.

“You have things to do,” I said, “and I can certainly fend for myself for awhile.”

“Here,” she said, handing me a stack of newspapers. “The morning papers have arrived. You can read these while I get some work done.”

I flipped through the offerings - the *Cabot Cove Gazette*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Portland Press Herald* - and settled in the living room with them, commenting as I did, “You’re obviously well read, Jessica.”

She shrugged. “Some of my friends think I overdo it with all the papers I receive, but I’m afraid I’m addicted to them.”

“A healthy addiction in any case,” I said warmly.

“It’s a shame more young people don’t read a newspaper every day,” she said. “News reports on television or the Internet only pick up the highlights. Newspapers cover such a wide range. I’ve generated some wonderful story ideas for my novels from the papers.”

I was halfway through the *New York Times* - having started locally, I was now moving more globally - when there came a knock at the door. Jessica sprang up from her laptop computer and moved to answer it.

It was the post. “Good morning, Newt,” she said as she accepted the pile of mail he handed her. As I approached I could see a letter-sized envelope with her name and address neatly printed on it sitting on top.

“George,” Jessica said, masking her anxiety, “I’d like you to meet Newt, our mailman. Newt, this is my friend George Sutherland from London.”

“I never met a real live Scotland Yard inspector,” Newt said as he shook my hand.

“And I’ve never met a real live Cabot Cove postie,” I replied. “It’s an honor, sir.”

Once inside, I asked - rather unnecessarily - whether yet another strange letter had arrived.

“I’m afraid so,” she said, handing me the envelope I’d spotted.

We went to the living room, where I carefully examined it. “Do you have a magnifying glass?” I asked.

“I do,” she said, and left the room to fetch it. While she was gone I absently pulled my pipe out of my pocket and chewed on the stem without lighting it, all the while examining the envelope in hopes of discovering any small detail that could shed light upon its origins.

I looked up at the sound of her return. “Shall I?” I asked.

Jessica nodded. “Go ahead.”

I slid my thumb under the flap and opened the letter, withdrawing the single sheet of folded paper from inside. Pasted on it in various sizes and colors were the letters G, L, O, T, C, and O.

“The O is larger than the others,” Jessica commented, “the way the C was in the previous one.”

“So I see,” I said. I picked up the envelope again and examined the postmark with the magnifying glass. “Pennsylvania,” I muttered. I looked at her and asked, “Anyone you know in that state capable of such a thing?”

She sighed. “I don’t know anyone anywhere who would engage in this sort of nonsense.”

“Whoever it is obviously intends to continue until -” I paused. The letters could be a prelude to all sorts of sinister endgames, most of which I did not care to contemplate. And unless the final stroke fell within the next several days, I would not be here to protect her from it when it came.

“Until when?” Jessica pressed when my silence had stretched on for too long.

“Until he runs out of letters to use,” I said finally, pushing aside the darkest of my anxieties, “or becomes tired of the game.”

“It can’t come soon enough.”

“Your Sheriff Metzger seems sufficiently concerned about these,” I said. That was something, at least - Jessica was hardly alone in all this. “Frankly, I don’t think his lab chaps will turn up usable fingerprints, but even if they do, whoever is sending the letters might not have his or her prints on file. In the meantime, my fearless Jessica, I suggest you begin to take some precautions.”

“I have been,” Jessica said. “Last night, I double-checked every door and window, and left lights on around the house.”

I quirked an eyebrow at her. “Because of the letters?”

“No,” she said, sounding a little less confident now. “Actually, I came home a few days ago and found my front door ajar.”

This news was as alarming to me as it was unwelcome. “Don’t you usually lock it before leaving?” I asked.

“I do, and I was certain I had, but it’s possible I didn’t,” said Jessica. “Under normal circumstances, it wouldn’t have been terribly important. But I’d seen Mr. Billups across the street and -”

I finished the thought for her: “You thought he might have broken in.”

“It crossed my mind, but I have no evidence of it,” she said. “Chances are I simply forgot to lock the door in my haste, or thought I had locked it but neglected to check.”

Despite her efforts to brush the incident off as nothing, my fears were not allayed. “Here you are receiving a strange series of letters. There’s some numpty across the road, possibly deranged, observing you day after day. And now the fastidious Jessica Fletcher returns home to find her door open. I’d say you have every reason to be concerned, *very* concerned.”

Jessica began to protest, “George, I -”

“Please, Jessica, listen to me,” I said. I knew from previous experience that giving Jessica advice pertaining to her safety was a wasted effort, but I couldn’t help myself, not when her well-being was at stake. “From this moment forward I want you to be on your guard, alert to everything and everyone around you. I know I can’t demand this of you, but were I you, I would not ride my bicycle into town until all this is resolved. Doors must be firmly locked at all times, and -”

Jessica held up her hand, interrupting my litany of safety measures. “You sound like Seth,” she said with a forced laugh. “I didn’t realize you’d spoken with Mort about the letters.”

“Briefly, when you and his wife left us at the table for a few minutes,” I said. “I must say that Dr. Hazlitt was surprised at hearing about this. He raised the topic again last night at his house.” ‘Raising the topic’ was putting it mildly - Seth had fairly accosted me with questions the moment I’d walked in the door.

“Oh, dear,” Jessica said, “you’ll have all the back-fence gossips talking about it and worrying about me. We have an extremely active rumor mill here in Cabot Cove.”

“Good,” I said with satisfaction. “The more who know, the better - plenty of people to look out for you.”

Jessica shook her head but didn’t respond.

“Come,” I said, patting the empty place next to me on the couch. “Lay aside whatever you were doing for awhile and share this bounty of newspapers with me.”

“With pleasure,” she said, and settled in close to me as she accepted the front portion of the *Portland Press Herald* that I handed to her. We passed the newspapers back and forth for the rest of the morning, wrapped in the warm contentment of companionship, until it was time to head downtown to attend a dress rehearsal of the Thanksgiving pageant, which Jessica said would be performed on Wednesday, two days hence.

As I pulled up in front of Cabot Cove’s charming town hall, Jessica pointed out two people headed inside.

“The lady with the cane is Wilimena Copeland,” she said. “And the gentleman is her, ah, friend ... Archer Franklin.”

The barest hint of acid in her tone at the word ‘gentleman’ was enough to tip me off that this man was not in Jessica’s good graces. *In what way is he so objectionable that not even Jessica likes him?* I pondered to myself as we, too, approached the front doors.

Once we stepped into the building, we were surrounded by a bevy of Jessica’s friends, all anxious to be introduced to me. I wasn’t certain whether the flurry of attention was because of my credentials as a genuine Scotland Yard inspector - definitely an exotic species here outside the realms of film, books, and television - or because the rumors were already circulating that Jessica and I were engaged in a romance. It didn’t matter, I decided as I smiled politely and returned the greetings. Both reasons were true enough, at least as far as I was concerned.

As the cast walked in and out in preparation for the show, Ms. Copeland and the questionable Archer Franklin approached.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Inspector,” Franklin said.

A quick glance at Jessica confirmed that whatever he’d heard, it hadn’t come from her.

“A pleasure,” I said after we’d shaken hands.

“I consider myself a bit of an Anglophile,” Franklin said. He laughed. “Actually, more than a bit.”

“Is that so?” I said mildly. “How flattering.”

“Yes,” Franklin continued. “I suppose you could also say I’m a history buff.”

“I’m fond of history, myself,” I replied,

“So,” Franklin said, “you’ve come to see how we celebrate Thanksgiving, hey?”

“Yes. I’ve heard so much about it and it’s - and it’s history. I’m delighted to share this special day with Jessica and her friends.”

“Shame you don’t have a similar holiday in England,” Franklin said smugly.

Already I was beginning to see where Jessica came by her dislike of this man. He was an oaf. “Well,” I said, “we didn’t have Pilgrims arriving in the UK with Indians to welcome them. Of course, we do have our own November holiday, but it’s a bit different from your Thanksgiving, although it does have traditional foods.”

“What holiday is that?” he asked.

“Bonfire Night, or Guy Fawkes Night,” I told him. “It’s like a combination of your Halloween and Independence Day. We set off fireworks, and leading up to it children play tricks and make stuffed figures of Guy Fawkes to throw on the bonfires.”

The puzzled expression on Franklin’s face testified to his lack of familiarity with the concept of Guy Fawkes Night, but then his face brightened. “Oh, right. Guy Fukes. He was that British terrorist who wanted to take over the country.”

“Not quite,” I corrected. “Actually, Mr. Fawkes was a Catholic chap who led a group that tried to blow up all of Parliament and King James the First because they were angry at what the perceived as bigotry against Catholics.”

“I was there once on Guy Fawkes day,” Jessica said. “Children approached me, saying, ‘Penny for the Guy?’ Of course, they were looking for more than a penny with which to buy fireworks to celebrate the event.”

“So those bonfires celebrate that Fukes was burned at the stake, huh?” he asked, repeating his mispronunciation of the name.

Franklin was worse than an oaf; he was an ignorant oaf. “Not precisely,” I said casually. “He was imprisoned, tortured on the rack, and hanged.” I wasn’t proud of certain aspects of Britain’s blood-soaked history, but I related the facts now in hopes that it would shock Franklin into silence. It usually worked.

But not this time. “Sounds like it was too good for him,” said Franklin, who not only didn’t know who Guy Fawkes was, but apparently didn’t know anything about medieval torture methods either. “We’re all too soft on people like that, giving them all sorts of rights and such. String ‘em all up is what I say.”

An insensitive, ignorant oaf. “As a matter of fact,” I countered, “Mr. Fawkes had a point. There *was* anti-Catholic bias. Still is. To this day, under our laws a Catholic cannot be the monarch.”

“Yes, I knew that,” Franklin said. It was obvious enough that he hadn’t.

An insufferable, insensitive, ignorant oaf. “Actually, we do share Halloween with you chaps here in the States,” I said as my parting comment. “It’s becoming quite a popular day back home, much to the delight of children. They gorge themselves on candy on October thirty-first *and* rake in money on November fifth. Now you must excuse us, Mr. Franklin. I believe they’re about to start.”

As we walked away, I leaned down and said softly to Jessica, “Opinionated chap, isn’t he?”

She sighed. “I’m afraid we’re in for more of his opinions on Thursday. Wilimena asked if she could bring him to dinner, and I didn’t say no.”

“Of course you didn’t,” I said. “Might be fun, hearing more about Guy ‘Fukes’ from the gentleman.”

We both laughed and settled in folding chairs to watch the dress rehearsal.

That evening, we were dinner guests at Mayor and Susan Shevlin’s home. Seth Hazlitt, Tim and Ellen Purdy. Tim, Jessica explained to me, was the town historian, while his wife was a champion quilter who had won many competitions across the State of Maine. Deputy Mayor Gus Westerholm and his wife, Birgitta were also in attendance; according to Jessica, Brigitta was active in virtually every civic and charity organization in town, including the upcoming Thanksgiving dinner for the less fortunate that would be happening on Tuesday.

It was the Deputy Mayor who brought up the subject of Archer Franklin during dessert. “Looks like you might have a serious challenge next year, Jim,” he said to Jim Shevlin. “This new fellow, Franklin, is going around town claiming he intends to run for your seat.”

“He’s entitled to do that,” Jim replied evenly.

“He says he’s got plenty of money to fund a campaign,” Tim Purdy said.

“And he’s entitled to spend it any way he wishes,” Shevlin said, still completely unruffled. I admired that - it was probably one of the traits that made him such a good leader.

This led to a spirited discussion about money in politics, and eventually to a comparison between the British and American political systems. By the time we’d exhausted that topic, it was almost midnight.

After the gathering broke up I drove Jessica home.

“Can you find your way back to Seth’s house?” she asked.

“I think so. My sense of direction is pretty sound,” I replied. “Come, I’ll see you safely inside.”

She hesitated for a moment, and I could tell that a protest was on the tip of her tongue ... but then reason made her change her mind, and she mutely allowed me to accompany her inside.

“A nightcap?” she asked as she shut the door behind us and led me down into the living room.

“Tempting,” I said, “but I think it’s time we both headed for bed.” I hadn’t meant for that to come out as a double-entendre, and I regretted my words as soon as they left my lips. Jessica gave me a sharp look, and I winced - but she didn’t say anything, so neither did I.

“A busy day tomorrow?” I asked, anxious to change the subject.

“I’m afraid so. The main even is our annual Thanksgiving dinner served to our less fortunate citizens. It starts at four, although I have to be there a few hours early to help with preparations.”

“Can you use an extra hand?” I asked her. “Sounds like something I’d like to be involved with.”

Jessica’s face lit with pleasure. “Would you? I wouldn’t expect that -”

I shook my head. “I can’t think of anything I’d rather do than help provide a fitting Thanksgiving dinner for some poor persons, working side by side with a very special lady.”

Jessica laid a hand on my arm. “You’re pretty special yourself,” she said fondly.

“Not only that. I can carve a decent turkey,” I told her. “I paid my way through school working at a carvery - that’s a restaurant that specializes in meats.”

“And you’d be wonderful, no doubt, but that’s my job this year,” Jessica said. “In fact, Seth has loaned me his special carving knife for the occasion.”

I smiled. “Then I’ll be content to do whatever is asked of me.”

Jessica walked me to the door where we paused, looking deep into each other’s eyes. In the dim light from the living room Jessica’s were dark and deep, the midnight blue of a summer night sky, with a hopefulness in them that I had not seen before. I thought I had an inkling what she was anticipating, and on the chance that I was right, I bent my head to hers and kissed her softly on the lips.

“Good-night, Jessica,” I murmured when we parted, my words barely audible above the rushing of the blood in my ears. “Pleasant dreams.”

“Good-night,” she replied, her voice quavering slightly. “Sleep well, George.”

With an effort of will I turned away and headed for my car. As I turned the key I looked back, and saw that she was still watching me. For a moment I was torn - to go, or stay? The desire to stay was very strong ... but I had already taken one chance this evening; I did not wish to press my luck too far.

I blew her a kiss, and drove off.

The next morning I found Jessica seated at her kitchen table, that day’s mysterious letter spread out in front of her.

“What can it possibly mean?” she asked me.

It was a rhetorical question, really, but I felt compelled to answer her nonetheless: “I have no idea, Jessica. I wish I did.”

We spent the next hour fruitlessly sifting through every possible message the collection of random letters could possibly represent. We looked in the dictionary, on the Internet, even in the telephone book ... and came up with nothing.

Jessica turned her attention to the envelope the letter had come in. “It has a Boston postmark,” she said.

“Chances are,” I mused, “these letters have been created by someone right here in Cabot Cove. This warped individual sends them to friends in other cities for mailing in order to throw you off the track.”

“All right,” she countered, “but who would go to such elaborate means of hiding their true origins - and why?”

“Unfortunately, those are questions to which neither of us has an answer.”

“Sheriff Metzger hasn’t been able to help, either,” Jessica said, the frustration evident in her voice. She stretched, her arms folded, in a futile attempt to relieve the tension in her back. *Poor lass, I thought, she really is hurting.*

I rose and came around to stand behind her chair. Placing my hands on her shoulders, I pressed my thumbs into the tight muscles of her back and began to massage them. Jessica gradually succumbed to my ministrations, relaxing by degrees.

“Do you know what I’d like to do?” I asked, leaning down and whispering suggestively in her ear.

An involuntary shiver ran through her. "What's that?"

There were, in fact, many things I would like to have done, chief of which was continuing my massage in a more intimate setting and bringing it to a very natural - and entirely satisfying - conclusion. But what I actually said was, "I'd like to go motoring."

"You would?" she asked in surprise, as if she had guessed at my unspoken desires. "To where?"

With a grin I straightened back up, all the while continuing to knead her sore shoulders. "Anywhere," I said. "Just a pleasant drive, the two of us."

Jessica resisted. "Oh, George, I'd love to," she said, "but there's so much to do before the holiday. And we have ... mmmmm."

She let out a soft moan as I redoubled my efforts at gentle persuasion. I shifted one hand from her shoulders to her neck, where I used my fingers to begin chasing away the stiffness I found there. "Show me a bit of the lovely countryside surrounding Cabot Cove," I coaxed, "or let's stop at that lake for which you serve on a - was it a committee?"

"A commission," she sighed, clearly enjoying what I was doing. She was like putty in my hands - had I known what effect a simple massage could have on her, I would have given her one much, much earlier in our relationship.

"It will do wonders for your psyche," I assured her as I continued to caress away the effects of her stress. "And besides, I need a little practice driving on the opposite side of the road."

"The wrong side, you mean?" she asked, pixie in her voice.

"If you say so." My fingers reached around to trace her delicate collarbones through the fabric of her shirt.

Jessica said nothing, seemingly lost in her first true moment of pure relaxation in days, and I continued to work out the remaining knots in her shoulders and back. Finally she reluctantly broke the silence, saying, "You drive a hard bargain, Inspector."

Having gotten my wish, I brought my hands to rest on her shoulders, leaned over and lightly kissed the top of Jessica's head. Her hair was golden like late summer sunshine, and scented like jasmine.

She glanced back at me over her shoulder. "As long as we're back by two," she said, "so we can get things moving at the Thanksgiving buffet."

I made a little bow. "I am at your service."

As I had predicted, the ride was exactly what Jessica needed: the further we went, the more relaxed she became. We drove along the shore of the long peninsula upon which Cabot Cove was situated, down one side and up the other. Beneath the overcast sky the steel-grey sea dashed against a rocky shore guarded by sentinel ranks of pine trees. It was a scene both raw and beautiful.

