

Fiddlers

A NOVEL OF
THE 87TH PRECINCT

ED MCBAIN

AN OTTO PENZLER BOOK
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A C E G I K J H F D B

This is for my wife,

~~DRAGICA~~

Here, now, forever

The city in these pages is imaginary.

The people, the places are all fictitious.

Only the police routine is based on
established investigatory technique.

The manager of Ninotchka was a wiseguy named Dominick La Paglia. Not a made man, but mob-connected, with a string of arrests dating back to when he was seventeen. Served time on two separate occasions, once for assault with intent, the other for dealing drugs. He insisted the club was clean, you couldn't even buy an inhaler in the place.

"We get an older crowd here," La Paglia said. "Ninotchka is all about candlelight and soft music. A balalaika band, three violinists wandering from table to table during intermission, the old folks holding hands when they're not on the floor dancing. Never any trouble here, go ask your buddies up on Narcotics."

"Tell us about Max Sobolov," Carella said.

This was now eleven P.M. on Wednesday night, the sixteenth day of June. The three men were standing in the alleyway where the violinist had been shot twice in the face.

"What do you want to know?" La Paglia asked.

"How long was he working here?"

"Long time. Two years?"

"You hired a blind violinist, right?"

"Why not?"

"To wander from table to table, right?"

"Place is dark, anyway, what difference would it make to a blind man?" La Paglia said. "He played violin good. Got blinded in the Vietnam War, you know. Man's a war hero, somebody aces him in an alleyway."

"How about the other musicians working here? Any friction between Sobolov and them?" Meyer asked.

"No, he was blind," La Paglia said. "Everybody's very nice to blind people."

Except when they shoot them twice in the face, Carella thought.

"Or anybody else in the club? Any of the bartenders, waitresses, whoever?"

"Cloakroom girl?"

"Bouncer? Whoever?"

"No, he got along with everybody."

"So tell us what happened here tonight," Carella said.

"Were you here when he got shot?"

"I was here."

"Give us the sequence," Meyer said, and took out his notebook.

The way La Paglia tells it, the club closes at two in the morning every night of the week. The band plays its last set at one thirty, the violinists take their final stroll, angling for tips, at a quarter to. Bartenders have already served their last-call drinks, waitresses are already handing out the checks...

"You know the Irving Berlin line?" La Paglia asked. "'Before the fiddlers have fled'? One of the greatest lyrics ever written. That's what closing time is like. But this must've been around ten, ten thirty when Max went out for a smoke. We don't allow smoking in the club, half the geezers have emphysema, anyway. I was at the bar, talking to an old couple who are regulars, they never take a table, they always sit at the bar. It was a slow night, Wednesdays are always slow, they were talking about moving down to Florida. They were telling me all about Sarasota when I heard the shots."

"You recognized them as shots?"

La Paglia raised his eyebrows.

Come on, his look said. You think I don't know shots when I hear them?

"No," he said sarcastically. "I thought they were backfires, right?"

~~"What'd you do?"~~

"I ran out in the alley. He was already dead. Laying on his back, blood all over his face. White cane on the ground near his right hand."

"See anybody?"

"Sure, the killer hung around to be identified."

Meyer was thinking sarcasm didn't play too well on a mobster.

The Sobolov family was sitting shiva.

Meyer had been here, done this, but today was the first time Carella had ever been to a Jewish wake. He simply followed suit. When he saw Meyer taking off his shoes outside the open door to the apartment, he took off his shoes as well.

"The doors are left open so visitors can come in without distracting the mourners," Meyer told him. "No knocking or ringing of bells."

He was washing his hands in a small basin of water resting on a chair to the right of the door. Carella followed suit.

"I'm not a religious person," Meyer said. "I don't know why we wash our hands before going in."

This was all so very new to Carella. There were perhaps two dozen people in the Sobolov living room. Five of them were sitting on low benches. Meyer later explained that these were supplied by the funeral home. All of the mirrors in the house were covered with cloth, and a large candle was burning in one corner of the room.

In accordance with Jewish custom, Sobolov had been buried at once, and the family had begun sitting shiva as soon as they got home from the funeral. This was now Friday morning, the eighteenth day of June. The men in the family had not shaved. The women wore no makeup. There was a deep sense of loss in this house. Carella had been to Irish wakes, where the women keened, but where there was also laughter and much drinking. He had been to Italian wakes, where the women shrieked and tore at their clothing. The prevailing mood here was silent grief.

The apartment belonged to Max's younger brother and his wife. The brother's name was Sidney. The wife was Susan. Both of Max's parents were dead, but there was an elderly uncle present, and also several cousins.

The uncle spoke with a heavy accent, Russian or Middle European, it was difficult to tell which. He told the detectives stories about when Max was still a little boy. How his parents had purchased for him a toy violin that Max took to at once...

"You should have seen him, a regular Yehudi Menuhin!"

The brother Sidney told them that his parents had immediately started Max taking lessons...

"On a *real* violin, never mind a toy," the uncle said.

...and within months he was playing complicated violin pieces...

"His teacher was astonished!"

"He had such an aptitude," one of the cousins said.

"A natural," Sidney agreed. "He was so sensitive, so feeling."

"The kindest person."

"Such a sweet little boy."

"When he played, your heart could melt."

"All his goodness came out in his playing."

"What a player!" the uncle said.

Sidney told them that no one was surprised when his brother was accepted at the Kleber School, or when Kusmin put him in his private class. "Alexei Kusmin," he explained. "The head of violin

studies there."

"Max had a wonderful career ahead of him."

"But then, of course..." one of the cousins said.

"He got drafted."

"The war," his uncle said, and clucked his tongue.