At Jessica's suggestion we paused for lunch at a small roadside seafood shack offering freshly-made lobster rolls. We were just in the nick of time; a sign posted in the window of the building announced that it would be closed for the season the following day.

"What exactly *is* a lobster roll?" I asked Jessica after our orders had been placed.

“It’s chunks of picked lobster meat mixed with mayonnaise served on a warm, toasted hot dog roll,” she replied.

“Is that all?”

“Trust me,” said Jessica, “simple is best.”

She was right, as I knew she would be. The lobster meat was so delectable that any further adornment would have only been a distraction.

We enjoyed our lunch at a weathered picnic table set in the lee of the wind, our conversation effortlessly moving from topic to topic. At length we continued our journey, concluding the tour on a bluff just outside of town that provided a stunning view of the ocean. Below us the water churned against the rocks, blue and green waves crowned with white foam.

“It reminds me of Wick,” Jessica said as we stood side by side and gazed out over the restless sea.

“Aye, that it does,” I agreed.

Jessica sighed. “What are you thinking?” she asked me as spray from a particularly large wave leaped up from the rocks below to shower us with a mist of cold, clear seawater.

I put my arm around her shoulders and briefly hugged her to me. “I was thinking about Thanksgiving, your special holiday. How wonderful to have a day set aside each year to give thanks for our blessings.”

“It’s a nice tradition, isn’t it?”

“When you view the world with open eyes, you realize how much we have to be grateful for,” I said.

We lapsed into a thoughtful silence, reflecting on this. I looked down at Jessica - her blue eyes were fixed on the distant horizon, her thoughts equally far away. She looked so much a part of her surroundings just then, and with a pang it occurred to me that I would never be able to take her away from a place that was obviously such an important part of her identity.

Raw, and beautiful.

“Where are you, Jessica?” I asked presently.

Jessica startled out of her reverie. “What? Oh, I’m sorry. I got lost in my thoughts.”

“It’s good to do that from time to time,” I said. “Nice to escape the here and now.”

She nodded, then shivered as another thought evidently crossed her mind. “Glotcoy,” she said into the wind.

I laughed. “Yes, the mysterious Glotcoy.”

“No such word in the dictionary,” she said.

“Perhaps we’ll never know what it means,” I said, “unless of course the sender wishes to expose himself.”

“Or herself,” she said.

“Right you are. It could be a woman. In fact, Jessica, it may even be more likely that a woman is behind those letters.”

“Why do you say that?” she asked, looking up at me.

“It’s such -” I grasped for the right phrase - “it’s such a passive-aggressive action. Nevertheless, if it is a woman, it doesn’t render this campaign any less threatening.”

“I can’t imagine that someone would go to so much trouble and not eventually reveal the motivation behind it.”

“The perpetrator may already have achieved her objective - to unsettle you,” I pointed out. “In that case, there is no need to reveal herself. She has accomplished her mission. Staying anonymous perpetuates that goal.”

“I *will* be very upset if I can’t get to the bottom of this,” she said with a wry smile.

I reluctantly glanced at my watch. “Time to head back, Jessica, if you’re going to be on time to serve up turkey with all the trimmings to Cabot Cove’s needy,” I said.

“Yes,” Jessica sighed, “time to head back.”

Once we returned to the house Jessica rushed about the kitchen gathering up aprons and utensils to take to the senior center with us.

“Need this?” I asked, picking up a beautifully carved box containing a singularly exquisite knife. I slowly drew it from its custom case.

“I’m reluctant to take it,” Jessica admitted. “It was a special gift to Seth.”

“I’ve never seen anything quite like it,” I said, holding up the ten-inch knife to better catch the light from a ceiling fixture.

“It was a gift to Seth from a wealthy Japanese businessman who’d been touring the United States with his family,” Jessica said. “They were spending a few days at the end of their trip in Cabot Cove - their son had been an exchange student here - and were having dinner at a popular Italian restaurant in town when the father suddenly clutched his chest and collapsed to the floor. Seth and I were at the next table. He immediately started cardiopulmonary resuscitation and saved the Japanese gentleman’s life. The man spent time in the hospital, but thanks to Seth’s quick action he recovered.”

“He was fortunate to have a physician sitting at the next table.”

“Yes, he was,” Jessica said, her eyes distant as she recalled the memory of the event. “Anyway, six months after the patient returned home to Japan, his son, the one who’d been a student here, came back to Cabot Cove bearing a gift for the doctor who’d ‘given his father the gift of life.’” She went on to explain that the knife was a handmade, carbon steel, Kounosuke carving knife that had been made in Sakai, famous for its samurai swords. “The case is made of paulownia wood. The son said the knife brings good luck to those who use it.”

“It’s magnificent,” I said sincerely.

“The handle is ivory. See those tiny pearls inlaid around the edges? That character on each side spells Seth’s name. The son told him they’re made from black diamonds.”

“Black diamonds,” I repeated. “They were formed in the heavens millions of years ago, as I understand.”

“You’re right,” she said. “Black diamonds come from meteorites, not like the diamonds we’re more accustomed to that are formed beneath the earth.” When I looked at her in surprise she smiled. “I did some reading about it after Seth showed me the knife.”

“It’s obviously worth a lot of money,” I said.

“I agree, but Seth never bothered to find out how much,” said Jessica. “I urged him to put it away in some safe place.”

“Did he?” I asked, despite suspecting that I knew the answer already.

She sighed. “No. He dismissed my suggestion. Instead, he invited me to dinner and used the knife to slice a ham he’d baked for us that evening. I remember him saying, ‘It might have a

fancy handle and all, but a knife is made for cutting things.’ He keeps it in a drawer along with his other kitchen knives.” Jessica laughed as I replaced the knife in its box. “I’d be devastated if something were to happen to it.”

“Nothing’ll happen to it, Jessica,” I assured her. “Besides, it’ll bring good luck to the folks who show up. They need it.”

I passed the case containing the knife to her, and she added it to the basket, which I then carried out to the car. Jessica closed the front door and locked it ... and out of the corner of my eye I saw her check to make doubly sure that she had.

When we arrived at the senior center, the place was already a beehive of activity. On one side of the room a heated buffet table was being set up, while in the kitchen area a couple I had not met yet was busy giving the dozen or so volunteers who’d already arrived their marching orders.

A man hauling folding chairs from a storage room passed by. “Hello, Jessica,” he said, depositing his load and taking a break. “Ready to do some fancy carving?”

“Ready to do my best,” she said, “with George’s help. You haven’t met yet. George, this is Richard Koser. Richard, my friend from London, George Sutherland.”

“Welcome to Cabot Cove,” Richard said. “I’ve heard lots about you.”

“And all of it good,” Jessica added.

“I’m relieved,” I said with a wide smile. “I’m also looking forward to being a part of this worthwhile event.”

“We all feel pretty good about serving up Thanksgiving meals to folks who are having trouble making ends meet,” Richard said. “It seems as Cabot Cove grows, there are more of them.”

Wilimena Copeland and the odious Archer Franklin approached us. “Ah, my favorite writer,” Franklin said.

“Good to see you again,” Jessica said, making a valiant effort to sound as though she meant it.

Franklin turned to me next. “Hello, Inspector,” he said. “Been solving any crimes while here in Cabot Cove?”

“One or two,” I replied. *Let him think on that!*

But I hadn’t counted on Wilimena being gullible. “Really?” she asked with eyes wide.

“No, not really,” I clarified with an internal sigh.

“The English sense of humor,” Franklin said, slapping me on the arm. “Subtle. I like that.”

“Much like the Scots sense of humor,” I said, winking at Jessica.

“Well,” she said, “I think we should join the others and get ready for our dinner guests.” She gave me a nudge, and we went to the kitchen - a surprisingly well-appointed kitchen, no doubt courtesy of Ms. Copeland’s generosity.

Susan Shevlin spotted us first as she straightened from checking on turkeys roasting in the large oven. “Oh, Jessica, I’m so glad you’re here,” she said. “We’re a little short on help. Fran Winstead is late. Wally forgot he was supposed to drop her off.”

“I’m here and ready to go,” Jessica said.

“I am, too,” I said, resting our basket on a huge granite-topped prep table in the center of the room.

“It’s so sweet of you to pitch in,” Susan said to me.

“Wouldn’t miss it.” I removed my tweed jacket and looked about for a place to hang it.

“I’ll take that,” Maureen Metzger said as she appeared from a back room, a large stainless-steel bowl of stuffing in her arms. She put the bowl down and took my jacket for me. “I’ll find a nice, safe place for it out of the line of fire.”

“Much obliged,” I said when she re-emerged from a back room a few moments later.

Another couple joined us in the kitchen. “Haven’t seen you in awhile, Jessica,” the man said, giving Jessica a peck on the cheek “How’s the book coming along?”

“It isn’t at the moment,” she said, the deflected any further questions by introducing me to them. They were the Wappingers, Beth and Josh.

“Nice to meet you,” Josh said. “Say, what do you have there?” he asked, noticing Seth’s open knife case in our basket. He laughed. “Do you always travel with your own machete, Jessica?”

“Oh, this,” she said, pulling the knife from its protective case. “It belongs to Seth Hazlitt. He insisted I use it to carve today’s turkeys.”

“Wow!” Beth said. “That looks like something a prince or rajah would own.”

“It is beautiful,” Jessica said. “It was a gift to Seth from a Japanese businessman whose life Seth saved. I didn’t want to bring it, but he insisted.” She sighed and rolled her eyes. “You know how stubborn Seth can be.”

“Seth Hazlitt *stubborn*?” Susan Shevlin said, looking up from giving two of the birds a final basting. “I can’t imagine.”

We all laughed.

“I thought you were traveling,” Jessica said to Josh.

“I was,” he said. “Got back late last night.”

“My traveling salesman husband,” Beth said in a mocking tone. “I’d have killed him if he’d been away over Thanksgiving.”

“How’re things at the shop?” Jessica asked her as she emptied the contents of the basket and placed them on the granite countertop.

“It’s always a little slow before Thanksgiving. Everyone is home cooking. But it was a good excuse for me to close early so I could be here and lend a hand. I expect a big rush on Friday,” Beth said, then added, “Oh, and Jessica, I just got in the most adorable line of blouses you should look at. They’re made for you.”

“I’ll make it a point to swing by,” she said, “once we get through the holiday.” She smiled up at me as I loosened my tie and rolled up my sleeves. “Ready to go to work?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied. “Ready, willing, and I hope able.”

I put on the apron that she tossed to me. “How do I look, lass?” I asked, letting a bit of my native brogue colour my speech.

“Absolutely splendid,” Jessica replied, mimicking my accent in turn.

As we walked from the kitchen to take up positions by a huge carving board Maureen Metzger had brought for the occasion, I saw Jessica’s reclusive neighbor, Linda Carson enter the room, followed by a man who I assumed was her husband, Victor.

“Well, we made it,” Linda said, coming up to Jessica. “What can we do to help?”

“I’m delighted to see you both here,” Jessica said.

“I’m pleased with Victor to come,” she said quietly. “It wasn’t easy. He isn’t very social.”

“See that lady over there?” Jessica said, nodding to the energetic woman we’d seen coordinating the volunteers when we’d first come in. “Her name is Birgitta. Call her Gitta. She and her husband, Gus, are in charge. She can put you both to work.”

Linda looked down at Seth’s ornate knife, which Jessica had placed on the carving board, and her eyes widened. “That’s some knife,” she said.

“It’s a long story,” Jessica said. “I’ll tell you later.”

People started arriving over the next half hour, some alone, others with their families in tow. Jessica and I set ourselves up as a well-honed team: she carved out what the guests requested, and I deftly placed it on plates.

“Well done, Jessica,” I told her warmly after the first half hour had gone by. “You can get a job at any London carvery now. Like me to take over for a bit, to give you a wee rest?”

“That would be great,” Jessica said, surrendering Seth’s remarkable knife to me. “I’m supposed to join some of the guests. I won’t be too long.”

As I took up the carving duties I observed Jessica make a circuit of the room before settling next to - of all people - Hubert Billups. She spoke with him for awhile - I was too far away to hear what was being said - before returning to the carving station.

Another man intercepted her on her way. “Jessica, we have a problem,” he said.

“Oh? What’s the matter?”

“Two of our people who were supposed to deliver meals can’t do it. Wally dropped off Fran, so she doesn’t have a vehicle. And Rena is having car problems. Do you think that you could take over ...?”

“Gus,” Jessica said, “you know I don’t drive.”

“I know, but your friend has a rental car. I thought maybe the two of you could do the deliveries, him driving and you showing the way. I’d offer to do it myself, but I really can’t leave here yet. There are only nine deliveries to make. The birds have all been carved.”

“Of course,” she said. “I’ll ask George.” She came back to me and asked, “How do you feel about leaving early to deliver a few meals to people’s homes?”

“You trust me to drive on the other side of the road all over Cabot Cove?” I asked.

Jessica smiled. “You did very well earlier today,” she said. “I’ll be right by your side.”

“Whatever you say, my dear,” I said, laying aside the carving knife. “I have to retrieve my jacket. It won’t take a jiffy.”

With all deliberate haste dinners were assembled on platters, wrapped tight in foil, and settled in the boot of my rental car.

“You go on and run,” Brigitta said to us. “Those meals get cold fast. And enjoy the rest of the evening together.” I saw her give Jessica a sly wink. “He’s very handsome, Jessica,” she said in a low voice that she probably thought I couldn’t hear, “and so charming.”

If the thought was that we could deliver all the meals before they cooled, it was a thought misplaced. It took no small amount of time to accomplish our errand; our homebound recipients were hungry not just for food but for the social contact our arrival provided. Neither of us had

the heart to rush off, even if it meant that at later stops on our route we had to reheat the dinners that had cooled off in the meantime.

Finally, the last platter had been delivered. Once we returned to the car I turned to Jessica and asked, "What's next?"

Jessica gave a tired laugh. "What's next," she said, "is going home, giving my aching feet a rest, and relaxing with you. You are an absolute trouper, George Sutherland. I don't know anyone else who would have thrown himself into our annual charity event as you did."

"It was fun," I said, an honest assessment of the afternoon's effort. Then I took her hand in both of mine and added earnestly, "And I'll do anything to stay close to you, Jessica. I want to share as much of your life as possible."

Jessica stared back at me wordlessly, at a loss for how to respond. I leaned over and kissed her gently on the lips.

"Let's *hie hame*," I said, and she smiled.

Once we were back in Jessica's cozy living room we poured ourselves snifters of brandy and settled on the sofa for a quiet evening together.

"To a successful conclusion to the day," I said, holding my glass aloft.

"Here, here," Jessica said, and touched the rim of her glass to mine.

We settled into a comfortable silence, sipping our brandies and watching the flames dance in the fireplace.

"I noticed you chose to sit with that Billy-No-Mates who's been loitering outside," I said idly.

"Does that mean someone without a friend?" she asked.

"Yes."

Jessica nodded. "He does seem a sad soul, and it was a perfect time to approach him," she said. "I've wanted to do that for a while but for some strange reason never got up the courage."

"What did he have to say for himself?" I asked her.

"Not much."

"How much?"

Jessica shrugged. "He said I was 'okay.'"

I smiled. "I'd certainly agree with his assessment."

"George," she said tentatively, "I invited him to Thanksgiving dinner."

My first instinct was to ask if she had taken complete leave of her senses ... but then I reconsidered. How very like Jessica to not only confront what she feared, but try to understand it and even embrace it. Once again she had left me in awe of her boundless capacity for compassion, and courage.

"I know, I know," Jessica groaned, taking my silence as a censure. "I shouldn't have. But the idea just came to me and -"

I reached over and placed my hand on hers. "I'm not surprised," I said. "You're just being Jessica."

Hesitant blue eyes met my own. "Is that good or bad?"

"Oh, it's decidedly good," I assured her wholeheartedly. *As if she had to ask.*

“He didn’t say he would come,” Jessica said, casting her gaze aside again. “He probably won’t. And to be perfectly honest, there’s a part of me that hopes he won’t.”

“Whether he does or not, the invitation has been extended,” I told her. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

After a moment Jessica changed the subject and asked, “Did you get an opportunity to sit down at one of the tables?”

“Not officially,” I said. “But the turkey was excellent. I managed to nip a piece now and then.”

“I hope it doesn’t spoil your appetite for Thursday.”

“Not a chance, Jessica,” I said, turning toward her. I reached out and tenderly caressed her soft cheek. “One of my favorite dishes.” *Laird*, she was beautiful by firelight!

For a long moment we gazed at each other, unspoken thoughts and desires echoing between us. How I yearned to take her in my arms, ease her down on to the cushions of the sofa, and make love to her with all my being, holding nothing back. In my longing I could practically see her lying beneath me, the warm light of the fire shimmering on her skin and in her hair; practically taste her lips as I joined my mouth to hers ...

My increasingly fevered train of thought was broken when Jessica asked nervously, “Did you happen to speak with my new neighbor, Linda Carson, or her husband? I introduced you to her in town.”

With a sigh I settled back on the sofa, drawing Jessica closer so I could encircle her with my arm. “Briefly,” I said. “She’s a nervous little thing, isn’t she?”

Jessica nodded, relaxing back into my embrace as I’d hoped she would. “I have a feeling their marriage isn’t a very happy one,” she said sadly. “Her husband came with her and pitched in a little, but he didn’t stay long. She scooted out right after him.”

“Oh, well,” I said, draining the last of my brandy and setting the snifter aside, “that’s what makes this an interesting world, its people, everyone different, everyone with their own pains and pleasures, triumphs and failings.”

We returned to our silent, individual musings. It was wonderful to be able to hold Jessica like this, to know that our relationship had reached such a level of comfort and acceptance. I ran my fingers lightly through her hair and she sighed and snuggled closer to me, enjoying the sensation and wordlessly asking me to continue.

Attuned as I was to her body and her emotions, I was aware the moment Jessica’s thoughts turned from ones of contentment to ones of anxiety. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Tomorrow’s Wednesday,” Jessica said bluntly.

At first I didn’t grasp why that should be a problem. “I believe you’re right.”

She sighed. “There’ll be another mail delivery.”

Of course. “Ah, yes. Will there be another upsetting letter? Perhaps there won’t be, Jessica.”

“I wish I were certain of that.”

We lapsed back into silence, but just as Jessica started to relax again, she suddenly sat bolt upright with a gasp. “Oh, good heavens!”

I, too, sat up. “What’s the matter, Jessica?”

“I have to go. Right now,” she said, distress radiating off of her in waves. “George, please. Get up! We have to go.”

“For goodness’ sake, lass,” I said, my Scottish brogue thickening with my concern, “are you all right?”

But Jessica only shook her head as she stood up from the sofa. “We have to go. I can’t believe I forgot all about it.”

“Whatever it is you forgot, I’m certain we can resolve it tomorrow.”

“No, you don’t understand,” she said as she frantically reached for her coat and shoes. “We have to get it now.”

“What do we have to get?”

Finally she paused and looked at me. “Seth’s knife.”

I went over to her and put my hands on her arms, stopping her before she could dash out the door. “Slow down for a moment, lass,” I told her. “There’s no point in haring forth into the night; the senior center is bound to be locked fast at this hour, is it not?”

Jessica slumped a little in defeat. “You’re right,” she said. “It is.”

“Then I have an alternative suggestion: why not telephone some of the people who were working with us this afternoon?”

“I can’t ask someone to come out and unlock the building,” she said.

“Of course not. But perhaps one of them safely stowed the knife for you after we left, and can tell you exactly where to find it tomorrow morning.”

Jessica brightened at that thought, and hurried to the kitchen to make a series of calls. Only Susan Shevlin have any information to offer.

“I saw the box,” I heard her tell Jessica. “I put it on a shelf in one of the kitchen cupboards.”

“Was the knife in it?” she asked, holding her breath.

“Afraid not, Jessica. It was empty. I thought you’d probably taken the knife but overlooked the box.”

Jessica’s face fell. “If only that were the case,” she said. “Thanks, Susan.”

Her other calls fared no better.

“I never thought of it in the rush to leave with the dinners to be delivered,” she told me when she had run out of people to contact.

“I didn’t either,” I admitted.

Jessica buried her face in her hands. “I can’t believe I did this,” she said.

“I’m sure it will turn up,” I said, trying to reassure her.

But Jessica would not be soothed. “What if it doesn’t? I didn’t want to use it - it’s more a piece of art than a kitchen knife - but Seth was so insistent.”

I took my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “We’ll look for it first thing in the morning.”

Jessica’s bright blue eyes were welling with tears. “How am I going to tell him?” she asked me.

“Seth? You don’t have to tell him right now. Chances are we’ll find it in a drawer and you’ll put it back in its case and return it, no one the wiser.”

“But if it’s gone, I should be the one to break the news.”

“Of course,” I said. “However, I’m confident you won’t have to be passing along any bad news.”

Despite my reassurances, Jessica’s mood remained grim. Realizing there was nothing more I could do to lift it, I reached for my coat and car keys.

“Please stay,” Jessica said when she saw what I was doing. “I’m sorry that my worry over the knife has cast such a shadow over this evening.”

I shook my head. “It’s been a long day, Jessica,” I said. “I’d best be getting back to Dr. Hazlitt’s house, my home away from home. Don’t worry, I won’t mention the knife to him, and in any case, you’ll be returning it to him safe and sound tomorrow.”

As she walked me to the car, she said softly, “I owe you an apology.”

I stopped and looked at her in astonishment. “Whatever for?”

“For the way your visit is turning out,” she said mournfully. “It seems that all I’ve had to offer since you arrived is a series of problems, *my* problems - weird letters, Mr. Billups setting me on edge, thinking someone broke into my house, and now the missing knife. I can’t believe I was so careless as to leave it behind. It’s just not like me.”

“Stop beating yourself up, Jessica,” I said. “We all make mistakes.”

“True,” she said, smiling up at me. “Still, that doesn’t make me feel any better.”

Once again I took her arms in a gentle grip. “We’ll face all your problems together, lass - at least we will tomorrow,” I told her earnestly. “I’ll be here first thing, before the mail delivery I know you’re dreading. We’ll look at the next letter together, providing there is one. We’ll find Seth’s knife at the senior center and return it unscathed. Any dragons that come along, I’ll slay. And, oh yes, I’m sure you have a full day on tap preparing for your Thanksgiving dinner.”

“I’ve put that out of my mind; I’d better bring it back to the front burner, so to speak,” she said. “And we mustn’t forget the Thanksgiving pageant tomorrow night.”

“I’ll be happy to pitch in with your preparations for dinner, Jessica. Put me to work. I know how to Hoover a rug. I don’t claim much expertise around a kitchen, but I am good at scrubbing pots and pans, and I look quite spiffy in your aprons, if I do say so.”

Finally, this coaxed a laugh out of her.

“And as for your Mr. Billups,” I said, “if he does decide to accept your invitation, we’ll welcome him with open arms the way Native Americans did when your Pilgrims arrived in their new world.”

Once again Jessica’s eyes sparkled with unshed tears. Without warning she threw her arms around me and squeezed tight.

“I don’t know what I did to deserve that,” I said when she let go as a lump began to form in my own throat, “but I intend to do it again as quickly as possible.”

I picked up Jessica promptly at a quarter to nine the next morning, and we headed straight to the senior center to look for Seth’s knife. True to my word I had not said a word about the misplaced knife to my host, nor had he asked after it. I was confident that we would find it straight away, but when we had searched the kitchen and main room from top to bottom without success, I had to admit that I may have been wrong.

“Someone must have taken it,” Jessica said in resignation as we walked out to the parking area in front of the building, the empty box in her hands. “I’m feeling terribly guilty.”

“Don’t give up hope yet,” I offered, rallying my flagging optimism. “Maybe someone in your favorite food shop will know something.”

“Mara’s,” Jessica said. “Yes, let’s check there.”

“All set for turkey day?” Mara asked as we walked in.

“Still lots to do,” said Jessica. “Mara, has anyone talked about finding an ornate carving knife used at the senior center yesterday?”

“Doc Hazlitt’s knife?”

“You already know about that?”

“Somebody said you’d been calling around looking for it.”

“I borrowed it from him and ... it doesn’t matter.” I knew what she was thinking - if Mara already knew about the missing knife, then chances were good that Seth now knew about it, too. “If you do hear anything,” she said, “you’ll call me?”

“Sure will. Coffee? Tea?”

“Two cups of tea would hit the spot,” I said, looking at Jessica to see if she was game. She agreed, and we took a pair of open seats.

“I can’t spend the day looking for it,” Jessica said. “For one thing, I’m not sure where to start. For another, there’s so much to do at home to get ready for the holiday.”

“It sounds as though the entire village knows by now, Jessica,” I said. “My suggestion is we relax with our tea, then return to your house and hope someone calls.”

We finished our tea, said goodbye to Mara, and stepped into the chilly fall air. At the end of the dock, where it meets the sidewalk, a scene was being played out that stopped us. Archer Franklin and Hubert Billups stood nose to nose, glaring at each other. It was Archer’s voice we heard as he boomed, “Lowlifes like you deserve to be put away, exiled to some godforsaken island where decent people don’t have to see or smell you.”

Whatever Billups said - he spoke too softly for us to hear - his words enraged his opponent even more. Franklin’s face had turned crimson. He shoved his index finger into Billups’s chest, sending him backward against the railing. Billups brought up a hand in a defensive gesture, but Franklin swatted it away, sending his fish flush against Billups’s cheek. Billups fell away to one side, grasping at the railing to keep from landing on the pavement. He scrambled to his feet and put up his fists, as if prepared to box. “These fists ... are ... lethal weapons,” he finally got out.

“You ever come near me again,” Franklin said, “and you’ll wish you were never born.”

Billups tried to advance against Franklin, but his gait was unsteady.

As Franklin poised to strike again, I sprinted forward and grabbed the man’s wrist in midflight. “Enough,” I said, bringing Franklin’s arm up behind him.

“Let me go!” Franklin demanded, struggling against my grip.

“Only if you calm down,” I said, my voice low and, I hoped, menacing.

Franklin whirled around the instant I loosened my grip. “Oh, it’s you,” he said, brushing off his sleeve.

I stepped around Franklin, positioning myself to block him should he decide to attack Billups again, and rested my fingertips against Franklin’s chest. “There’s no need for fisticuffs,” I said. “I’m sure you two gentlemen can resolve whatever differences you have in a peaceful manner.” I risked a glance at Billups.

Shielded from Franklin, the ragged man had leaned against the railing, holding on with one hand while the fingers of his other hand shifted his jaw from left to right, testing to see if it was broken.

Franklin forced a smile. That *gentleman*, as you called him, assaulted me.”

“The only assault I saw came from you,” I said, as Jessica caught up to us.

The sound of a siren drew everyone’s attention. We all turned as Mort Metzger’s marked sheriff’s car came to a screeching halt. Mort assessed the scene and slowly climbed from behind the wheel.

“Guess I missed the action,” he said, ambling to where we stood, his eyes flicking from Billups to Franklin and back. “What’s going on? Mara called to report a fight.”

“Nothing of the sort,” Franklin said, stepping forward. “This - this *bum* assaulted me and I defended myself.” He waved a hand at Billups, who inched along the railing.

Mort grabbed him before he could walk away. “Are you making trouble again?” he asked.

Billups replied, “I didn’t do nothing to him. I swear it.”

Mort turned to Franklin. “You want to press charges?” he asked.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” he said, puffing out his chest. “But I do suggest that you do a better job of ridding the streets of scum like this. If you can’t efficiently carry out your responsibilities to keep the citizens of this town safe, then we should consider finding a replacement who will.” He looked around at the few people who’d gathered to watch what was going on. “Isn’t that right?”

Anger flared in Mort’s eyes but he didn’t respond. Instead, he turned to Billups. “You want to press charges against Mr. Franklin?”

The red-bearded man shook his head.

“Really, Sheriff,” Franklin growled.

“You okay, Mrs. F?” Mort asked Jessica.

“I’m fine.”

“You, Inspector?”

“We’re both fine, thank you.”

“Well, then, I suggest everyone go on their way,” Mort said, turning in a circle. “All of you. We don’t need this sort of nonsense the day before Thanksgiving.”

The small crowd melted away and we watched Billups shuffle up the street and disappear around a corner. Without another word, Mort got back into his car and drove off, leaving Jessica, me, and Archer Franklin standing at the end of the dock.

“I’m sorry that you two were spectators at this unfortunate episode,” Franklin said to Jessica, conveniently forgetting my role in preventing him from throwing the next punch. “The sheriff is right. With a festive dinner at your home tomorrow, Jessica, it’s best that we all forget it. Isn’t that right, Inspector? I just hope that both of you won’t think poorly of me for defending myself against an obvious madman.”

I wasn’t sure that Billups was the madman here, but Franklin’s suggestion that we all put the incident behind us was the most reasonable thing he had said to date.

“Can I drop you two anywhere?” Franklin asked. “My car is down the street. It would be no trouble at all.”

“Thank you, no,” I said. “I have a car.”

“How do you like driving on the right side of the road for a change?” Franklin asked me, laughing.

“I’m enjoying it very much, thank you,” I said blandly, taking Jessica's arm. “Coming, Jessica?”

“Yes. Goodbye, Mr. Franklin.”

“Looking forward to tomorrow,” he called after us.

“Wait until he finds out who’s sitting at the same table with him,” Jessica said so only I could hear.

I glanced at her, and her small smile reassured me that she was not so much worried about the possibility as amused. I chuckled.

We didn’t turn to acknowledge Archer, simply climbed in the rental car and drove to Jessica's home, where, after leaving a message on Seth’s answering machine, Jessica tried to put the missing knife, and the altercation we’d just witnessed, out of her mind as she focused on getting ready for the next day’s festivities.

She was well into it, with me lending a hand, when she happened to spot the mailman walking toward the mailbox. She headed for the door, and I followed her.

“Morning, Mrs. Fletcher, Inspector.”

“Good morning, Newt,” Jessica said.

“Here you go,” he said, handing her that day’s mail. Right on top of the pile was another neatly addressed letter. Jessica gasped and in response I placed my arm over her shoulder.

"Have yourself a wonderful Thanksgiving, sir," I said.

“Oh, I expect to,” Newt said with a broad smile. “Got me brother and his wife coming in from Texas; should arrive any minute now. You folks have a good one, too.”

We opened the latest missive in the kitchen. Sure enough, an eighth letter had been added, a tiny pink, lowercase *b*. The postmark was Bangor, Maine.

“GLOTCOYB,” Jessica sighed. “At least tomorrow won’t bring another. There’s no mail on a holiday.”

“Something else to give thanks for,” I said. I got to my feet and went to the window. I pulled aside the curtain, and stood quietly looking out. After a few minutes I said, “Come here, Jessica.”

Jessica joined me at the window. I again put my arm around her shoulder and together we watched Hubert Billups walking up the road in the direction of the Carson house. After he’d passed from our view, I commented, “At least he isn’t standing there staring at your house. Come on, lass, time to get back to work. Thanksgiving will be here before we know it.”

The words to a Thanksgiving ditty by the country’s first children’s poet laureate, Jack Prelutsky, were part of a package of printed material that Tim Purdy handed out to those attending the previous evening’s pageant. As the event’s host, the town's historian gave a fifteen minute presentation that wove amusing stories in with some little-known facts, as well as myths, about Thanksgiving.

Naturally, before he'd had a chance to listen to Jessica voice mail message, Seth had heard through Cabot Cove's gossip wires that the knife had gone missing. He mentioned it to her at last night's pageant.

"Oh, Seth, I am so sorry," Jessica had said mournfully after the performance had ended and we'd gathered outside. "We looked everywhere. My only hope is that someone took it home inadvertently and will return it when they discover their error."

"Not to worry, Jessica," Seth said, a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Such things happen, and you shouldn't fret over it. After all, it's just a knife."

"Oh, no," Jessica protested, "it was more than that, Seth. It was a special gift to you for having saved a man's life."

"Do you think his is the only life I've saved?" he replied, feigning having been insulted. Jessica was taken aback for a moment before she realized he was jesting. "Seth, I -"

"Not another word, madam," Seth said. "I assume your own carving knife will do nicely tomorrow."

Finally Jessica relaxed. "I'm sure it will."

"You'll be doing the carving honors, Inspector?" he asked me.

"If called to duty."

"A good soldier, huh? Well, keep in mind if your arm tires, there's an experienced carver who can step in as backup. Remember," he added, "I've had training in surgery."

"Your Mr. Purdy is quite an entertaining chap," I said as we worked together to get ready for the three o'clock arrival of our guests.

"He's delight," Jessica said. "I hadn't realized that our annual tradition of having the president pardon a turkey may have begun with Abraham Lincoln, of the folklore is true."

"That's one lucky turkey," I said. "What I found interesting was what Tim said about the National Day of Mourning." The historian had given the Native American side of the story equal time in his presentation. "A very different take on the holiday's meaning." I dripped some candle wax into a candleholder to keep one of the long, tapered orange candles from tilting.

"And unfortunately true," Jessica said from the kitchen, where I joined her as soon as I had finished my task. "I washed the long-stemmed white wine glasses," she told me. "Care to dry them?"

"Of course."

By one, things were in pretty good shape. It goes without saying that Jessica would have been happier had Seth's knife shown up but it hadn't, and we had to resign ourselves to the nasty fact that someone must have taken it from the senior center.

At two, it seemed that everything was set. The table was laid, the pies, cakes and breads on the sideboard with a space left for Linda Carson's contribution. An empty space on the stove awaited Susan Shevlin's clam chowder. The turkey was roasting in the oven, with an occasional basting by yours truly. I'd also set up a bar in the living room and was prepared to play bartender, along with being the designated carver.

"I'll keep thinking of that ditty Mr. Purdy handed out while slicing up the bird," I said through a smile.

“Just don’t slice a piece off your finger,” Jessica admonished. “We don’t need a thumb on the platter.”

We took a brief break and sat with our feet up until two thirty when Jessica announced, “Battle stations!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Seth was first to arrive, which was no surprise. Following close on his heels were Wilimena and Kathy Copeland, accompanied by Willie’s new boyfriend.

“A pleasure meeting you, Dr. Hazlitt,” Franklin said after Jessica had introduced him to Seth. “I hear that you’re the best sawbones in town.”

Seth winced but shook Franklin’s hand and said, “I’ve been at it awhile.”