"Vietnam."

"Twenty-fifth Infantry Division."

"Second Brigade."

"D Company."

"B Company, it was."

"No, Sidney, it was D."

"I used to write to him, it was B."

"All right, already. Whatever it was, he came back blind."

"Dreadful," Susan said, and shook her head.

"It began at the hospital," his uncle said. "The drug use."

"Before then," his brother said. "It started over there. In Vietnam."

"But mostly, it was the hospital."

"Medicinal," his brother said, nodding.

"The VA hospital."

This was the first the detectives were hearing about drug use.

They listened.

"And also, you know, musicians," one of the cousins said. "It's prevalent."

"But mostly the pain," the uncle said.

"Understandable," another cousin said.

"Besides, everybody smokes a little grass every now and then," a third cousin said.

"It should only be just a little grass," the uncle said, and wagged his head sympathetically.

"And yet," his brother said, "right to the day he died, he was the sweetest, most loving person on earth."

"A wonderful human being."

"A mensch," the uncle agreed.

Only one of the girls was really beautiful, but the other one was cute, too. He hadn't expected either of them to be prizes. You call an escort service, they're not about to send you a couple of movie stars.

The woman on the phone yesterday had said, "You know what this is gonna cost you, man?"

She sounded black.

"Price is no object," he'd said.

"Just so you know, it's a thousand for each girl for the night. Comes to two K, plus a tip is customary."

"No problem," he'd said.

"Usually twenty percent."

He thought this was high, but he said nothing.

"Which'll come to twenty-four hundred total. You could make it an even twenty-five, you were feeling generous."

"Credit card okay?" he'd asked.

"American Express, Visa, or MasterCard," she'd said. "What time did you want them?"

"Seven sharp," he'd said. "Can you make it a blonde and a redhead?"

"How about a nice Chinese girl?"

"No, not tonight."

"Or a luscious sistuh?"

He wondered if she had herself in mind.

"Just a blonde and a redhead. In their twenties, please."

"Le'me find you suppin nice," she'd said.

The blonde was the real beauty. She told him her name was Trish. He didn't think this was her real name. The redhead was the cute one. She said her name was Reggie, short for Regina, which he had to believe because who on earth would chose Regina as a phony name? He guessed Trish was in her mid-twenties. Reggie said she was nineteen. He believed that, too.

"So what are we planning to do here tonight?" Trish asked.

She was the bubbly one. Wearing a short little black cocktail dress, high-heeled black sandals. Reggie was wearing green, to match her green eyes. Serious look on her Irish phizz, she should have been wearing glasses. Better legs than Trish, cute little cupcake breasts as opposed to the melons Trish was bouncing around. Neither of them was wearing a bra. They both wandered the hotel suite like it was the Taj Mahal.

"Lookee here, two bedrooms!" Trish said. "We can try both of them!"

Before morning, they'd used both beds, and the big Jacuzzi tub in the marbled bathroom. It hadn't worked anywhere.

"Why don't we try it again tonight?" Trish suggested now.

"I have other plans," he told her.

"Then how about tomorrow night?" she said.

"Maybe," he said.

"Well, think about it," she said, and gave his limp cock a playful little tug, and then went off to shower. Reggie was drinking coffee at the dining room table, wearing just her panties, tufts of wild red hair curling around the leg holes. Freckles on her bare little breasts. Nipples puckered.

"We could do this alone sometime, you know," she said.

He looked at her.

"Just you and me. Sometimes it works better alone."

He kept looking at her.

"Sometimes two girls are intimidating. Alone, we could do things we didn't try last night."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. We'll experiment."

"We will, huh?"

"If you want to," she said. "Give it another try, you know?" She lifted her coffee cup, drank, put it down on the table again. "And you wouldn't have to go through the service," she said.

Down the hall, he could hear the shower going.

"You could call me direct," she said, "forget Sophisticates," and shoved back her chair and walked to the counter, and began writing on the hotel pad under the wall phone. Leaning over the counter, writing. White panties tight across her firm little ass. Nineteen years old. She tore the top sheet of paper from the pad, turned to him and grinned. Little Bugs Bunny grin. Freckles spattered on her cheeks and nose. Strutted back to the table barefooted. Plunked down the sheet of paper like a warrant.

"Call me," she said.

He picked up her number, looked at it.

"Whenever," she said, serious now, the grin gone.

"Well, not tonight," he said.

Tonight he would have to kill Alicia Hendricks.

~~He was worried that he wouldn't have the strength to see him through all this. Not the mental—~~ conviction, no, not that—he *knew* he was doing the right thing, was convinced of that the moment he decided on what had to be done *now*, if ever, so that he could at last come to terms with what he bitterly labeled his so-called life. But would he have the actual *physical* strength he would need to carry him through to the end?

The corrections had to be made, however painful.

Yes. All the decisions not his own, all the paths traveled against his will, all the journeys to places he had not chosen for himself, these had to be adjusted. *Now*. They had to learn he was cognizant of the sins committed, they had to be made to realize. Even blind Sobolov, who could not see who was about to fire two shots into his face, had recognized in that last moment that this was redemption, had whispered a name on the sullen night air—"Charlie?"—just before the thunder roared and the blood spurted.

The problem now was staying strong.

Not allowing the pain to divert him.

Then he would get through this.

Louis Hawkins was asleep when Carella and Meyer knocked on his door at noon that Friday.

He told them at once that he'd worked till two A.M. last night, and didn't get home till three, and he appreciated his sleep and didn't much care for the police knocking on his door at the crack of dawn. Carella apologized for both cops, explained the urgency of constructing a timetable before a case got cold, and then politely asked if Hawkins could spare them a few moments of his time. Reluctantly, he let them into the apartment.