After a few minutes of aimless chitchat, Franklin said, “I assume you keep up with newer advances in medicine.”

“Actually,” said Seth, “I still use leeches for bloodletting. They’re coming back in style. Excuse me while I see what’s going on in the kitchen.”

I greeted Seth as he came into the kitchen and asked if he wanted a beverage.

“Ayuh,” Seth said, “but nothing alcoholic. I ended up spending the morning at the hospital. One of my patients thought her oven was off and took a peek inside, using a match to see better. Her hair and eyebrows should grow back in a few months. I promised I’d check back later today.”

I went to the living room to serve drinks, mostly wine and a punch Jessica had whipped up from a recipe that had been in her family for generations.

“Do you think I’m getting too old to keep up with new discoveries in medicine, Jessica?” I heard Seth ask her.

Jessica looked up from the succotash casserole she’d taken from the oven. “Why would you ask that, for heaven’s sake?”

“Just curious,” he said.

“I’ve never heard anything so ridiculous in my life,” she said, returning to her chore.

The doorbell heralded the arrival of more guests, this time Mayor Jim Shevlin and his wife. Susan had brought her famous clam chowder, a particular favorite of Jessica and Seth’s.

“I brought a little corn bread to serve with it,” she said, heaving the pot onto the burner. “And some crumbled bacon and parsley. Those go in at the last minute.”

“So what’s new at the mayor’s office?” Franklin asked Shevlin after they’d been introduced.

“Nothing much, Mr. Franklin. I’ve heard a lot about you. Welcome to Cabot Cove.”

“Thanks. I think I’m going to enjoy it here, especially after meeting this ravishing creature.” He smiled at Wilimena, who hung on to his arm.

“Willie’s a treasured newcomer to the town,” Shevlin said. “Of course, we’ve had the pleasure of her sister, Kathy, for many years.”

“The dynamic duo,” Franklin said. “You know, Mr. Mayor, I’ve been meaning to get in touch with you for quite a while. I’d like to find some time to sit down and give you my thoughts on solving some of the town’s more pressing issues. I’m afraid I’m a little tied up right now, but I’ll try to find an hour or two over the next few weeks.”

“That’s good of you,” Shevlin said, being nice enough not to add that Franklin wasn’t the only one pressed for time. “We have a monthly ‘Ask the Mayor’ breakfast. You’ll have to join us for one of those occasions.”

Everyone had settled in the living room with their drinks when the Metzgers came through the door, Maureen carrying her sweet potato casserole. Jessica divided her time between her guests and the kitchen, where Maureen had stationed herself. She’d donned one of Jessica’s aprons and looked very much at home. “You go mingle,” she told her. “I’ve got everything under control.”

Jessica was about to suggest that we all take seats at the table when the doorbell rang. It was Linda and Victor Carson, her new neighbors. She greeted them warmly, and although he didn’t smile, Victor thanked her for inviting them and followed her inside the house. Linda was dressed smartly in a blue pantsuit and white blouse, and carried a foil-covered pumpkin pie.

Maureen appeared briefly by Jessica’s side to relieve Linda of her package. “Everyone loves pumpkin pie,” she whispered to Linda.

Victor wore a slightly wrinkled pair of khaki slacks, white shirt, and maroon cardigan sweater. I was again aware of what a big man he was, with wide shoulders, a bulging chest, and arms that were defined even beneath the fabric of his shirt and sweater. He towered over everyone in the room, although I came close to his height.

Jessica headed back to the kitchen to see how Maureen was doing. “Ready to go,” she announced. “I checked the bird. He’s done to perfection. And I added a few things to the giblet gravy.”

“What things?” Jessica asked warily.

“My secret ingredient.”

“Great,” she said brightly, doing a masterful job of masking her worry. “Let’s get everyone seated and serve the clam chowder and salads.”

Because she was acutely aware of seating certain people apart from each other, Jessica set out handwritten place cards with everyone’s names at their seats. While the table was set for fourteen people, she’d left two place settings at the end without cards, one of which, I knew, was reserved for Hubert Billups, should he decide to attend. She’d even prepared a place card with his name, but left it in a basket on the expectation it would not be needed.

Despite her concerns about pairing certain people, the mood at the table was appropriately festive and friendly. Conversation flowed easily as Maureen and Jessica ladled the chowder into bowls, sprinkled on the garnishes, delivered salads, and joined the others.

“You’ll say grace,” Mort said to Seth.

“Ayuh,” Seth said. “I usually do.”

Seth delivered what had become his standard prayer, with appropriate religious references combined with more secular expressions of thanks for the gathering of good friends, newcomers who would become good friends, and of course, for the bounty we were about to enjoy.

“May I say something?” I asked when Seth had finished.

“Please do,” Jessica said.

I stood and cast a wide smile across the table. “It is a rare privilege to have been invited to join you for this most American of celebrations, and so I wish to propose a toast. It’s said in

Britain that it takes three people to properly offer a toast - one to hand the glass to the toaster, the toaster to drink from it, and the third to defend the drinker whilst he's otherwise distracted."

There were laughs; Archer Franklin's was the loudest and most prolonged. Victor Carson's was brief and forced. It took Mort a few seconds to get the humor. Once he did, he joined in.

"But since I'm the only Brit here - a Scotsman, actually - I'll have to fend for myself. You've welcomed me to Cabot Cove with open arms, and the warmth I've experienced will stay with me for a very long time." I raised my wineglass. "To my friends in Cabot Cove, Maine, good health, good fortune, and may we dine together again soon."

Other glasses were raised and a few said, "Hear! Hear!"

"Maybe we can get together for Guy Fokes Day in England," Franklin suggested.

"A splendid idea, I said, sitting, tossing Jessica a sly smile and sipping my wine.

As we enjoyed our chowder and salads, Linda Carson commented on the two unoccupied place settings.

"I like to leave a place in case a last-minute guest arrives," Jessica explained.

"What a nice gesture," she said.

"What do you do, Victor?" Franklin asked.

"I'm in the process of looking for a job."

"What sort of work?" Jessica asked.

"I'm, ah - I used to be in the restaurant business. A manager. Casinos, too. I figure I'll find something in a restaurant around here."

That led to a flurry of suggestions as to where he might look, with others at the table coming up with names of people to approach.

"Is everyone done with their chowder and salads?" Susan asked, getting up to help Jessica clear the first course.

It appeared that they were. Jessica had just picked up the first empty bowl when the doorbell sounded. She handed the bowl to Susan and went to the door. She opened the it, and on the threshold stood ... Hubert Billups.

If Jessica was surprised, she didn't show it. "Happy Thanksgiving, Mr. Billups," she said. "Please come in." She walked into the dining room and announced, "We have another guest."

Conversation stopped and everyone looked at her, and then beyond to Billups, who stood in the archway between the living and dining rooms.

"Mr. Billups - I'm sure he doesn't mind being called Hubert - is a little late, but that's certainly no problem."

Billups remained motionless, a blank expression in his eyes. He'd washed up, and changed his usual uniform to a yellowed, slightly stained, double-breasted white dinner jacket, grey shirt, skinny black tie, tan cargo pants, and low black sneakers, a proud man who'd tried to dress for the occasion.

Jessica grabbed his place card from the small basket on the breakfront, set it down at one of the two unoccupied spots at the table, and said, "Please sit down, Mr. Billups. I'm sure no one will mind waiting until you've had your clam chowder and salad."

Seth had a wry smile on his face as he said, "Welcome, Mr. Billups, and happy Thanksgiving."

Across from him, Mort was in shock, his face a question mark as he looked at Jessica, then back at Billups, who'd taken his seat. Susan Shevlin ladled chowder into the new arrival's soup bowl and placed a salad next to it.

"Jessica, can we talk?" Wilimena whispered in her ear.

They retreated to the kitchen for their "talk." I considered following them, but decided against it. When they returned, Wilimena's face was set in a concerned scowl.

"Everyone ready for Tom Turkey?" Jessica asked brightly.

The main part of the meal went smoothly despite the unexpected presence of Billups. He wasn't talkative, although he did respond to comments and questions from others at the table. And when we were making toasts - to everyone's health, to the hostess and her visiting Scotland Yard inspector, to welcome new neighbors - he raised his glass and called out, "Down the hatch." Everyone laughed except Linda, who had swallowed too quickly and coughed; her husband helped by pounding on her back.

I sampled every dish and condiment, complimenting the various chefs who had contributed to the meal, and saving his highest praise for Maureen's praline sweet potato casserole, an opinion shared by everyone else, including Jessica.

"It's a Southern recipe," she told me shyly. "I know Jessica wanted to have a classic New England menu for you, but I figured she wouldn't mind if we had sweet potatoes from another part of the country. It's still American."

"I don't mind where the recipe comes from when it's as delicious as this," Jessica said, smiling at her. Maureen had clearly exceeded her expectations.

After the turkey and its accompanying dishes had been consumed and the plates and silverware removed to the kitchen, Jessica suggested we take a break in the living room before coffee and dessert. As was usually the case at Thanksgiving dinner, everyone had eaten too much and needed a respite before attacking the array of pies and cakes provided.

To my relief, Archer Franklin had kept his ego in check. For the most part he ignored Billups; an expression of disgust crossed his face each time he glanced in the direction of the newcomer, but he refrained from making any comment. Wilimena had spent most of the dinner looking concerned, as though a calamity would ensue at any moment; her more sensible sister Kathy poked her with her elbow and whispered something that sounded like an admonition. Mort kept his distance from Billups, and did the same with Victor Carson, who rivaled Billups as a noncommunicator. Linda Carson's spirits were high throughout the meal, chatting constantly while stealing peeks at Billups. She must have been wondering why Jessica had invited him. Seth staked out his favorite chair, a plump, overstuffed one where he fought to keep his chin from dropping to his chest.

"Coffee, Mr. Billups?" Jessica asked.

"No, thank you. I'll be going."

"But you haven't had dessert."

But Billups had made up his mind. "Thank you for the dinner," he said. "You're okay. G'bye."

Jessica walked him to the door then returned to the living room, where I was in a discussion with Mort, Mayor Shevlin, Archer Franklin, and the Copeland sisters. Franklin was pontificating about what was wrong with Cabot Cove and what he'd do to fix it - provided, of

course, that he was in a position to do anything. Seth had dozed off. Victor Carson stood at the window, his attention on anything but the room and those in it. He turned and intercepted Jessica as she was collecting glasses to take back to the kitchen.

“Enjoying yourself?” she asked him.

“Huh? Yeah, very much, only I’m not feeling too good.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Can I do anything for you, get you something, an aspirin, or -?”

“I think I’d better leave,” he said.

Jessica nodded. “If you’d feel better at home, I certainly understand.”

Victor went to the kitchen to tell his wife that he was leaving. Her expression immediately fell - she'd been having a good time, and wasn't sure she wanted to leave.

“You stay,” Victor said, and without a parting word he was gone from the house.

With two down, the eleven remaining guests enjoyed dessert and even livelier conversation than before - Willie had cheered up considerably - until it was time to end the day. As Jessica said goodbye to her friends at the door, she noticed Hubert Billups pacing back and forth across the road.

“I’ll see if he wants a lift into town,” Seth said. But Billups waved Seth off when he stopped the car. Perhaps he would have accepted if the weather had been foul, but it was a lovely, unusually mild November evening, with plenty of stars and a full moon.

Once Jessica had seen off the last of the guests, I suggested we finish the cleanup before fatigue could overtake us. An hour later, a little after nine, the house was put back together, and the only reminder of the earlier feast were the delicious aromas that still lingered in the air.

“In the mood for a walk?” I asked.

Jessica readily agreed. “Good idea,” she said. “It will get rid of some of these excess calories.”

As we walked along the road in the direction of town, arm in arm, a feeling of profound contentment settled over me that had nothing to do with my satiety from the meal. My happiness was augmented by the fact that Jessica also seemed content, and relieved - as well she should, having successfully pulled off a very challenging Thanksgiving dinner with few, if any, hitches.

“Happy?” I asked her.

“Very,” she replied. “You?”

“Verra much,” I said, my voice sliding deeper into my native Scottish burr. I squeezed her arm and smiled. This was wonderful. As good as the gathering had been, this was better - much better.

We turned around after a mile or so, but when we returned to our starting point Jessica suggested that we continue a little further, to the Carsons’ house.

“Not the friendliest fellow,” I commented.

“He seemed terribly uncomfortable, but his wife certainly enjoyed herself,” Jessica said. “It was almost as though she seldom gets to go out and felt free for the first time.”

“About your Mr. Billups,” I said as we slowly strolled along the shoulder of the road, “not a bad chap. His presence seemed to unsettle the sheriff, although everyone else took it in stride.”

“Not Wilimena Copeland,” said Jessica. “Billups was the thirteenth person at the table, which really bothered her. I had no idea that she was so superstitious.” She shook her head. “But

I agree with you. Mort was on edge the minute he walked in. I'm sorry if Billups took away some of the pleasure of the holiday for Mort. I didn't stop to think of the run-ins he'd had with Billups, including the fight we witnessed between him and Archer Franklin. I really can't blame Mort for being uneasy."

Dusk rapidly darkened into full night as clouds moving in from the West shadowed the moon.

"I should have brought a flashlight," Jessica said.

"Let's head back," I suggested.

We'd reached the Carsons' house, lights shining through the windows. A rustling under a bush drew our attention, and a moment later a cat - theirs, I presume - leaped out and bolted across the road, causing Jessica to jump.

I pulled her close to settle her nerves. "At least he's not a black cat," I said with a chuckle.

Jessica gave me a disapproving look tempered with a smile. "Now don't tell me you're superstitious, too," she said.

"Not a bit. I'll even walk under a ladder to prove it to you."

She laughed. "There's no need for extreme measures."

The moon was drifting in and out of the cloud wrack, casting a fitful light over our path as we retraced our steps. Halfway home, it finally sailed free, flooding the night with its clear, sliver light. We continued in silence, the only sound the hiss of the wind blowing through the dried grass at the roadside.

As we approached the house, the glitter of reflected moonlight caught my attention. "What's that?" I asked, pointing to an area of tall grass to the right.

Jessica followed my gaze, approaching the object until she was about ten feet from it. Suddenly she took a step back with a sharp intake of breath.

"It's Seth's knife," she whispered, "in a man's body."

I strode forward in alarm - it was indeed the missing carving knife stuck in the chest of a male victim. In the moonlight the blood around the wound looked as black as tar. I carefully knelt beside the body and swept aside the grass that hid his features from view.

I looked back at Jessica, who wilted with sadness as she recognized the face. "It's Hubert Billups."

I stayed with the body while Jessica returned to the house to call 911 before rejoining me outside. Before long a phalanx of police and medics arrived on the scene, the flashing lights and sirens of their vehicles ripping through the previously quiet, tranquil night.

Mort Metzger arrived shortly thereafter to take charge of the scene, overseeing the forensics team as they documented the body from every conceivable angle. Once this was done, he finally turned to us.

"Well, he's definitely dead. You called it in, huh, Mrs. F?" he said.

She nodded. "That's right. George and I were taking a walk and spotted the handle of the knife sticking up. I was elated at first, thinking we'd found Seth's missing knife, but then we saw Mr. Billups."

"Before you found the body, did you notice anything out of the ordinary or see anybody else while you were walking?" Mort asked.

Jessica and I looked at each other. “No,” she replied for both of us. “There were cars that passed us, but no one on foot.”

We turned as the medical examiner’s ambulance arrived and watched, somberly, as two medics lifted the body and placed it inside. The knife had been removed from his chest, and bagged separately for evidence. By now Jessica’s neighbors had emerged, curious to see what the disturbance was. Jessica nudged me and nodded at the Carsons, standing apart from everyone else. He had his arm protectively around his wife, who seemed to be leaning against him for comfort. Perhaps there was more there than originally met the eye.

Mort drew my attention back to the matter at hand. “I’d like you two to come down to my office in the morning to make formal statements,” he said.

“Of course,” I said with a nod.

“In the meantime, I suggest you lock up tight,” Mort said, his expression grim. “Looks like we’ve got a homicidal nut running loose in Cabot Cove.”

Jessica and I went back inside, where we settled at the kitchen to discuss what had happened over coffee. Jessica looked worried, as though she had concerns she was afraid to give voice to.

“Tell me what you’re thinking, lass,” I coaxed her.

She sighed. “I know it’s an outlandish notion, but it has been running through my mind.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you think it could have been someone who was here tonight?”

My first impulse was to dismiss the very notion. “I can’t imagine that anyone close to you would be capable of such madness,” I said.

“I agree,” she said, “but there were others here who *aren’t* close to me, like Archer Franklin and Victor Carson. I really don’t know them.”

She had a point. “Then it’s not unreasonable to consider them suspects, Jessica, but what about the women?” I asked. “You mentioned that Ms. Copeland was upset by his arrival.”

This Jessica waved away. “Just a silly superstition about having thirteen people at the table. She was afraid it would result in tragedy. And look what happened,” she added sadly, lowering her face into her hands. “Now she’ll be convinced she was right.”

“Is she -?” I broke off my thought and patted the pockets of my jacket in search of my pipe.

“Is she what?”

“Is she mentally unbalanced?”

Jessica looked taken aback by my question. “No. Not at all,” she said. “Willie can be quirky, but I don’t see her as a murderer. As I said, I don’t know anything about Victor Carson, and the same holds true for his wife, Linda. Archer Franklin certainly didn’t have any love for Billups. We saw them fighting, and he’d made a number of comments about ridding the town of men like Billups.”

“True, but he behaved relatively rationally tonight,” I pointed out. “And he’s a wealthy businessman. Such men don’t usually stoop to stabbing people in the chest with a carving knife.”

“Ruthless ones stab competitors in the back now and then,” said Jessica.

She was right about that as well. I grunted in response as I finally located my pipe and stood up from the table.

Jessica reached for my arm. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"Thought I'd go outside and take a pull on my pipe. Helps me to think."

"You can do your thinking right here," she said.

"You don't mind?"

She smiled at me warmly. "I've always been partial to the aroma of a pipe."

Ah, yes, I remembered as I settled back in my chair, *it reminds her of Frank.* "What about your neighbor, Victor?" I asked as I lit the tobacco with a match and sent a small cloud of fragrant smoke into the air.

"I've been thinking about him. He probably represents the great unknown among people who were here, but why would he kill someone like Billups?"

"I don't have an answer," I said. "I'd say it's highly unlikely that anyone gathered around your table today is a murderer. Let's put that notion aside for the moment and step back. Billups was likely to have been killed by one of three people: someone he knew who bore him ill will, someone he may or may not have known, a deranged person, say." I took another puff on my pipe.

"And the third?" she asked.

"Someone he didn't know at all, perhaps someone passing through, who selected him at random." I thought this was unlikely - in my experience crimes are seldom as random as they may first appear - but my comment struck a chord with Jessica, who seemed to retreat into her own thoughts.

It was almost midnight when I announced that I was leaving. Jessica walked me to my car.

"Okay to drive to Seth's house?" she asked me.

"I'm fine," I said. I placed my hands on her shoulders and gave her a gentle squeeze. Those shoulders were bearing up under such pressure these days. Tonight's murder was only the latest burden to be added to her load, and it made my heart ache. "I'm sorry, lass."

"Sorry about what?" she asked, looking up at me.

"That you've ended up close to another murder."

"That seems to be my fate," she said, bitterness coloring her words.

"Sure you'll be all right alone? I've slept on many a couch in my day," I added hastily.

"I'll be fine," she said. "I'll lock up. We'll go to Mort's office first thing in the morning?"

"I'll be here at eight," I promised.

"I'll be ready."

I gathered her into my arms and kissed her tenderly. As I did I could feel Jessica melting into my embrace, in no hurry to bring the kiss to an end.

"Good-night, love," I said when we finally parted.

"Good-night, George," she replied. "Safe home."

"Appreciate you folks coming in so early," Mort said after Jessica and I had given our statements. "Nothing more you can remember?"

"Nothing I can think of," Jessica replied. "We were taking a walk and came upon the body." She picked up a photo of the crime scene from Mort's desk and examined it.

"You, Inspector?"

“I think we’ve covered everything, Sheriff.”

“Did you notice how the angle of the knife is straight in?” Jessica asked, turning the picture sideways to see if it made a difference.

I leaned over to see what she was looking at. “Whoever killed him slipped that knife between two ribs straight into his heart.”

“Do you have any leads, Mort?” she asked.

“Too soon for that, Mrs. F. I’m heading over to the rooming house where he lived. I sent one of my deputies there to make sure nobody disturbs it.”

“Mind if we tag along?”

“Now, why would you want to do that, Mrs. F?”

“I feel very much a part of this,” she said. “He’d been a guest at my dinner table hours before he was murdered, and had been spending an inordinate amount of time standing across from my house. Besides, there’s the matter of the knife that killed him. It belonged to Seth, and I lost it.”

“*We* lost it,” I corrected, giving her shoulder a squeeze.

“I suppose there’s no harm in having you come with me,” Mort said, “provided you stay out of the way.”

“You have my word,” Jessica said sincerely.

Mort’s expression said that he’d heard that from her before and didn’t necessarily buy it.

We drove to the rooming house in Mort’s marked vehicle. It was a nicely kept, very large older house that probably once had been home to multiple families. A small garden in front was neatly tended, and a fresh coat of yellow paint glowed in the morning sun. An unoccupied Cabot Cove patrol car was parked to the side of a wide driveway.

We stepped up onto the porch that ran the width of the house and Mort knocked on the front door. A woman immediately peered out from the carpeted entrance hall.

“I’m Sheriff Metzger, ma’am,” Mort said, touching the brim of his Stetson.

“This is terrible,” the woman said, wringing her hands. “To think that a tenant of mine was murdered gets my blood boiling. A person isn’t safe in this town anymore.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mort said mildly. “Where was Mr. Billups’s apartment?”

“Apartment? We don’t have apartments here, just rooms, but nice ones I can assure you. Never had no trouble with the law. I run a respectable establishment, check on my people before I let them stay. I don’t like havin’ a cop up there, I can tell you. Upsets the neighbors.”

“The room’s up there?” Mort asked, indicating the staircase.

“That’s right, second floor, third door on your left.”

“May we?” Mort said.

“Just make sure you wipe your feet,” she said, stepping back to pull the door wide. “I just cleaned up there.”

We did as instructed. Mort didn’t bother introducing Jessica or me to the landlady, which was just as well. We followed the sheriff up the stairs to where a uniformed officer leaned against the wall next to an open door. A short strip of yellow crime-scene tape was draped across it. He snapped to attention upon seeing Mort, who said, “Relax, Joey. Nobody’s been in there?”

“No, sir. I made sure of that.”

“Good job.”

The officer removed the tape and we followed Mort into the room, which was a pin, although it was impossible to say if that was Billups's doing or his landlady's. The bed was made, and no clothing was visible. The wastebasket was empty, except for a torn piece of newsprint. Jessica reached down and pulled it out. Nothing was written or printed on it, and she dropped it back in the basket.

Mort opened the only closet, while Jessica wandered to a table next to his bed. On it were three small silver frames holding color photographs. She picked one up to examine its picture, but Mort said, "I'll be the one to do that, Mrs. F."

She replaced the frame on the table and took a few steps away to allow Mort to get close to the table, but not so far back that she couldn't see the photos along with him.

The first showed a man I assumed was a beardless Billups at a much younger age. He stood next to a beautiful woman on a beach. The second photo was a more recent Billups, again minus his red beard. He stood in front of a storefront window next to another man; both wore suits and ties. There seemed to be a strong resemblance, and I surmised they were related.

Mort placed the second photo on the table and picked up the third.

"Mind?" she asked as she retrieved the second picture and studied it more closely. Behind the two men - the two brothers? - was a sign above the window, "Down-the-Hatch." It wasn't a very good photo, and had faded over time.

"I suppose you want to look at this one, too," Mort sighed, handing her picture number three. This shot was of Billups being presented something by a white-haired gentleman in a setting that had all the trappings of a politician's office.

"Interesting," she said, placing it next to the other two.

"What's interesting?" Mort asked.

"The pictures. I wonder where they were taken."

"No idea, Mrs. F. Never found out where he was from."

"Wherever it was, he could have made an enemy there," Jessica added.

Mort sniffed as his eyes roamed the room but said nothing.

I stood silently in the doorway, not wanting to appear to be intruding on Mort's turf. Finally, I spoke up: "I'd say that the victim had a confrontation with someone last night."

Mort turned. "I'd say that goes without saying, Inspector."

I smiled. "That he'd been stabbed in the chest means he'd faced his attacker, as opposed to someone sneaking up from behind. That's all I meant."

"You'd mentioned that he'd had an altercation with someone here at the rooming house," Jessica said to Mort. "Have you spoken with him?"

"Not yet, but I will." He poked his head out the door and instructed his deputy to bring the landlady to the room.

She arrived, and not at all happy at being summoned, "You know my business doesn't stop just because you're up here, Sheriff," she said. "I've got more rooms to clean and dinner to get on for my tenants, and that means a trip to the market. Thanksgiving emptied the shelves, as it is. If I don't get there soon, the best produce will be gone. I don't imagine you're going to hang around and explain to my tenants why I can't put a decent dinner on the table. And don't tell me to go. I'm not leaving this house until you do."

“Can’t be helped, ma’am,” Mort said, doffing his hat. “Sorry to inconvenience you. We’ll try not to keep you too long.”

“See that you don’t,” she said, but Mort’s courteous manners had disarmed her and her voice had softened.

Mort asked about the roomer who’d accused Billups of having stolen his things.

“That’d be Mr. Catalana. Pain in the neck, but not a bad sort.” Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial level. “He’s paranoid, you know. Hears things, I think. But he always paid his rent on time. That’s what matters to me, and that they act respectful and don’t make a mess.”

Mort pointed to his deputy. “Write down the name Catalana,” he said. “We have to find this guy and bring him in.” He turned to the landlady. “First name?” he asked.

Her brows shot up. “Beverly,” she said, smiling and pulling a lock of hair across her shoulder, curling it around a finger.

Mort rolled his eyes. “Not yours. His.”

“Oh. Um. Pete. I mean, Peter J., I believe. Anyway, that’s what he wrote in the register.”

I rescued her from her embarrassment. “You said he always ‘paid’ his rent on time,” I said gently. “Does he no longer live here?”

She swiveled toward me. “Left this morning,” she said, recovering her poise. “Paid me for the week, packed his suitcase, and was gone.” Her face twisted in thought. “You don’t think that -”

“He leave a forwarding address?” Mort asked.

“No,” she said. “They never do.”

“We’ll want to see his place, too, in a few minutes,” Mort said, turning over items on the small desk that was among the sparse furnishings in Billups’s room.

“Then you can call me when you’re ready,” the landlady said crisply, her limited supply of patience evidently having been exhausted. “I can’t stand here waiting around for you. I’ve got chores to do.” She bustled out the door, making a show of staring down the deputy to get him to move out of her way.

Mort’s attention stayed focused on the desk. He opened its only drawer and pulled out the contents. On top of the pile was a menu, its edges frayed, the paper yellowed with age. He discarded it to the side, but Jessica was not so quick to dismiss it, and stepped closer to get a better look. Printed in fancy script at the top was “Down-the-Hatch.” Below it was the establishment’s Boston address and telephone number.

Mort finished going through papers from the desk, slipped them into a plastic bag he drew from his pocket, and handed them to the deputy. “I don’t see anything here, but I’ll look them over again in the office in case I’m missing anything.”

“What about the menu?” Jessica asked. “He might have had something to do with the restaurant it came from. One of the photographs has him posed in front of it.”

“Oh, yeah, I noticed that, Mrs. F, but the shot could’ve been taken when he was on vacation. We got a lot more to find out about what he was into in Cabot Cove before I go digging into what he did who knows how many years ago. I doubt it’s got anything to do with what happened here last night. I’m going to check out this Mr. Catalan’s room, and head back to the office.”

“Catalana,” she corrected softly.

“Whatever. I gotta hurry. I’ve got Wally Winstead coming in at nine-thirty.”

I looked quizzically at Jessica, who explained, “A fellow in town who accused Mr. Billups of flirting with his wife.”

“Coming?” Mort asked.

“May I take this menu with me?” Jessica asked.

“You collecting old menus now, Mrs. F?” Mort asked. “From the looks of it, it’s from the Revolutionary War. Might be worth a fortune.”

“A new hobby,” she said with a smile.

“Suit yourself.”

“While I’m suiting myself,” Jessica continued, “may I borrow one of these photos for a few days? I promise to return it.”

“Take ‘em all,” Mort said impatiently. “But if some next of kin shows up, you’d better be prepared to bring them right back.”

“Of course,” she said. “They’ll be on your desk Monday morning.”

He grunted and Jessica held her peace.

Mr. Catalana’s now-unoccupied room provided nothing of interest, and we returned to headquarters, where Wally Winstead was pacing out front. Judging from his crimson face, Winstead was angry at having been kept waiting.

“It’s not like I got nawthin’ better to do except sit around here twiddlin’ my thumbs while you’re rammin’ around the countryside,” he told Mort as we walked into headquarters.

“Ran a little late,” Mort said, motioning for Winstead to follow him into the office. We trailed along.

“I gotta get to work. How come I’ve been brought down heah?” Winstead demanded. He was a big, beefy man with a large, round face and head.

“It’s about the murder last night,” Mort said.

“Murder? What murder?”

“Hubert Billups.”

“Who’s he?”

“The man you attacked about your wife, the old guy with the red beard,” said Mort.

“That homeless bum? He got ‘imself killed? Well, I’ll be.”

“Tell me about it,” Mort said.

Winstead squirmed in his chair, and for the first time seemed to notice that Jessica and I were also in the room. “What are you doin’ here, Mrs. Fletcher?” he demanded.

“Don’t worry about them,” Mort said. “Where were you last night?”

“Now don’t jump down my throat. I don’t hafta answer your questions,” Wally said. He faced Jessica again and said accusingly, “You writin’ some stupid story about this?”

I didn’t like his tone or what he was implying. “I suggest you lower your voice, sir,” I said.

Winstead turned to Mort. “If you want to know the truth, I was home last night with the wife.” His voice had increased in pitch.

“All night?” Mort asked.

“That’s right. A man oughta be able to spend a night with his wife.” He turned to Jessica again. “If somebody killed that foolish old bum, he had it coming. Write that!”

“Who can vouch for your whereabouts last night?” Mort asked, keeping his voice even in spite of his witness's provocative manner.

“My wife.”

“Wives’ alibis don’t count,” Mort said. “Who else? You have Thanksgiving dinner with other people?”

“You chargin’ me?” Winstead said, standing and hitching up his trousers.

“Not at the moment,” Mort said.

“Well, then, I’ll be leavin’. All I did was pound up the fella, and he weren’t dead then. I don’t hafta be here.”

Jessica and I expected Mort to stop him, but he didn’t say or do anything as the increasingly agitated Wally stormed from the office.

“I don’t figure he’ll go very far,” Mort said.

“It may not be my place to interject, Sheriff,” I said, “but I believe the man was lying about where he was last night.”

“Oh? What makes you say that?”

“He had all the physical signs in his voice and face,” I explained. “His eyes opened wider than usual, and his pupils were dilated. That suggests to me that he suffered more tension than if he’d simply been telling the truth. He was thinking hard about what to say. That tension showed up in his voice, too. Did you notice how much higher it became when he had to come up with an answer to your question?”

“And he didn’t answer your question right away,” Jessica added. “He asked me a question first. That gave him some extra time to think of an answer to your question, Mort.”

“I picked up on those things, too,” Mort said. “I’m going to let him stew in his juices a bit, then get him back in here for further questioning. I know what I’m doing.”

“Without doubt,” I said, nodding. “Very sound thinking.”

“And it’s time for us to leave,” Jessica announced. “Thanks, Mort. I appreciate your allowing us to come with you this morning. Oh, did Seth’s knife provide any useful information?”

“Not yet. It’s at the state lab. I expect some preliminary info later today.” He seemed to relax now that we were making our departure. “By the way, Mrs. F, dinner was terrific yesterday. Best yet.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it, Mort,” Jessica said, smiling. “And please thank Maureen again for me. Her sweet potato casserole was superb.”

Mort chuckled. “Yeah,” he said, shaking his head. “It was. Whaddya know?”

I thought we were going to go back to Jessica’s house, but as we passed the street on which the boardinghouse was located, she asked me to turn in.

“Forget something?” I asked.

“I just want to ask Beverly a question. You can wait in the car. I won’t be long.”

I pulled his pipe from his pocket. “Take your time,” I said.

About ten minutes later she returned to the car and settled into the passenger seat.

“Learn anything new?” I asked as I turned over the engine.

She sighed. “Nothing useful, I imagine.”

We drove back to her house, Jessica silent with her thoughts until we turned on to her street.

“The mail will be waiting for us.” It was a simple statement of a what should have been a mundane fact, yet the deeper meaning - and the anxiety behind it - was not lost on me.

“One hopes there won’t be another GLOTCOYB letter.”

“Yes,” she replied, giving me a small smile. “One hopes.”

Our hopes were rewarded. The bundle in the mailbox did not contain another of the telltale envelopes.

“Perhaps your torment is over,” I said as she sorted through the correspondence on the kitchen table. “The sender may have gotten bored.”

“If it’s so, I’m grateful for that,” Jessica said with obvious relief. “But it doesn’t answer the question of why those eight letters were sent to me in the first place.”

“You may never know, lass,” I said, shaking my head. “Some people get their jollies by sending anonymous missives and never revealing their identity.”

“That would be a shame,” she said, tearing up an advertising circular in frustration and tossing it into the recycling bin with more force than was strictly necessary. I couldn’t help but laugh. As much as the letters bothered her, I knew her well enough to know that an unsolved mystery bothered her much more.

“What do we have planned for the rest of the day?” I asked.

“I haven’t really thought about it. I assume Mort will be questioning the others who were at dinner yesterday, both the men and the women.”

“An equal-opportunity investigator,” I remarked.

“Appropriately so.” She opened her shoulder bag and took out a plastic bag containing, so far as I could tell, men’s toiletries. They must be Hubert Billups’s, I realized as she examined its contents - a comb, a frayed toothbrush, an almost empty tube of toothpaste, and a rusty pair of scissors - nothing that gave any hint of the man or insight into the crime.

Sighing, Jessica unfolded a menu she had taken from Billups’s room, laid it on the table, then set the three photos next to it.

“I have the feeling that your mind is shifting into high gear, Jessica,” I said. “You get a certain look in your eye when the hunt is on.”