All over the walls, there were photographs of a balding, gray-haired man playing a violin.

"Stephane Grappelli," Hawkins explained. "You want coffee? What the hell, I'm awake now."

Barefooted and in his bathrobe, he stood at the kitchen counter, measuring out coffee by the spoonful.

"Greatest jazz violinist who ever lived," he said. "Died in Paris seven years ago. Still playing when he was eighty-nine. You know what he said when he was eighty-five? A reporter asked him if he was considering retirement. Grappelli said, 'Retirement! There isn't a word that's more painful to my ears. Music keeps me going. It has given me everything. It's my fountain of youth.' I feel the same way. I'm almost fifty, lots of people start considering a condo in Florida at that age. Hell, I could get a job down there easy, same as the one I have here at Ninotchka, playing gypsy music for old farts. But you know something? I moonlight at jazz clubs. Sit in with some of the best musicians in this city. That's what keeps me going. You ever hear of Django Reinhardt? The great jazz guitarist? You never heard of him?"

"I heard of him," Carella said.

"Grappelli used to play with him. Can you imagine *that* sound? They took the world by storm! The stuff they did with the quintet? At the Hot Club in Paris? Nothing like it, man, nothing on earth. He's my hero. If I could ever play like him. .." Hawkins let the sentence trail. "I hope you like it strong," he said, and set the coffeepot on the stove to perk. "So this is about Max, huh?"

"It's about Max," Meyer said.

"I figured. You know what Grappelli once said? He said, 'I play best when I'm happy or sad.' I think Max played best when he was sad. In fact, I don't think I ever saw him happy."

"Sad about what?" Carella asked.

"His lost sight? His lost youth? All his lost opportunities? When he played gypsy music, he made you want to weep. The codgers tipped him lavishly, believe me."

"What lost opportunities?" Meyer asked.

~~"He had a great career ahead of him as a classical musician. Before he got drafted, he was~~ studying with Alexei Kusmin at the Kleber School of Music here. Max was one of the more promising young violinists around. Then ... Vietnam."

"Any idea why anyone would want him dead?"

"Senseless," Hawkins said, and shook his head. "You want some orange juice?" Without waiting for an answer, he went to the refrigerator, took out a bottle. "This is fresh-squeezed," he said, pouring. "I get it at the organic market, it's not from concentrate. I mean, who would want to kill a blind man? Why? Grappelli also said he played best when he was young and in love. I don't think Max was ever in love. In fact, I don't think he was ever young. The army grabbed him for Vietnam, and that was the end of his youth, the end of everything. He came back blind. Tell that to all these fuckin macho presidents who send young kids off to fight their stupid fuckin wars."

"What makes you say he'd never been in love?" Carella asked.

"Do *you* see a woman in his life? I'm sorry, but I don't see one. A wife? A girlfriend? Do you see one? I see a guy who was fifty, sixty years old, wandering around in the dark with a violin tucked under his chin, playing music could break your heart. That's what I see. This is done. How do you take it?"

They sat at the kitchen table, drinking coffee.

Hawkins was silent for what seemed a long time. Then he said, "Grappelli once said, 'I forget everything when I play. I split into two people and the other plays.' I had the feeling Max did the same thing. I think when he played, he forgot whatever it was that troubled him."

"And what was that?" Meyer asked.

"Well, we'll never know, now will we?"

"Did he ever specifically mention anything that was bothering him?"

"Never. Not to me. Maybe to some of the other musicians. But I have to tell you, Max kept mostly to himself. It was as if his blindness locked him away in darkness. You ask me, the only time he expressed himself was when he was playing. The rest of the time..." Hawkins shook his head. "Silence."

On the way down to the street, Carella said, "The rest is silence."

Meyer looked at him.

"*Hamlet*," Carella said. "I played Claudius in a college production."

"I didn't know that."

"Yeah. I could've been famous."

"I'll bet."

They came out into the street, began walking toward where they'd parked the car.

"How about you?" Carella asked.

"I could've been Picasso."

"Yeah?"

"When I was a kid, I wanted to be an artist," Meyer said, and shrugged.

"Ever regret becoming a cop?"

"A cop? No. Hey, no. You?"

"No," Carella said. "No."

They walked toward the car in silence, thinking about paths not taken, dreams unborn.

"Well, let's check out this other musician," Carella said.

"I play at Ninotchka only when I'm between pit gigs," Sy Handelman told them.

They figured a "pit gig" was a job that was the bottom of the barrel. The pits.

~~"The orchestra pit," Handelman explained. "For musicals downtown, on the Stem."~~

He was twenty years old or so. Wore his hair long, like an anachronistic hippie. They could imagine him playing violin outside a theater downtown, collecting tips in a plate on the sidewalk. A busker. They could also imagine him in a long-sleeved, white-silk, ruffled shirt, playing violin for the senior citizens at Ninotchka. They had a little more trouble visualizing him in the orchestra pit at a musical; on their salaries they rarely got to see hundred-dollar-ticket shows.

"I like pit work," Handelman said. "All those good-looking gypsies."

They got confused again.

Was he now talking about his work at Ninotchka?

"The chorus girls," he explained. "We call them gypsies. You sit in the orchestra pit, you can see up their dresses clear to Manderlay."

"Must be an interesting line of work," Meyer said.

"Can make you blind, you're not careful," Handelman said, and grinned.

Which led them to why they were here.

"Max Sobolov?" Handelman said. "A sad old Jew."

"He was only fifty-eight," Meyer said.

"There are sad old men who are only forty," Handelman observed philosophically.

"Ever tell you why he was so sad?" Carella asked.