She looked up at me sharply. “What look is that?”

I held up my hands in a gesture of defense. “Now don’t get offended, dear lady. It’s a look I take great pleasure in seeing. When you’re presented with a puzzle, it brings all your concentration into focus, sparks that famous inquisitiveness, and displays the uniqueness of your intellect. It’s a rare talent, and one I’m enjoying seeing you apply to the unfortunate soul who met his Maker last evening.”

Mollified, Jessica sat back and blew a stream of air up through her bangs. “I simply can’t accept that Mr. Billups was killed by some stranger,” she said. “Wally Winstead is a hothead, it’s true, but how would he have gotten hold of Seth’s knife? The same is true for the other tenant from the rooming house, although his disappearance following the murder is suspicious.” She paused, frowning in concentration.

“Go on,” I urged. “What else are you thinking?”

“Billups’s behavior since arriving in Cabot Cove was strange, to say the least - hanging around on the road across from my house, showing up where I happened to be in town, even accepting my invitation for Thanksgiving dinner. Then there are those letters with that indecipherable message. And I don’t believe that someone like Archer Franklin, with all his braggadocio, is capable of murder, despite his dislike of Billups and others like him.”

“Why not?”

“This is an awful thing to say, but somehow I don’t think Mr. Franklin would stab someone who stood facing him. Now, if Mr. Billups had been stabbed in the back . . .” she trailed off.

“What about Mr. Carson?” I asked. “He’s not a known quantity to you. He lives on the road where the murder took place, and was at your senior center when the doctor’s knife was stolen.”

Jessica nodded. “He might be an antisocial sort of fellow, but that doesn’t necessarily translate into being a murderer,” she said.

She started to pick up the menu, but I laid my hand on hers and gently made her set it down again.

“Why don’t you leave off of this for awhile, and try to write?” I suggested. “Focusing on something different for awhile may bring you fresh insight.”

She sighed. “I suppose so,” she said without enthusiasm. “What will you do?”

I gestured to the pile of the day’s newspapers. “I have more than enough reading material to keep me occupied and content for the next several hours.”

“All right,” she said at last, “I’ll see you in a bit.”

Half an hour later the phone rang. Jessica had a brief conversation that I could only hear bits and pieces of, and appeared in the living room a short time later with a look of consternation on her face.

“What nerve!” she said as she sat down on the sofa next to me.

“Who was that calling?” I asked, looking up from the *Wall Street Journal*.

“Archer Franklin. He was all riled up because Mort wanted him to come in to make a statement, and took exception to it even though I tried to explain that everyone who was here last night - including you and me - had done the same thing. He seems to think that as a ‘leading citizen’ - his words, not mine - he should be exempt from such indignities.”

“A wee bit full of himself, isn’t he?” I commented.

“Worse than that,” she said. “I can’t imagine what Wilimena sees in him.”

I cocked my head. “Dollar signs?”

“I prefer to think she’s got more character than that,” Jessica said, then added worriedly, “I certainly hope she does. But I don’t know why she doesn’t see through him.”

“People tend to see what they expect to see, Jessica.”

“True.” she stopped and stared off into space.

“What is it, Jessica?” I asked.

“George,” she said, “I have an idea.”

I listened intently as she laid out for me what she wanted to do. When she had finished, I sat back, closed my eyes, and smiled wryly. Her cleverness was impressive, and it occurred to

me that it was a very good thing she was firmly on the side of justice - as a criminal mastermind, she would have been unstoppable.

I opened my eyes then, and leaned close to her so that our faces were mere inches apart. "I can understand why your crime novels are so successful."

" 'Crime novels,' she repeated. "That's right. You don't call them 'mystery novels' in England."

"Call them what you will," I said, "your success has everything to do with the way your mind processes grisly matters like murder, to say nothing of your tenaciousness and inherent curiosity."

"You sound like Seth."

"Not a bad person to emulate," I pointed out.

"But you do think I'm right."

"Yes. Frankly, I'm surprised that your sheriff doesn't share your belief that knowing as much as possible about the victim's past can be pivotal to solving his murder."

"Mort deals very much with the here and now," she offered in defense of her friend, "and he sometimes jumps to conclusions prematurely. I'm afraid that's what he's doing here, treating Mr. Billups's murder as having to do with a recent event or random incident. He may be right, but I can't help feeling there's more to it than that."

"Your instincts have been solid ever since I first met you, Jessica," I told her. "By all means follow them." I closed the remaining space between us and kissed her gently on the lips.

Jessica had proposed a trip to Boston the next day so that we could do a little snooping into Hubert Billups's background, in hopes of finding something, anything, that might help make sense of his murder, and I had readily agreed. She called Jed Richardson to see whether he could change his schedule and fly us to Boston tomorrow instead of Sunday, when I was scheduled to depart for England. He said he could accommodate us, and so she booked him for a nine-o'clock departure.

"I'd like to make Seth aware of our change in plans," I said, looking at my watch. Jessica waved away my concern. "He's invited us for dinner tonight, and I accepted on our behalf. You can let him know then."

"Yes, I can. But," I added, "I planned to bring him a little gift as thanks. Would you care to accompany me into town to pick something out?"

"Mind terribly if I don't? I have a little catching up to do."

"Working on your novel?"

"Perhaps."

I smiled. "I'm guessing you have another sort of computer work in mind," I said, kissing her cheek. "I shouldn't be too long. I'll ring you up when I'm on my way back."

I had an idea of what I wanted to give Seth, and found it without much looking in Cabot Cove's downtown bookstore. An inveterate book browser, I allowed myself to be distracted by the shop's surprisingly diverse inventory, and before I knew it an hour and a half had flown by. Realizing that I needed to get back to Jessica's, I took my purchases to the register and paid for them while admiring a display of Jessica's books arranged on a table next to the counter.

While I'd been inside the bookstore the weather had abruptly changed from fair to stormy. Thunder rumbled in the near distance and rain was just beginning to pelt down as I made my dash to the car.

The rain only intensified as I started the drive back to Candlewood Lane. I took it slowly, peering through the windshield through sheets of water that reduced my visibility to almost nil. Nevertheless, I instantly recognized Jessica when I came upon her, walking her bicycle on the side of the road and looking thoroughly miserable.

I tapped my horn as I pulled up beside her and rolled down the window.

"Need a ride, lass?"

"George!" she cried. "Thank goodness."

I put on the car's flashers and popped open the boot before getting out to help her load the bicycle in. By the time we'd gotten back into the car, I was as soaked as she was from the downpour.

"What possessed you to try and bicycle home in this downpour?" I asked, shifting into gear and pulling away.

"I thought that - no matter. I'm just glad you came along."

I glanced at her and grinned. "You look absolutely beautiful with water running off that fine nose," I told her.

Jessica shook her head and tried to push her wet hair back into place with her sleeve.

"I'm a mess."

"All in the eye of the beholder, Jessica. You'll soon be warm and dry." I started humming "Singin' in the Rain" as we continued the trip.

Once we were home, Jessica handed me a jumpsuit. "Here," she said. "This is three sizes too big for me, but it should fit you perfectly. It was a gift I hadn't gotten around to exchanging - but now I'm glad I didn't."

"Many thanks," I gulped as I accepted it. To be perfectly honest, I was having difficulty concentrating on what she was saying. Jessica was standing before me with her soaked clothes plastered to her body, and as such they did not leave much of her figure to the imagination. Her shirt, especially, had been rendered nearly transparent by the heavy rain, clearly revealing every soft, sensual curve. *Och mah.*

"I'm going to take a hot shower before I catch a chill," she said, apparently oblivious to my staring, and gave me a little push in the direction of her guest room. "You can change down the hall. I'll meet you downstairs once I put on some dry clothes, and then we'll have tea."

Tea! Yes, tea - capital idea. When stressed, the British always seek solace in a cup of tea, and at the moment I was feeling decidedly stressed. I changed quickly and went downstairs to put the kettle on.

Once she was out of the shower and in to a (properly fitting) jumpsuit of her own, Jessica put our wet clothes in the dryer while I lit the logs in the fireplace. We sat in front of the flames and enjoyed steaming cups of tea while Jessica related her conversations with Kathy Copeland and Joe DiScala about Archer Franklin.

"If what they say is true," I said, "I feel sorry for Ms. Copeland." I shifted closer to her on the couch, enjoying the feel of the warm cotton material against my skin. Jessica had put all of my wet clothes in the dryer, so I was "going commando," as they say. It felt ... nice.

“I thought for a while that she’d latched onto him because he was rich,” Jessica said, “but it now looks as though it’s the other way around. I Googled him and found nothing under the name Archer Franklin.”

A rather naughty thought occurred to me: was Jessica also wearing only her jumpsuit, with nothing else on underneath? I needed to find out. “For a man of his alleged successes, I find that strange.”

“And he moved in with Kathy and Wilimena a few days ago.”

“Another bad sign,” I said. I put my arm around her and idly ran my fingers up and down her shoulder, surreptitiously looking for an undergarment strap. I found none.

“Wilimena isn’t a stupid woman,” Jessica said. “Surely she’s capable of seeing that Archer isn’t all he claims to be.”

“One would hope so, although you’ve said she craves male attention. I suppose that could explain the blinders she’s wearing.” I wondered how I might go about learning whether Jessica was wearing anything else under that jumpsuit, but couldn’t come up with any method that wouldn’t get me justifiably slapped.

“Did you find a gift for Seth?” Jessica asked.

I brought my thoughts back to the conversation at hand. “I certainly did. In our conversations, Seth revealed that, like me, he’s an avid reader of history.”

Jessica smiled. “No wonder you got along so well.”

“We did, in fact. Anyway, I noticed that Seth had the first and second volumes of Edmund Wilson’s excellent series of diary entries from the last century, spanning the twenties through the sixties. I found a bookstall in town that stocks rare and used books, and bought him the editions he was missing.”

“He’ll love it,” Jessica said in delight. “He’s always been a fan of Wilson.”

“A crusty chap with an outsized ego, and intellect.”

“Edmund Wilson, or Seth?”

I laughed. “Wilson, of course. I’ll give Seth the books at dinner tonight.”

We decided to leave early for Seth’s. Scheduled to join us that evening were Jack and Tobé Wilson, but they were running late, something to do with emergency surgery Dr. Wilson had to perform on someone’s pet. Jessica and Seth settled in the living room to chat while while I retired to my guest room to change into a set of regular clothes and finish packing before dinner.

“Ah, there he is, all garbed up,” Seth said as I re-entered the room.

I looked from one to the other. Jessica looked tense, almost shaken. “Have I missed anything?” I asked casually, wondering what they could have been discussing that had provoked such a reaction in her.

“No, just catching up,” Seth said lightly, casting a sly smile at Jessica that I did not miss. Jessica’s returned glance was not nearly as amused. *Hmm.*

The Wilsons arrived soon after, and Seth poured drinks. I was in good spirits, and prompted by Seth and the Wilsons I began to tell stories of some of my more unusual and amusing cases.

“ . . . and so this bloke stands there blinking furiously and scratching his nose, sure signs that he’s lying,” I was saying. “It’s called the Pinocchio Syndrome. There’s even a theory that blood rushes to the nose when you tell a lie, making it itchy. But the kicker, of course, was that he’d written his stickup note on the back of his business card. There’s a right turnup for the books, wouldn’t you say?”

I continued to tell amusing stories over dinner, but was acutely aware of Jessica’s disquiet throughout the evening. She seemed on edge and preoccupied, and for the life of me I could not figure out why, though my thoughts continually returned to the looks she and Seth had exchanged when I had come upon them after I had finished packing.

Ah, well, I decided eventually. It’s between the two of them, and if Jessica wants me to know what they were discussing, she’ll tell me when she’s ready.

After dinner we retired to the living room for after-dinner drinks. I waited for a break in the conversation and got to my feet, a glass of Seth’s fine vintage brandy in my hand.

“May I have everyone’s attention?” I asked. I immediately got it, and so I continued: “My visit here has been a wonderful one. I haven’t had the pleasure of spending much time with Dr. and Mrs. Wilson, but I intend to rectify that the next time around. I’m especially grateful to Dr. Hazlitt, who opened his home for me and has been a splendid host. Half a moment.” I ducked out of the room briefly to retrieve the books I’d purchased from my guest room. A moment later I returned and handed the package to Seth. I was gratified by his expression, which indicated that he was truly surprised by the gesture.

Seth tore off the paper and removed Edmund Wilson’s volumes one by one, admiring each as he did. “This was certainly unnecessary, George,” he said, “and I’m touched by your generosity, as well as your taste in literature.”

I laughed. “I thought you’d enjoy having the complete set.”

“That I do, and I intend to read every word,” Seth said. He got to his feet, reached behind his chair, and came up with another package, this one wrapped in silver paper. “Seems to me,” he said, “that this might be a good time to become a gift giver, too.” He crossed the room. “For you, Jessica,” he said.

Jessica, equally surprised in turn, accepted it with wide eyes. “What is this for?” she asked.

“Open it and find out,” Tobe said.

All eyes were on her as she pulled on the red silk ribbon. The wrapping fell away to reveal a gleaming marble statue of a man holding a writing tablet and a quill pen.

“What’s it supposed to be?” Jack Wilson asked.

Jessica found the answer by reading what was inscribed on a brass plate at the base:

*“Be thou the tenth Muse, ten times more in worth
Than those old nine which rhymers invoke.”
- William Shakespeare, Sonnet 38*

“It’s lovely, Seth,” she said, clearly touched by his gesture. “Thank you.”

“I figured since you’ve been having trouble finishing your latest book, your regular muse might have skipped out on you, so I came up with this new one, compliments of Willie Shakespeare.

“Where did you have it done?” she asked.

“Down in Portland. Remember Regina Gormley?”

“Of course I do. She’s a wonderful sculptress. I was sorry to see her leave Cabot Cove after her husband died.”

“She moved to Portland. We’ve kept in touch, so when I had this idea to get you a new muse, I called her. She came up with Shakespeare and the quote. Flew down with Jed Richardson to pick it up personally.”

Jessica gave Seth a light kiss on the cheek. “I have a feeling, Seth, that this new muse is exactly what I need. With him looking over me, I’ll have that book written in no time.”

The party broke up at ten-thirty. The Wilsons offered to drive Jessica home, but I intervened, insisting that it would be my pleasure. Jessica accepted, although I detected some reluctance - probably because I had to make a special trip to her house and then back. But I truly didn’t mind.

“You were full of wonderful stories,” she said as we went.

“I had a wonderful audience,” I said. “I felt very much as though I was with family.”

“You’ve been adopted,” Jessica said lightly.

I grinned. “Lucky me.”

As I walked Jessica from the car to her door, I said, “As much as I love your friends, Jessica, I admit I’m looking forward to our trip tomorrow, just the two of us.”

“It will be a busy time,” she said. “I hope you don’t mind that I’ll be spending much of it trying to fit pieces into the Billups puzzle.”

“Correction,” I said. “*We*’ll be looking for those missing puzzle pieces. Besides, what would a trip with Jessica Fletcher be without a hefty dose of intrigue?”

This made her laugh, as I’d hoped it would. “What a reputation to have!”

“Just one of many things I . . .” I stumbled - “I love about you, lass. Go on, now, get yourself inside. Have you packed?”

“No.”

“Then get to it. What shall I do with the car?”

“You can give it to Jed at the airport. People do that all the time.”

I nodded. “Very good. What time would you like me to collect you?”

“Come by at seven-thirty. We can have breakfast here before heading to the airport.”

I took her in my arms and kissed her goodnight. “Have a pleasant night’s sleep,” I said. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

She went inside; I heard the lock turn in the door, and then headed back to Seth’s house to turn in for the night.

The next morning we were winging our way to Boston in Jed Richardson’s Cessna, with Jessica at the controls. It was a smooth flight, and before I knew it we were landing at Logan Airport.

“What’s the drill?” Jed asked. “When do I pick you up, Jess?”

“Sunday afternoon,” she said. “Is four okay with you? George’s flight to London leaves at three.”

“Sure. Not a problem.” He shook my hand and said, “Travel safe, Inspector, and come back soon.”

“Oh, I intend to do that,” I said sincerely. “Many thanks for the smooth flight.”

We headed out of the terminal and hailed a cab.

“The Lennox Hotel, please,” Jessica told the driver, “on Boylston at Exeter.”

I was very pleased - *very* - to see that Jessica had booked adjoining rooms, one of which was a corner room with a working fireplace.

“This is your room,” Jessica said as a bellhop delivered our luggage.

I looked around at the opulent setting. “Ach, no, lass,” I protested. “This one should be yours.”

“Not another word,” Jessica insisted. “Besides, I fully intend to spend *almost* as much time in this room as you do.”

With that settled, we agreed to meet in the lobby in half an hour. I arrived first, and pursued a complimentary copy of the *Boston Globe* until I spotted Jessica stepping off the elevator.

“What’s first on the agenda?” I asked as I fell into step beside her.

“A stop at Down-the-Hatch,” she said.

I grinned. “Ah, haven’t gone pub crawling since my early days with the metropolitan police.”

“Just *one* pub, George,” Jessica said with a smile. “I have no idea what Billups had to do with Down-the-Hatch, but there was that photo of him posing in front of it, and the menu found in his room. There has to be some connection.”

“A little early for a pub to be opening, isn’t it?”

“It’s getting close to noon,” she said. “There must be people there setting up for lunch.

“Lead the way, lass.”

Boylston Street was bustling as we walked past condominiums, shops, restaurants and bars, including Down-the-Hatch. We lingered outside the restaurant for a few minutes and peered through the window, observing the activity inside.

“Nice looking place,” I commented. “Very welcoming - reminds me a bit of home. Shall we?”

“Yes,” Jessica agreed. “Let’s.”

“You take the lead, lass. You know better than I what it is you’re looking for.”

When we opened the door, a young woman approached us.

“Afraid you’re a little early for lunch,” she said, “but you can get something at the bar.” She looked to where a bartender was dumping indicating a wave that he’d be with us in a few minutes.

“No rush,” Jessica said.

“Very nice ambiance,” I said once we were seated at the bar. “Very much like a British pub.”

The bartender came to where we sat and asked what he could get us.

“Just a glass of seltzer for me,” Jessica said.

I checked my watch. "Make that two," he said.

"Visiting Boston?" the bartender asked me when he returned with our drinks.

"I am."

The bartender grinned. "It was the accent. Could tell you weren't local." He looked at Jessica. "Where are you from?"

"I'm from Maine," she said. "My friend here is from London."

"I was in London last year. It's a cool city."

Jessica asked the bartender if he knew Hubert Billups, although based on his age I thought unlikely that he would - and that proved to be the case. He did, however, mention a long-time patron named Damon O'Dell who might.

"He's a customer, been coming in for as long as I've worked here, and that's only a year. But he's one of the regulars from way back. You're sitting in his place."

"I am?" I asked.

"Sure. Read that little plaque on the edge of the bar."

We leaned over to read the tiny inscription: "Reserved for Damon O'Dell."

"He must have been a very good customer," Jessica said, "to warrant his own barstool."

"Never misses a day unless he's sick. He's a nice old guy, lives alone a few blocks from here. A real gentleman." He smiled. "And a good tipper."

"Do you think he'll be in today?"

"I'd bet my life on it. Two o'clock sharp. Bowl of chowder and extra crackers, sliced tomatoes with mayonnaise, and a Rob Roy."

"I like his choice of drinks," I said.

"He's got taste," the bartender said. "Always dresses nice and neat. Like I said, a real gentleman. Excuse me." He moved down the bar to serve a couple who had just come in.

I knew what Jessica was thinking even before she said it: "This Mr. O'Dell might be able to tell us something."

"It sounds as though he goes back far enough," I said. "Shall we stay for lunch?"

Jessica nodded. "I'd like to. Maybe we should vacate his reserved spot. We wouldn't want to upset him when he walks in."

I escorted her to a booth and we ordered one of the day's specials, Reuben sandwiches with salads on the side. The place had begun to full up, and by a few minutes before two there wasn't a table or booth to be had. However, although the bar was also busy, no one opted to sit in O'Dell's spot.

At a few minutes past two, the door opened and a dapper gentleman who appeared to be in his seventies entered the restaurant, went directly to the O'Dell stool, and slid onto it.

"That must be him," said Jessica.

"How do you plan to approach him?" I asked her.

"Look - the person next to him is leaving."

We left the booth and approached the bar, where Jessica took the now vacant stool. O'Dell glanced at her and smiled, then returned his attention to the Rob Roy the bartender had prepared moments before his customer's arrival. I stood behind Jessica and tried to look unobtrusive.

"Drink?" the bartender asked her.

“Oh, yes, please.” She glanced at O’Dell’s glass. “That’s an interesting-looking drink,” she said. “I think I’ll try one of those.”

“You, sir?” the bartender asked me.

“I believe I’ll join in as well.”

“What’s it called?” Jessica asked O’Dell.

“A Rob Roy,” the bartender supplied helpfully.

“Oh, Jimmy, you know better than that,” O’Dell said.

“He’s right,” the bartender said. “It’s actually a Bobbie Burns.”

“Is it after the Scottish poet?” Jessica asked, glancing back at me. “What makes it that?”

O’Dell turned to her. “Quite simple,” he said. “You take the classic Rob Roy, which was named for the Scots folk hero Robert Roy MacGregor, but add a dash of Benedictine. Gives it a nice honey flavor.”

“Make it that way, please,” Jessica told the bartender.

“Yes, ma’am.”

O’Dell returned his attention to his drink, and to the plate of tomatoes slathered with mayonnaise.

“By the way,” Jessica said, “I’m Jessica Fletcher, and this is my friend George Sutherland, visiting from England.”

O’Dell’s eyes opened wide, and he smiled. “*The Jessica Fletcher?*”

Jessica returned his smile. “I’m the only person I know with that name,” she said.

“The writer,” said O’Dell. “I’ve read most of your books. I like mysteries.”

Jessica’s smile was even warmer. “I’m flattered.”

“What brings you to Boston?” O’Dell asked as he ate his tomato. “Promoting a new book?”

Jessica could not have wished for a better opening even if she had written it herself. “Actually, no,” she said. “George and I are looking into the background of someone.”

His eyebrows rose. “Sounds intriguing,” he said. “Anyone I know?”

“I’m not sure,” she said, “but here - take a look.”

She handed him a copy of one of the three photos she’d retrieved from Billups’s room that she had scanned before returning the originals to Mort Metzger.

“It’s Hubie!” O’Dell exclaimed.

“Then you know him.”

“Of course I do, or did. Haven’t seen him in a dog’s age.”

Jessica looked up at me and smiled. “May I ask how and where you knew him?”

He took another stab at his tomatoes and sipped his Rob Roy.

“Did you have a close relationship with him?” Jessica asked.

O’Dell slowly turned to face her. “It seems as though I should be asking you the questions,” he said. His tone was firm, but carried no hostility.

I took advantage of the departure of the patron sitting next to Jessica and took his place on the bar stool.

“Please do,” Jessica said O’Dell.

“Why are you carrying around a picture of Hubie, and why are you asking about him?”

Jessica paused for a moment before saying, "It's difficult to have to tell you this, but Mr. Billups is dead. He was murdered in front of my house."

O'Dell visibly recoiled at her words. "Hubie's dead?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Murdered, you said?"

"Yes."

"Oh, boy," he muttered, and took a big gulp from his glass.

"I'm sorry to break that news, Mr. O'Dell," said Jessica.

"Oh, no, it's okay," O'Dell assured her. "Just a momentary shock, and I shouldn't be shocked."

"Why's that?"

"I knew Hubie would have a bad end after what happened."

This sounded interesting, and I leaned into Jessica to better hear what O'Dell had to say.

"I don't understand," Jessica said. "What *did* happen to him?"

He shook his head and continued eating. Jessica glanced back at me, and I shrugged.

At last O'Dell broke his silence to ask, "Are you writing a book about what happened to Hubie?"

"No," Jessica said. "My only interest is to do what I can to help find his killer. He'd moved recently to Cabot Cove - that's where I live in Maine - and he was a guest at my Thanksgiving Day dinner. He seemed to be a very lonely man and, well, a little strange."

"How could he not be?"

Jessica was silent, allowing him the space to say more.

"Hubie got beat up pretty bad," O'Dell said, "especially around the head. Folks didn't think he'd pull through. He did, but he was never the same. His brain didn't work so well after that. His speech was affected, and his eyesight. He kept forgetting things. Really sad. Then he just disappeared."

"He was in an accident?" I asked.

"More a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, with the wrong people." He peered at me and asked, "Are you a writer, too?"

"No, sir. I'm with Scotland Yard in London."

The bartender delivered our drinks and slid a bowl of clam chowder in front of O'Dell.

"Scotland Yard, hey?" O'Dell said, impressed with George's credentials. "Why would Scotland Yard be interested in Hubie?"

"They aren't," I said. "I'm just tagging along with Mrs. Fletcher."

O'Dell's gaze came back to Jessica. "Enjoying your Bobbie Burns?" he asked her.

"I haven't even tasted it yet." She took a sip, then said, "It's good, very good. As you say, it has a hint of honey."

"Yes," I agreed after sampling my own drink. "Very tasty."

"Glad you approve," O'Dell said. "That's about all I can tell you about Hubie. I'm sorry to hear what happened to him. They haven't caught the culprit yet?"

"It happened only two days ago," Jessica said. She reached into her purse and pulled out the old menu from Down-the-Hatch. "I found this in his room. That's why we came here. The

picture of him was taken in front of this place, and with the menu we thought there might be a connection between him and the restaurant.”

O’Dell finished his drink and asked the bartender for another.

“Two today, Mr. O’Dell?” the bartender said with a smile.

“I’ve had bad news, Jimmy. Bad news calls for another balm to the soul.”

Jessica discreetly cleared her throat to recapture O’Dell’s attention. “I was saying ...” she began.

“I heard you,” O’Dell said. “You thought there might be a link between Hubie Billups and Down-the-Hatch.”

“That’s right.”

“Well, I’d say there certainly was.”

We looked blankly at him.

“Hubie used to own the joint,” O’Dell said. He sighed and downed the rest of his second drink in one go. “Look, it’s a long story, and I can’t tell it here. Why don’t you come back to my place and we can continue our discussion there.”

Jessica nodded, and I signaled to the bartender. “Can we settle up? And please add Mr. O’Dell’s order to our tab.”

O’Dell protested, but I prevailed. As we were leaving the hostess flagged me down:

“Sir! Your bill.”

“Sorry,” I said. “We were busy talking at the bar and forgot about our lunch.” I handed her my credit card, and when she returned it with the slip I made sure to leave a good tip.

Damon O’Dell didn’t seem affected by his two Bobbie Burns in the least as he led us down Boylston and on to a tree-lined street where his own building was squeezed between to modern condo complexes. As for the flat itself, it was more library than living space, with floor-to-ceiling bookcases complete with a rolling ladder.

“Please excuse the mess,” he said as he cleared stacks of books off of two chairs for us.

Jessica was impressed. “You have quite a collection,” she said, surveying the shelves with wide eyes.

“I love books!” he proclaimed. “Yours are over there, right-hand bookcase, third shelf from the bottom.”

Jessica went over to the place he indicated, and assessed his collection, obviously pleased.

“Would you be good enough to sign them for me?” he asked.

She beamed. “Of course.”

The man had almost all of Jessica’s books, so the signing took awhile. While she was thus engaged, he and I discussed another section of his library I had found that was dedicated to Scottish history. I remarked that I was surprised to see this, in light of the fact that he had was I was pretty certain was an Irish surname.

O’Dell laughed. “I am Irish,” he confirmed, “but I’ve always admired the Scots. They hold their liquor better.”

Once Jessica had completed her task she rejoined us and the conversation returned to the late Hubert Billups. O’Dell identified the other man in the photograph as Hubert’s brother Harry, co-owner of Down-the-Hatch. He told the story of how the two brothers, feisty and stubborn, had

been targeted by organized criminals intent on taking the restaurant over. When they resisted, the mobsters retaliated, killing Harry and beating Hubert so severely that initially he was not expected to live. Although the actual men who had carried out the attacks were eventually convicted, the mobster who actually issued the order disappeared - O'Dell had no idea what had happened to him.

"Anyway," he concluded, "Hubie survived, although he was never the same. I only saw him once after he came out of the hospital. I couldn't believe the way he looked and acted, his speech slurred like he was drunk, walking funny, you know, like an old man. It was really sad to see this tough little guy reduced to that."

"And that was the only time you saw him?" I asked.

"That's right. Folks told me that whatever money Hubie got from the sale of Down-the-Hatch went to pay his hospital bills, and what was left went to his wife."

"He was married?"

"Oh, yes, he was. She was a beauty, and a real spitfire. She used to come in the place now and then, and everybody liked her. Hubie used to say that she had to be a saint to put up with him, and he was right. They got along fine. At least it seemed that way to me."

Jessica fetched the scanned copy of the photograph of Billups and a woman that she had taken from the rooming house and showed it to O'Dell.

"That's Connie, all right," he confirmed.

"Is she still alive?" she asked.

"I believe so. You can give her a call. I have her number - if she's still there."

He rummaged through a bulging address book until he found it.

"Speaking of pictures," Jessica said, "can you identify what's in this one?" She produced the third picture, of Billups receiving a plaque.

O'Dell nodded. "That was the Boston mayor giving Hubie a citizenship award. Hubie used to sponsor amateur boxing here in Boston, gave kids from the poorer parts of town something positive to do. Hubie probably would have been a pretty good fighter himself if he'd pursued that, probably in the lightweight or welterweight division. He loved those kids he trained, always said it was better for them to punch each other in the ring than in some back alley." He sighed at the memory. "Can I get you folks some coffee and cake? I've got a nice pound cake in the freezer, defrosts in no time flat."

"I think we've taken enough of your time," Jessica said. "You've been very gracious, Mr. O'Dell."

"Please call me Damon," he said. "If you want to try calling Hubie's wife - I suppose she's his widow now - you can do it from here." He pointed to a phone half buried beneath books.

Jessica took him up on his offer and dialed the number. After a long wait, someone answered. "Hello. Mrs. Billups? My name is Jessica Fletcher. Damon O'Dell was kind enough to give me your number. . . . I'll do that. Mrs. Billups, I'm here in Boston with a friend from London. We're trying to find out what we can about your husband, Hubert." There was another pause and Jessica's expression became pained. "I'm very sorry to have to tell you this, but Hubert is dead. He died in Cabot Cove, Maine on Thanksgiving evening." Another pause, and then she said, "No - Mrs. Billups, could my friend and I come visit? We're here in Boston only

overnight - my friend flies back to London tomorrow - and I would very much appreciate being able to talk with you in person. I promise not to take too much of your time." A suggestion that we come to her home was apparently rebuffed, so Jessica tried again: "Would you like to meet us at Down-the-Hatch?" This was acceptable; a meeting time at six o'clock was set.

It was only four in the afternoon now, so that left us with two hours to spend as we wished. Jessica thanked O'Dell profusely and promised to send him a signed copy of her newest book once it was released. We left the apartment and walked slowly along Boylston Street toward Boston Common, but the weather was turning colder, so after half an hour we stopped into a tearoom that served pastries on the side.

"What do you think?" I asked her when we had been seated at a table near the windows.

"I'm not sure what to think, George," Jessica said. "We know that Billups once owned Down-the-Hatch with his brother, Harry, and that the mob tried to muscle in on their business. They balked and Harry paid with his life. What I'm not clear about is what happened to Hubert after his hospitalization. His wife - actually, his former wife - might be able to fill in the gap between his injuries and his arrival in Cabot Cove."

"That's a lot of years to cover."

"I know, but it doesn't make sense to me that he just happened to end up in town. Why Cabot Cove? He must have come there for a reason."

"Maybe, maybe not," I said. "Men like that are apt to wander without specific destinations. If he left Boston and traveled north along the coast, eventually he would hit Cabot Cove. He may have lived somewhere else to the south for a time until he got the urge to move."

"True, but -"

"Jessica."

"Yes?"

"You do realize that what we find out from his former wife, and what we've learned from Mr. O'Dell, may make an interesting story but may have absolutely no bearing on why Billups was killed."

Jessica drew a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. Although neither of us hoped I was right, she undoubtedly recognized that there was a very real possibility that what I'd said would prove true. She looked at me, doubt clouding her features; in return I gave her an encouraging smile. It was never my intention to cast cold water on her enterprise, only to make sure it didn't end in crushing disappointment.

Her gaze drifted to the street outside the window - what she was thinking about, I had no idea. After awhile I dared to break into her thoughts: "Jessica?"

She looked up at me in surprise. "What?"

"Your mind is elsewhere again."

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry," she said, shaking off her reverie. "Do you think this trip is pure folly?"

I snorted. "Of course not."

"I'd understand if you did."

"Well, I don't."

Still, Jessica persisted: "We could have been seeing the sights in Boston on your last full day here."

I reached across the table and barely grazed her cheek with my fingers. “Your face is the sight I most prefer, lass,” I said. “I was never one for doing the tourist route.” I checked my watch. “Maybe we should be going.”

Jessica nodded, and motioned for our check.

“How will we know her?” I asked once we’d stepped outside and started looking for a taxi.

“She said she’d be wearing a red beret and a black cape.”

I laughed. “Quite an outfit for an older woman.”

Jessica quirked a smile. “Maybe she was a child bride. Maybe Mr. Billups robbed the cradle.”

“I hope not.”

“There’s a cab,” Jessica said, and I stepped to the curb to hail it.

By the time we returned to Down-the-Hatch, the bar was filled with patrons. I scanned the room and spotted a woman sitting by herself at a small table against the wall, a red beret on her head, and her black cape folded over the back of her chair. I tapped Jessica’s shoulder, and allowed her to lead the way.

“Are you Connie?” she asked when we came up to her. At her nod, she continued. “I’m Jessica Fletcher. This is George Sutherland.”

“Hello,” she said. She looked around - “Would never have recognized the place, you know, if it weren’t for the sign over the door.”

“Has it changed that much?” Jessica asked, taking the seat opposite hers. I dragged over a chair from an adjacent table and also sat down.

“A bar gets a lot of wear and tear, especially the floor,” Connie said, eyeing the Mexican tile beneath her feet. “Ours was wood.” She gazed around the room, taking in all the details. “And of course every owner has a vision of how they want it to be. At least they kept the name. That’s nice.”

A waiter approached us and asked, “You having dinner, folks?”

Jessica looked at Connie, who shook her head. “No, thank you,” she said, “but you can bring us something to drink.”