"I got the feeling it was guilt. We Jews always feel guilty, anyway, am I right?" he said to Meyer. "But with Max, it was really oppressive. What I'm saying is nobody acts the way Max did unless he did something terrible he was sorry for. Never smiled. Hardly even said hello when he came to work. Just got into costume ... we wear these red-silk ruffled shirts..."

Okay, so they'd figured white.

"...and tight black pants, give the old ladies a thrill, you know. Then he went out to do his thing. Which was to play this dark, brooding, gypsy music. Which he did superbly, I must say."

"We understand he was trained as a classical musician."

"I didn't know that, but I'm not surprised. Where, would you know?"

"Kleber."

"The best. I'm not surprised."

"This terrible thing he did, whatever it was..."

"Well, I'm just guessing."

"Did he ever mention what it might have been, specifically?"

"No. He never told me any of this, you understand, he never said, 'Gee, I'm so guilty and sad because I threw my teenage sweetheart off the roof,' never anything like that. But there was this ... this abiding sense of guilt about him. Guilt and grief. Yes. Grief. As if he was so very sorry."

"For what?" Carella asked.

"Maybe for himself," Handelman said.

First time Kling ever called her was from a phone booth in the rain. Less a booth, really, than one of these little plastic shells, rain pouring down around him. He was calling from a similar enclosure today, the heat rising from the pavement in shimmering waves he could actually see, talk about palpable.

He hadn't spoken to her in six days, but who was counting? You go from sharing apartments, his and hers, alternately, to simply not speaking, that was a very serious contrast. He was calling her at her office, he hoped he wouldn't get the usual medical menu, hoped he wouldn't get a nurse asking him where he itched or hurt. Sharyn Cooke was the police department's Deputy Chief Surgeon. Bert Kling

was a Detective/Third Grade. Big enough difference right there. Never mind the fact that she was black and he was white. Blond, no less.

"Dr. Cooke's office," a female voice said.

He was calling her uptown, in Diamondback, where she had her private practice. Her police office was in Rankin Plaza, across the river. They knew him at both places. Or at least *used to* know him. He hoped she hadn't given orders otherwise.

"Hi," he said, "it's Bert. May I speak to her, please?"

"Just a moment, please."

He almost said, "Jenny, is that you?" Knew all the nurses. But she was gone. He waited. And waited. Heat rose from the sidewalk and the street.

"Hello?"

"Sharyn?" he said.

"Yes, Bert."

"How are you?"

"Fine, thanks."

"Shar..."

Silence.

"I'd like to see you."

More silence.

"Shar, we have to talk."

"I can't talk yet," she said.

"Shar..."

"I'm still too hurt."

Heat rising.

"You don't know how much you hurt me," she said.

Fire truck going by somewhere on the street. Siren blaring.

"Please don't call me for a while," she said.

There was a click on the line.

For a while, he thought.

He guessed that was a hopeful sign.

Alicia was certain someone was following her. She'd confided this to her boss, who told her she was nuts. "Who'd want to follow you?" he'd said, which she considered a bit of an insult. Like *what*? She wasn't good-looking enough to be followed?

Alicia was fifty-five years old, a tall Beauty Plus blonde (what they called Honey Melt, actually with excellent legs and fine breasts, a woman who'd provoked many a construction-worker whistle on the streets of this fair city—so what had Jamie meant by his remark? Besides, she *was* being followed she was certain of that. In fact, she checked the street this way and that the minute she stepped out onto the sidewalk that Friday evening.

Beauty Plus was located in a twenty-seven-story building on Twombly Street midtown. The Lustre Nails Care Division was located in a string of eight offices on the seventeenth floor of the building. Fanning out from these offices every weekday were the twenty-two sales reps Beauty Plus hoped would vigorously sell its nail-care products to the four-thousand-plus manicure salons all over the city. Alicia had written out her day's report by a quarter to five, had mentioned to Jamie Dewes that she hoped she wouldn't be followed again tonight (hence his snide remark) and was stepping out onto the sidewalk at a few minutes past five.

The June heat hit her like a closed fist.

She looked up and down the street again. No sign of whoever it was she felt sure was following her. ~~She stepped out in a long-legged stride, heading for the subway kiosk on the next corner.~~

Detective/First Grade Oliver Wendell Weeks had lost ten pounds. This caused him to look merely like a hippopotamus. Patricia Gomez thought he was making real progress.

"This is truly remarkable, Ollie," she told him. "Ten pounds in two weeks, do you know how wonderful that is?"

Ollie did not think it was so wonderful.

Ollie felt hungry all the time.

Patricia was still in uniform. She told Ollie she'd signed out late because her sergeant had something brilliant to say about the way the team had handled a joint operation with Street Crime. Seemed a confidential informant wasn't where he was supposed to be when the bust went down, some such bullshit. Her sergeant was always complaining about something or other, the old hairbag. Ollie told her he'd have a word with the man, ah yes, get him off her case. Patricia told him to never mind. They were strolling up Culver Av, in the Eight-Eight territory they called home during their working day. If she wasn't in uniform, he'd have been holding her hand.

"Are you nervous about tonight?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Why should I be nervous?"

Actually, he was nervous.

"You don't have to be," she said, and took his hand, uniform or not.

On the way to Calm's Point, Alicia kept eyeing the subway crowd. The man who'd been following her was bald, she was sure of that. More of a Patrick Stewart bald than a Bruce Willis bald. Tall slender guy with a slick bald pate, had to be in his mid-to-late fifties.

He scared hell out of her.

She'd spotted him on two separate occasions now, just quick glimpses, each time ducking out of sight when she'd turned to look.

There was only one bald guy in the subway car, and he had to be in his seventies, sitting there reading a Spanish-language newspaper.

Ollie guessed he expected everybody to be speaking Spanish. Her mother's name was Catalina, and her two sisters were Isabella and Henrietta. Her brother—who played piano—was named Alonso. First thing the brother said was, "Hey, dude, I hear you play piano, too."

"Well, a little," Ollie said modestly.

"He learned 'Spanish Eyes' for me," Patricia said, beaming.

"Get *out!*" her sister said.

"I mean it, he'll play it for us later."

"Well," Ollie said modestly.

"Come," Patricia's mother said, "have some *bacalaítos*." Ollie almost said he was on a diet, but Patricia gave him an okay nod.

The owner of the Korean grocery store around the corner from her apartment greeted Alicia warmly when she stopped in to pick up some things for dinner. He told her he had some nice fresh blueberries today, three-ninety-nine a basket. She bought half a pound of shiitake mushrooms, a dozen eggs, a container of low-fat milk, and two baskets of the berries.

It was while she was making herself an omelet that she heard the bedroom window sliding open

"Oh, Spanish eyes ..."

~~This was the Al Martino version of the song, not the one the Backstreet Boys did years later.~~ Ollie had been studying it for weeks now. His piano teacher insisted he had it down pat, but this was the first time he'd ever performed it in public, in front of Patricia's whole family, no less.

They were all gathered around the upright piano in the Gomez living room. A framed picture of Jesus was on the piano top. The picture made Ollie nervous, staring at him that way. What made him even more nervous was Patricia's father. Ollie got the feeling her father didn't like him too much. Probably thought Ollie was going to violate his virgin daughter, though Ollie guessed she wasn't one at all.

Patricia and her mother knew the words by heart. It was Patricia's mother, in fact, who'd taught her the song. Her sister Isabella seemed to be hearing it for the first time. She seemed to like it, kept swaying back and forth to it. When they'd met tonight, Ollie told her his sister's name was Isabel, too, and she'd said, "Get out!" She looked a little like Patricia, but Patricia was prettier. Nobody in the family was as good-looking as Patricia. In fact, nobody in this entire city was as good-looking as Patricia.

Tito Gomez, the father, kept scowling at Ollie.

The brother was doing a good imitation of his father, too.

Patricia and her mother kept singing along.

Isabella kept swaying to the music.

In the kitchen, *asopao de pollo* was cooking.

At first, Alicia thought she was hearing things. She'd turned on the air conditioner and closed all the windows the minute she'd come into the apartment, but now she heard what sounded like a window going up in the bedroom. There were two windows in the bedroom, one of them opening on the fire escape, the other with an air-conditioning unit in it. She did not want to believe that someone had just opened the fire escape window, but...

"Hello?" she called.

From outside, she heard the sudden rush of traffic below. Would she be hearing traffic if the window wasn't...?

"Hello?" she said again.

"Hello, Alicia," a voice called.

A man's voice.

She froze to the spot.

She'd sliced the mushrooms with a big carving knife, and she lifted that from the counter now, and was backing away toward the entrance door to the apartment when he came out of the bedroom. There was a large gun in his right hand. There was some kind of thing fastened to the barrel. An instant before he spoke, she recognized it as a silencer.

"Remember me?" he said. "Chuck?"

And shot her twice in the face.

The two detectives met for lunch in a diner on Albermarle, two hours after Carella received the telephone call. He figured he knew what Kramer wanted. He wasn't wrong.

"The thing is," Kramer was telling him, "we don't catch many homicides up the Nine-Eight. This is more up your alley, you know what I mean."

Low crime rate in the Nine-Eight, was what Kramer was saying. As compared to the soaring statistics uptown in the asshole of creation, was what Kramer was saying. What's another homicide more or less to you guys, Kramer was saying. Carella was inclined to tell him, Thanks, pal, but our platter is full right now. If only it weren't for the First Man Up rule.

Kramer wouldn't have called if the Ballistics match hadn't come through so fast. You get a blind man shot dead outside a nightclub Wednesday night, and then Friday night, at the other end of the city you get a woman killed cooking an omelet in her own apartment, there's no connection, right? Unless Ballistics calls early Monday morning to tell you the same nine-millimeter Glock was used in both shootings. That can capture a person's attention, all right. It had certainly caught Kramer's, who was now munching on a ham and egg sandwich while trying not to be too aggressive about the department's time-honored First Man Up rule. Hence his song and dance about the Nine-Eight's inexperience with matters homicidal.

"So what do you say?" he asked Carella. "I'll turn over our paper to you, the Eight-Seven can pick it up from there. This should be a snap for you guys, you already got a gun match."

A snap, Carella thought, and wondered how many nines were loose in the city.

"I'd have to check with the loot," he said, "see if he thinks we can take on another homicide just now."

"Oh, sure," Kramer said, and then casually added, "but he's familiar with FMU, of course." And further added, "Which is the case here. You caught your blind guy two days before we caught the omelet lady. So what do you say?" Kramer asked again.

He knew he had Carella dead to rights on FMU. He was just being polite.

Carella hoped he'd at least pay for the lunch.

"Way I understand this," Parker said, "is we're now the garbage can of the Detective Division, is that it?"

There were only five men in the lieutenant's office and Parker had the floor. He was dressed this Monday afternoon the way he usually dressed for work: like a bum. Unshaven. Blue jeans and a T-shirt. Short-sleeved Hawaiian print shirt over that, but only to hide the automatic holstered at his right hip.

"I wouldn't put it exactly that way," Carella said.

"No? Then what does it mean when any murder done with a Glock gets dumped on us?"