With glasses in front of us, Connie took charge of the conversation, speaking mostly of the decline of the traditional family-owned restaurant-bars in Boston. We listened attentively, waiting for an opportunity to change the subject.

“Would you excuse me a moment?” Connie asked. A few moments later she was back: “Just wanted to see if my name was still carved in the wood back there,” she said, smiling softly.

“And is it?” I asked.

“It is. I guess you always want to leave a permanent mark on a place you’ve owned. Hubie and I picked out the lintel over the kitchen door, figuring it would last a long time, and it has.”

That was our opening, and Jessica seized it. “It was good of you to find time for us,” she said. “I know this must be distressing for you, but -“

“It’s okay,” she said. “You say Hubie’s dead. How did he die?”

“He was murdered,” I said.

Connie’s eyes widened. “Hmmm,” she said. “Murdered? How?”

“Well ...” Jessica began.

I decided to spare her from having to reveal the details. “Someone stabbed him to death,” I said.

“Oh. Who did it?”

“We don’t know,” Jessica said gently. “That’s why we’re trying to come up with an answer.”

Connie looked at us warily. “Are you cops?”

“No,” Jessica said.

“Well, if you’re not, what are you here for? What are the police doing?”

“They’re doing all they can,” Jessica said, “but ...”

“Who are you?”

“I’m a writer,” Jessica replied, “and George is with Scotland Yard.”

“Scotland Yard? Did Hubie do something *really* wrong?”

I grinned. “No. I’m just along as Jessica’s friend.”

Her narrowed eyes clearly indicated that she thought we were understating things with “friends.”

Jessica started to ask a question, but before she could form the words Connie signaled the waiter and ordered another drink.

“You’re paying, right?”

Jessica nodded.

“Okay, Connie said, “what do you want to know about Hubie?”

An hour and a half later, Jessica and I stepped out of a taxi in front of our hotel.

“Hungry?” I asked her.

“Maybe a little,” she said. “What I’d really like is a quiet place to talk.”

We had two choices in the Lennox: an Irish pub, Solas, or the less crowded City-Bar. We opted for the latter.

“... and according to her, Mr. Billups just disappeared from Boston and from her life,” I said, nibbling at our shared Maine lobster salad.

“I had the feeling she wasn’t particularly unhappy to see him go.”

“I had that feeling, too. Of course, he wasn’t the same man she’d married, not once those thugs scrambled his brain.”

The former Mrs. Billups had also told us that the little money she’d received from the sale of Down-the-Hatch hadn’t gone very far. Hubie, unable to work, had taken off. She was left almost destitute and had made ends meet by working as a waitress in restaurants around Boston. She’d attempted during the first few years of his absence to find out where he was, but eventually gave up and resigned herself to never seeing him again. She filed for divorce based upon abandonment, and it was easily granted.

“She certainly is no fan of law enforcement,” I said.

“I suppose you can’t blame her, George. The two thugs who killed her brother-in-law, and who beat her husband nearly to death, ended up in prison, but the man behind it beat the rap.”

Jessica pulled a slim reporter’s notepad from her purse on which she’d made notes during our conversation with Connie. “That would be ... Here it is: Vincent Canto, nicknamed “the bear”

because he was so big. She claims he cut a deal with the authorities, turned state's evidence against Hubie's assailants, and got a free pass."

"Chances are he's in your Witness Protection Program, never to be seen or heard from again," I said.

"Do you have that program in England?" Jessica asked.

"Oh, yes, patterned after your own," I said. "Yours was extremely well thought out, and works quite efficiently, including all its subtleties, the way identities are kept secret, funding families that are entered into the program, rules concerning the role of local law enforcement and its responsibilities, down to such things as choosing new names for informants who go into witness protection. We always recommend that they choose a name with the same first and last initials as their real name, or at least retain their first name."

"You do?"

"Oh, yes. Every detail is thought out."

"I suppose it has to be to assure their safety."

"Do you know what I think, Jessica? While all this is interesting from a human drama perspective, I'm beginning to doubt it has anything to do with Mr. Billups' demise."

"You may be right," she said sadly.

We fell into an easy, comfortable conversation from that point forward about a variety of distinctly less weighty things. It was after I had assigned the bill to my room, and we were about to head for the elevators that Jessica gasped and grabbed my arm.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I don't think this was a wasted trip after all."

After leaving the hotel's City-Bar, we went up to my room to continue our conversation.

"We might as well take advantage of the fireplace," I said, igniting the gas and adjusting it until the flames were just the right height. With this done I joined Jessica, who was standing at one of the room's large windows gazing out over the twinkling lights of the city of Boston. The moon, still mostly full, was rising and seemed to hang suspended just above a high-rise in the distance.

Jessica sighed. "So beautiful," she said.

I put my arm around her. "Indeed." But it wasn't the lights of Boston that I was referring to.

We stood there for a little while longer in silence, watching the moon rise, until I ventured to ask Jessica if she wanted something to drink, an offer that she accepted.

"Let's see what we have here," I said, crossing the room to the minibar. "Hmm. Brandy, scotch, white and red wine ..."

"White wine would be fine for me," she said.

I opened a miniature bottle of white wine and poured it into a glass for her, then treated myself to one last taste of scotch before going home. Jessica had already sitting on the sofa with her feet tucked under her; I handed her the glass of wine and sat down next to her.

"Cheers," I said, touching my glass to hers. "So - what exactly did you mean when you said this wasn't a wasted trip after all?"

"I think I know what happened to Vincent Canto," she said.

“You do?” I said in surprise.

“Yes. He is living just down the road from me in Cabot Cove, with his wife.”

That news came as something of a shock. “The Carsons?” I said.

“I think they’re in the Federal Witness Protection Program,” she said. “And I’m virtually certain that Victor Carson is - or was - Vincent Canto.”

I took a thoughtful sip of my scotch as I considered what she was saying.

“Think about it,” Jessica said, her eyes sparkling. “He’s a big, powerful man, which fits the physical description we have of Canto. Linda indicated that they are from the Boston area. His current name has the same initials as his real one, as the Witness Protection Program advises. He admitted at Thanksgiving dinner that he used to be in the restaurant business, and,” she concluded, “they’ve been lying in virtually every conversation I’ve had with them - or at least, Linda has.”

“I don’t know, Jessica,” I said. “It’s an awfully big coincidence that Vincent Canto and Hubert Billups should happen to land in the same small town in Maine.”

“Not if Billups knew Carson for who he really was, and was following him from place to place,” said Jessica.

“That would leave open the possibility that Carson ... also knew who Billups was,” I said.

“Yes,” said Jessica. “Exactly.”

The implication was clear enough - Jessica didn’t need to articulate it. If Carson - Canto - did recognize Hubert Billups, it left open a very strong possibility that he might have decided to finish what he had started in Boston.

I took a deep breath. “What will you do?”

Jessica sipped her wine. “I’ll call Mort Metzger and tell him what I think might have happened.”

“Do you think he’ll listen to you?”

“Oh, Mort will listen,” Jessica said with confidence, “but he might not agree with me.”

“You really have little concrete to offer, Jessica,” I said.

“Except a strong hunch.” She smiled at me. “My hunches haven’t always been right, but they haven’t always been wrong either.”

That was true enough - but it didn’t ease my worry. “If the conclusion you’ve come to is correct,” I told her, “you’ll be stepping on some pretty big toes.”

“Which isn’t nearly as important as getting to the truth about Billups’s murder.” Jessica sat back and turned her gaze back toward the cityscape beyond the window. “Funny how my view of Billups has changed over the past few days,” she said thoughtfully. “I started out being wary of him, even fearful. Now it’s as though I knew him, a friend who’s been killed in a brutal way, someone who deserves to see his killer brought to justice.”

“I admire your tenacity,” I said.

She set aside her empty wine glass before turning back to face me with a wry look in her eyes. “Some, like Seth, consider it a character flaw.”

I laughed. “I suspect, Jessica, that the good Dr. Hazlitt has great respect for that so-called character flaw.”

“Maybe.” She didn’t sound convinced.

I took Jessica's hand in my own. "Take it from someone who just spent the last several days as his erstwhile houseguest," I said. "You have many remarkable gifts, Jessica. Seth is well aware of them ... as am I."

She smiled, and once more allowed me to put my arm around her and draw her close to my side. I turned off the lamp on the end table next to me; now the only light in the room came from the fireplace, the city lights outside the window, and the moon. It had risen higher while we talked, and was now spilling its silver light through the room's large windows.

Jessica laid her head on my shoulder and sighed with contentment.

"Shilling for your thoughts?" I offered.

"I was thinking how lucky I am, to have someone as wonderful as you who listens to me and understands me," she said. "It means more to me than words can ever express."

"That's saying quite a bit, coming from a writer," I chuckled.

"There are times," she said, her voice now tinged with sadness, "when even writers are at a loss for words."

"Your writer's block," I said, and she nodded.

I tousled her hair, which caught the moonlight and firelight and reflected them back as sparks of silver and gold. "You will get past this," I told her. "You've had a lot going on lately - is it any wonder that you're having trouble focusing on putting words to paper?"

"I know," she said. "Thanksgiving took on a life of its own this year. But as holidays go, at least it was a memorable one."

"I certainly wouldn't argue with that sentiment."

We settled into a companionable silence. As often happened during contemplative moments such as this, I found my thoughts straying in directions that I knew full well Jessica did not wish to go. It was a pity, really - I could not have come up with a more romantic setting than this. In spite of myself, a sigh escaped me.

Jessica lifted her head and looked up at me. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"Ah, nothing, Jess," I said, giving her an extra squeeze and returning my gaze to the fireplace. "I was just thinking, that's all."

"About ...?"

"About this evening," I said, "and how perfect it is."

"It is perfect," Jessica agreed, "*almost*."

"Almost?" I asked, turning to look at her once more. "What's missing?"

"This," she said, and placing a soft hand on my cheek she reached up and kissed me.

A rush of lightheadedness overwhelmed me as her lips met mine. Rational thought scattered like dandelion seeds on the wind; in its absence all I could do was feel. And feel I did: the rising heat as our kiss moved in intensity from gentle to fervent to searing; the trembling of her every muscle as I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her to me; the tingling sensation her fingertips created as she clung to me in return. This was no mere goodnight kiss - this was a door opening, a dream coming true.

When we broke apart I looked at her in amazement. Eyes, large and dark in the moonlight that cast her face in pale perfection, met my own.

"Perfect," she said, smiling.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck twelve, its chime ringing quietly across the room.

“Midnight,” Jessica said, quickly looking away from me. “I’d better go.”

She rose from the sofa with deliberate haste. Trying very hard to mask my disappointment, I also got to my feet. “Aye - it’s getting late.”

“What time would you like to meet?” she asked as I walked her to the door that connected her room with mine.

“As early as possible,” I said. “Let’s squeeze every last minute out of the time we have left.”

Jessica opened the door but paused before stepping into her room. She gave me a quick, fleeting kiss, then she shut the door behind her and was gone before I had a chance to respond.

“I hate to see you go.”

“Believe me, lass, I hate that I must go.”

It was Sunday afternoon, and Jessica and I were sitting together in Logan Airport’s international terminal waiting for my flight back to London to be announced. There was little that needed to be said beyond our regret at our parting; I was content merely to have her company for just a few more minutes before I had to leave.

Inevitably, we heard my flight announcement over the PA.

“The time went so quickly,” Jessica sighed as we walked toward the row of people waiting to get through security.

On impulse I took her by the elbow and guided her away from the line to a quiet area off to the side.

“I hate to leave, lass,” I said, drawing her into my arms one last time. “It will be too long till I see you again. I know this may not be the best time, but I’ve been meaning to ask you a question.”

“You have?” Jessica asked in an unsteady voice.

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve given it a great deal of thought and there’s something I wish to propose.”

“George, I -”

I cut her off with a wave of my hand. “I know, I know, your head is filled with thoughts of murdered men, ruthless gangsters, and abandoned women. But I feel the pressure of time. I was going to propose that -” I paused before finishing my thought. Was this really a good idea? Jessica might see it as pressure, to come see me again so soon after I’d come to see her. But we’d made such great strides during my visit. And the worst she could say was no ...

I became aware that Jessica was waiting with what seemed to be more anxiety than the situation warranted. *Go on, out with it, George.*

“Would you consider coming to London for Christmas this year?”

Her eyes grew wide and I do believe her jaw dropped. “*Christmas?*”

I mentally kicked myself for underestimating the great significance she attached to Christmas, but forged ahead anyhow. “I know,” I said quickly, “it’s a very special time of year for you here in the States, wanting to spend it with family and friends, but we do quite a nice job of celebrating it in Britain ...”

I saw the shock and surprise fade from Jessica’s features and a dazzling smile take its place. Maybe it wasn’t a hopeless petition on my part after all.

“Will you at least consider it?” I pleaded.

“Yes, I will consider it very seriously,” she said.

“That’s all I can ask.”

I embraced her, pulled back for a moment to make sure her face was etched into my memory, and embraced her again. Time to go - with a supreme effort of will I said my last goodbyes and headed toward security. I was through in no time at all; before I headed toward my gate I turned and gave her one last wave farewell, which she returned.

Once aboard the plane I had time to reflect on our parting. Jessica’s response to my invitation had seemed ... strange, somehow. Her expression had almost seemed to be one of relief, mixed with a touch of disappointment. What could possibly account for that?

I mulled over this mystery until all at once the blindingly obvious answer hit me. Suddenly it all made sense - the apprehension I’d been sensing from her, her hurried exit from my room the night before just as things had been getting interesting, and her exaggerated anxiety in the airport when I brought up the question I’d wanted to ask her.

She thought I was about to propose ... not a visit over Christmas, but *marriage*.

“Oh, *guid Laird!*” I exclaimed as I smacked my head with the palm of my hand. “How could I have been so *bloody daft?*”

A flight attendant paused on her way up the aisle and looked at me with concern. “Is everything all right, sir?”

“Fine,” I groaned, “just fine.”

The attendant returned to helping the other passengers stow their gear in the overhead bins while I thought back over our last days together. The shift in her mood had happened two nights ago, during the dinner party at Seth’s. Come to think of it, I’d noticed that she seemed different the moment I’d come back downstairs after changing into regular clothes. I could tell from the set of her eyes that she and Seth had been having a serious conversation about something, but I’d never bothered to ask her what it was about, and figured it was none of my business anyway. Now I thought I could guess what they’d been discussing.

What in the name of all that was good had Seth said to her?

The next day I received an e-mail from Jessica. She reiterated how much she had hated to see me go, and reassured me that she would give Christmas in London serious consideration. She then went on to tell of her disappointing meeting with Mort, who had arrested Wally Winstead for Hubert Billups’s murder. In the height of irony, it was my techniques for telling if a suspect was lying that had led to Winstead’s arrest - apparently he’d had something to lie about, and had done a poor job of it. But Jessica was not convinced that it was the murder that he was lying to cover up. Her dejection was palpable through the typed words on the computer screen.

Immediately I typed out a reply:

My dear Jessica - the flight home was pleasant and uneventful. I miss you already, and hope you’ll venture across the pond for Christmas. The more I think about your theory of the Billups case, the more it appeals to this Scotland Yard inspector. Your sheriff’s reaction can be explained, I feel, by the rules of the Witness Protection Program as practiced here and in the States. When someone is relocated through the program, local law enforcement officers must be

told of their presence in the community. Of course, they are bound to secrecy unless circumstances warrant a breach. Certainly, murder would constitute such a circumstance. Have to bob down to a meeting. Always a dashed meeting it seems. Fondly, George.

The next day's e-mail was more upbeat - Jessica and Mort had met again, this time with a much more positive outcome. I was relieved. I was even more relieved at the news that she was back on track with her book, having managed to break through her writer's block at last.

Jessica did not write again until the day after next, and when she did, it was to relate a terrifying tale that left me feeling hot and chilled by turns. The case had been resolved, but nearly at the cost of her life. And the murderer had not been Victor Carson, but his wife, Linda - the woman she had tried so hard to show kindness to, to befriend. It was she who had stabbed Hubert Billups to death, and she had then tried to kill Jessica over the protestations of her husband. Although Jessica had escaped unharmed, the harrowing story left me feeling shaken, and guilty. If only I had stayed a few days longer! I would have been there then, to protect her ... but who could have known that things would turn out the way they did?

Jessica closed her e-mail with an apology:

I'm so sorry for the way things turned out for your visit. I intended a tranquil, joyful introduction to Thanksgiving in America for you, but murder tainted everything. Please forgive me for dragging you into the investigation, and for turning your trip into a busman's holiday.

Forgive her! For what? For fully including me in her life, even if it was for just a short while? I immediately wrote back to dispel any notion she had that an apology was necessary.

My dearest Jessica, there is absolutely nothing for me to forgive. I'm just sorry that murder once again injected itself into your life, Jessica, which seems to happen with startling regularity. I assure you of one thing. Should you decide to join me here in London over the Christmas holidays, I will labour intensely to issue a total ban on anything nefarious happening within a hundred miles of us. You have my word.

Jessica did not make up her mind about spending the holidays with me immediately. Every day I looked for an answer, but all her correspondences were mute on the topic. I was about to lose hope when finally, in mid-December, she announced her decision:

I'm hoping your invitation to spend Christmas with you in London still holds, George - because I'll be there!

The End