"Not every Glock. Just the ones that match the blind-man kill."

"Which we caught," Lieutenant Byrnes explained again. Bullet-headed, gray-haired, square-jawed, he looked like an older Dick Tracy sitting behind his corner-office desk. "Which means First Man Up prevails," he explained further.

"Like I said," Parker continued, undeterred. "We're the DD's garbage can."

"How many have there been so far?" Genero asked. Curly-haired, brown-eyed, the youngest man on the squad, he always sounded tentative. Or maybe just stupid.

"Just two, counting the omelet lady."

"That ain't so many," Genero said. "Can you run them by us?" he said, trying to sound executive

"The blind guy is the one we caught," Meyer said. "Ten thirty last Wednesday night."

~~Bald and burly, shirtsleeves rolled up and shirt collar open because the squadroom's air conditioner wasn't working again on one of the hottest days this June, he hunched over Carella's desk consulting the DD report.~~

"That would've been?"

"June sixteenth."

"Fifty-eight years old. Two in the head," Meyer said.

"From a Glock?"

"A Glock. Apparently, nothing was stolen from him. His wallet still contained a check for three hundred dollars, and a hundred and change in cash, presumably tip money."

"And the next one?"

Carella walked over from the watercooler. He moved like an athlete, though he wasn't one, his skills limited to stickball when he was a kid growing up in Riverhead. He picked up the Nine-Eight's report, and studied it again, together with the other detectives this time. Standing side by side, reading the report, the men could have been accountants looking over a client's weekly payroll report—if only it weren't for the shoulder holsters.

And the nine-millimeter Glocks in them.

Just like the one that killed the omelet lady and the blind guy.

"Friday night," Carella said. "Calm's Point. The Nine-Eight phoned this morning, right after they got a Ballistics match."

"Sure, the word's out," Parker said. "Dump it on the Eight-Seven."

"Perp climbed in the window and shot her while she was cooking an omelet," Meyer said.

"What kind of omelet was it?" Genero asked.

Parker looked at him.

"I'm curious."

"Who was the vic?" Parker asked.

"Woman named Alicia Hendricks. Fifty-five years old."

"Point is," Byrnes said, "Steve and Meyer can't handle it alone. We're looking at overtime here. Two homicides in as many..."

"Like I said, we're the garbage can here," Parker said.

"How do you want us to divvy this, Loot?" Carella asked.

"I thought Andy and Richard could get on the latest one..."

"Who caught it again?" Genero asked.

"The Nine-Eight. Detective up there named Kramer."

"Like in *Seinfeld*?"

"There's other Kramers in this world, Richard."

"Like I didn't know, Andy."

"You and Meyer stick with the violin player. And head up the team."

"We better hope there ain't another one," Parker said.

"Another violin player?" Genero asked.

"Another *anybody*," Parker said.

This was truly a pain in the ass.

Calm's Point could have been a foreign nation. Took them forty minutes downtown from the Eight-Seven and then over the bridge to the Nine-Eight, where the most recent Glock murder had occurred. Was what they were already calling them: The Glock Murders. In the dead woman's apartment now, the inheriting detectives felt like they'd just crossed the Euphrates.

The body had been removed long ago, but its chalked outline was still on the kitchen floor. ~~Frying pan on the stove, cold mushrooms and eggs in it, lady'd been cooking an omelet. Big carving knife on the floor, where she'd dropped it when the killer aced her. Fire escape window open wide,~~ they assumed this had been the point of entry.

What troubled them was that this time he—or she—had been invasive. The blind violinist had been shot on the street. This time, the killer had entered the vic's living space, which meant this wasn't just a random killing, this was a chosen target. Which could or could not mean that the previous vic had been deliberately selected as well. In which case, the killer had so far picked targets in disparate parts of the city. The blind guy all the way uptown in the Eight-Seven's turf, and now the omelet lady here in her own apartment in Calm's Point.

No apparent theft this time, either. Lady's jewelry still in her top dresser drawer, money in her handbag. Credit cards ID'd her as one Alicia Hendricks. Neighbors told them she worked for some cosmetics company in "The City"—which meant back across the river and into the trees again. One of the neighbors thought the name of the firm was Beauty Blush. But a laminated card in her wallet identified her as a sales rep for a firm called Beauty *Plus*, at 165 Twombly, in midtown Isola, and a phone call confirmed that she was indeed an employee of the company.

The salesman was telling him that the sticker price on the car was \$74,330...

"Standard features include the four-point-two-liter V-8, two-hundred and ninety-four horsepower engine..."

Baldy kept circling the car like some kind of hawk about to pounce on a rabbit.

"... six-speed automatic transmission with overdrive, four-wheel antilock brakes..."

Guy didn't look like he could afford seventy-four *bucks*, no less seventy-four *grand*...

"...side-seat-mounted air bags, driver and passenger side air-bag head extension..."

"What colors does it come in?" Baldy asked.

"I have the chart right here," the salesman said. "Your exteriors come in the Topaz, the Ebony, the Midnight, the Radiance, the Seafrost. .."

Guy kept circling the car, running the palm of his hand over the fenders, the hood, the sleek sides...

"For the interiors, you have a choice of the Cashmere, the Dove, the Ivory..."

"When can I take delivery?"

"Depends on whether you plan to buy or lease..."

"Lease," Baldy said.

"... and whether we can find the vehicle in the colors you..."

"Find it," he said.

The sales manager of Beauty Plus's Lustre Nails Care Division was a man named Jamie Dewes. He was surprised to find two detectives from uptown on his doorstep at four P.M. that twenty-first day of June, because he'd already been visited by detectives from Calm's Point last week.

"Terrible thing," he told Parker and Genero. "Why would anyone want to kill Alicia?"

But in the very next breath, he told the detectives that Alicia thought someone was following her. Veronica Alston, his assistant, confirmed this.

"Some creepy bald-headed guy," she said.

"When did she tell you this?" Genero asked.

"Last week sometime?" Jamie said.

"No, before then," Veronica said. "Around the beginning of the month."

"What a month," Jamie said. "Hottest damn June I can remember."

"Said someone was following her?" Parker said.

~~"Said she'd spotted this guy following her, yes."~~

"Where, did she say?"

"Just following her."

"Here? This neighborhood? Or where she lived?"

"She didn't say."

"How many times did she spot him?"

"Once or twice."

"Did she confront him?"

"No. Well, I don't think so."

"Did she report any of this to the police?"

"No. Ronnie? She didn't call the police, did she?"

"No," Veronica said.

"Just mentioned it to each of you."

"Yes."

"Either of you notice any bald guys lurking around outside?" Parker asked.

They both shook their heads.

"Know anything about anyone she might've been seeing?" he asked. "Any boyfriends?"

"She recently broke up with this stockbroker guy," Veronica said.

"Would you know his name?"

"No. Harold something."

"When was this?"

"Breaking up? Around Easter time."

"Been dating anyone since?"

Jamie shrugged.

So did Veronica.

"This Harold something? He wouldn't be bald, would he?"

"Don't know what he looks like," Veronica said, and shrugged again.

"Would anyone else in the office know his last name?"

One of the other sales reps did.

Harold Saperstein was a man in his early fifties, they guessed. Wearing eyeglasses and a business suit. He had thick curly black hair, they noticed.

He was just leaving his office when they caught up with him at five that Monday afternoon. The three identified themselves, told him they were investigating the murder of Alicia Hendricks...

"Yeah, I figured you'd be around," he said.

... and asked if he would mind answering a few questions. They walked over to a pocket park near his office. The three men sat on a bench, Saperstein in the middle. A waterfall streamed down a tan brick wall behind them. It made the day seem cooler.

"So tell us how you happened to break up," Parker said.

"You know about that, huh?"

"Tell us, anyway," Genero said.

"It was *The Passion*."

They thought he was talking about the heat of their love affair.

"The Mel Gibson movie," he explained. "I told Alicia it was anti-Semitic. She disagreed. I'm Jewish, we got into an argument."

"So whose idea was it to split up?"

"My mother's. I live with my mother. She said if we were going to fight already over a fecoekte movie, that was just the beginning."

"When was this?"

"Around Easter time. When the fever was at its pitch."

"When's the last time you saw her?"

"Passover. At my mother's."

"Ever talk to her since?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Couple of weeks ago. She phoned to tell me some guy was following her."

"And?"

"She wanted to know what she should do. I told her to call the cops."

"Did she?"

"I have no idea. That's the last time we ever spoke."

He was silent for a while. Behind them, the water cascaded down the wall.

"I *hate* Mel Gibson," he said.

"This would've been a long time ago," Meyer said.

"Forty years or more."

"Around the time of the Vietnam War."

The woman they were talking to was Abigail Nelson, Director of Music Studies at the Kleber School of Music, Dance and Drama. She was perhaps forty years old, a trim-looking woman who wore her darkish brown hair in a feather cut. Blue pinstripe suit, like what you'd expect on a bank manager. Alert blue eyes behind oversized glasses. They were sitting at a long table in the school's clerical office. Filing cabinets lined the room. Late afternoon sunlight slanted through the windows. Down the hall, they could hear distant music from rehearsal rooms.

"The sixties sometime?" Abigail asked.

"Mid-sixties, probably. We have him in Vietnam during the late sixties."

"So this would've been before then."

"Yes."

"We wouldn't even have been in this building. In the sixties, we were still uptown, on Silvermin Drive, near Tenth."

"Close to our turf," Meyer said. "The precinct."

"Yes," Abigail said, not completely sure she'd understood. "He was a violin major, did you say?"

"Yes."

"Alexei Kusmin would have been heading Violin Studies."

"Yes, so we understand. Mr. Sobolov was one of his students."

"Kusmin was first desk at the philharmonic back then. But he also taught here. Your man would have played violin day in and day out for four years. Well, not just violin. He'd have taken piano as his second instrument, all students in the music department do, even today. And L and M, of course, which is Literature and Materials. He'd also have played in one of the orchestras. There were only two back then, the Concert and the Rep. We have four now. And he'd have taken courses in music history and—since he was a string musician—he'd have been assigned to chamber music as well."

"He'd have been busy," Carella said.

"Oh yes. Our students are expected to be *serious* about music. Here at Kleber, it's music—or dance or drama, of course—all day long, every day of the week. Lessons, or practicing, or performing in this or that orchestra ... it's a life, gentlemen. It's a full life."

The detectives nodded.

~~Carella was wondering if he ever really could have become a famous actor.~~

Meyer was thinking his uncle Isadore had once told him he made nice drawings.

As she led them across the room, Abigail explained that Max Sobolov's options after a four-year course of study here would have been numerous.

"We've got several major symphony orchestras in this city, you know," she said, "plus the two opera companies, and the three ballets. There are something like thirty, thirty-five violin chairs in an given orchestra—well, count them. Eighteen fiddles in the first section, another fifteen in the second. That's thirty-three chances for a job in any of the city's orchestras. Plus there's nothing to say he couldn't have applied to an orchestra in Chicago, or Cleveland, or wherever. A good violinist? And one of Kusmin's students? His chances would have been very good indeed."

She pulled open one of the file drawers.

"Let's hope his records haven't already been boxed and sent up to Archives," she said. "Soboloff was it?"

"*Sobolov*," Carella said. "With an o-v."

"Ah. Yes," she said, and began riffling through the folders. When she found the one for SOBLOV, MAX, she placed it on top of the filing cabinet, and opened it. "Yes," she said, "an excellent student. Brilliant future ahead of him." She paused, reading. "But you see, gentlemen, he never finished the course of study here. He left after only three years."

"The Army," Meyer said.

"Vietnam," Carella said.

"A pity," Abigail said.

"This would've been a long time ago, you understand," the woman in the clerical office was telling them.

Her name was Clara Whaitsley. Parker thought she was British at first, the name and all, and this was mildly exciting because he'd never been to bed with a British girl. But she had a broad Riverhead accent, and he'd been to bed with lots of Riverhead girls in his lifetime. So had Genero. Well, a few, anyway. All business, they merely listened to her.

"We're talking a girl in her teens," Clara said. "They enter high school in the tenth grade, you know, when they're fifteen, going on sixteen. According to our records, Alicia Hendricks came into Harding directly from Mercer Junior High, some forty years ago."

"Long time ago," Genero observed sagely.

"The usual progression is Pierce Elementary to Mercer Junior High to Harding High," Clara said. "We have her leaving Harding at sixteen."

"Any follow-up on that?"

"We wouldn't have anything on her after she left our school."

"Went into the workforce, looks like," Genero said.

"That's awfully young to be starting work."

"I started work when I was fourteen," Parker said.

He was tempted to add that he'd got laid for the first time when he was sixteen.

"You know," Clara said, "while I was looking through the files for you..."

Both detectives suddenly gave her their undivided attention.

"...I came across the records for another Hendricks. I don't know if they're related or not, but he was here at about the same time, entered a year later."

"What've you got on him?" Parker asked.

Karl Hendricks was still serving the twelfth year of a fifteen-year rap. He'd been denied parole twice—the first time because he'd physically abused a prison guard, the second because he'd stabbed another inmate with a fork. He could not have been older than fifty-three or -four, but at six thirty that Monday evening, when he shuffled into the room where Genero and Parker were waiting for him, he looked like an old man.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Your sister was murdered," Parker told him subtly.

"Yeah?" Hendricks said.

He seemed only mildly interested.

"When's the last time you saw her?" Genero asked.

"Be a real miracle if I did it, now wun't it?" Hendricks said. "Sittin up here in stir."

"We're wondering who did," Parker said.

"Who cares?"

"We do."

"I don't."

"So when *did* you see her last?"

"She came to visit on my forty-fifth birthday. Brought me a cake with candles on it. No file inside it, more's the pity."

Sometimes, in prison, a man developed a sense of sarcastic humor. Sometimes the humor was funny.

"When was that, Karl?"

"Nine years ago. I'd just started serving this bum rap."

In prison, everyone was serving a bum rap. Nobody'd ever done the crime for which he'd been convicted. Nobody.

"Nine years ago," Genero said, and nodded, thinking it over.

It seemed unlikely that Alicia Hendricks would have mentioned anyone following her nine years ago. Nine years was a long time to be following someone. Nine years was what you might call a Dedicated Stalker. Genero asked, anyway.

"She mention anyone following her?"

Hendricks stared at him blankly.

"Some bald-headed guy following her?"

"No," Hendricks said, and shook his head unbelievably. "That why you came all the way up here? Cause some bald-headed guy was following her?"

"We came all the way up here because your sister got murdered," Parker said.

"I'm surprised somebody didn't kill her a long time ago," Hendricks said.

"Oh?"

"The friends she had. The company she kept."

"What kind of company?"

"Half of them should be in here doing time."

"Oh?"

"In fact, her first husband *did* do time, but not here."

"Husband? We've got her as single."

"Married twice," Hendricks said. "Both of them losers."

"Went back to using her maiden name, is that it?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"Tell us about these guys."

"The first one did time in Huntsville. One of the state prisons down there."

"That be in Texas?"

"Texas, yeah."

"For what?"

"Delivery and sale. Copped a plea, got off with two years and a five-grand fine."

"You ever meet this winner?"

"No. Alicia told me about him."

"So this had to be longer ago than nine years, right?"

"Huh?"

"If the last time she came to visit..."

"Oh. Yeah."

"So this first husband is bygone times, right?"

"Right."

"When did he do his time? Before or after Alicia knew him?"

"Before. He was out by the time they met."

"Living up here by then?"

"I guess. Otherwise how would she've met him?"

"That his only fall? The one in Texas?"

"Far as I know."

"And his name?"

"Al Dalton."

"For Albert?"

"Who the hell knows?"

"How about the second husband? Has he got a record, too?"

"No. What makes you think that?"

"Well, you said he was a loser."

"One thing has nothing to do with the other. I'm in jail, for example, but I'm not necessarily a loser."

Parker nodded sympathetically.

"But this second husband *was* a loser, you said."

"A loser, how?" Genero asked.

"Bad investments, like that. Also, he did dope."

"Ah," Parker said. "And Alicia?"

"She dabbled."

"Ah."

"What's his name? The second husband?"

"Ricky Montero. For Ricardo."

"A spic?" Parker said.

"Dominican."

"What kind of bad investments?"

"You name them."

"Is he still here in this country, or did he go back home?"

"Who knows? She divorced him, it's got to be ten, twelve years ago. I never liked him. He played trumpet."

"Is that why you didn't like him?"

"I got nothing against trumpet players. I'm just saying he played trumpet, is all."

"So that's the bad company she kept, right?" Genero said. "These two husbands. Al Dalton and Ricky Montero."

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