

THE ZUMBROTA

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the University of
Tennessee at Chattanooga in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree
of Master of Arts: English

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Chattanooga, Tennessee

May 2018

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ABSTRACT

My thesis is a creative project that consists of a craft introduction and Act I of my novel, *The Zumbrota*. In Chapter 1, the craft introduction, I look at the history of the serial detective in crime fiction and examine how serial detectives fit into the discussion of round and flat characters as defined by E.M. Forster and James Wood. Through the discussion of serial detectives as round and flat characters, I ultimately examine the fundamental differences between literary and genre fiction. Then in Chapter 2, readers go back to 1940 as my detective, Wes Grizzly, uncovers a conspiracy between mobsters and Nazis to undermine America's recovering economy. *The Zumbrota* is my love letter to the detective genre, a grand tradition that goes back almost two centuries.

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CHAPTER I

ROUND AND FLAT: A STUDY OF SERIAL DETECTIVES

“It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence,” Sherlock Holmes says in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). “It biases the judgment” (Doyle 17). While Holmes was not the first literary sleuth, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s creation touches at the heart of the detective genre with this simple line of dialogue, and ironically, Holmes himself is its most famous example. In the middle of every mystery story are the men and women who investigate. They come in all forms: private investigators, police detectives, vigilantes, and even ordinary citizens. Some, like Holmes, solve crimes for the thrill, and then there are those who do it to serve a moral truth and sense justice, like Michael Connelly’s Harry Bosch. But at the end of the day they all follow the clues, no matter the risk, and piece them together in a way that solves whatever crime they got caught up in, and for the most part, we, the readers, happily follow them into danger from the safety of our imaginations.

As to why these stories fascinate us, one can probably find a host of scholarly articles written by philosophers and psychologists alike that try to explain it, but look no further than *The Bible*, and one will read stories of people who lie, steal, and kill and the individuals who rise to stop them. In detective fiction, the conflict between these people comes to the forefront, and readers are fascinated by the individuals involved, especially the men and women who stand up against humanity’s worst natures. Throughout the history of detective fiction, crime writers use their sleuths to show us the people who walk the line between the romance of searching for

answers we do not understand and the harsh realities of the world's criminal underground. But how these writers manage to create their crime fighters is not as big of a mystery as the ones their detectives have to solve. In order to answer it, I will first provide a brief history of the detective genre and the rise of the serial detective. Then I will examine the conversation between E.M. Forster and James Wood concerning round and flat characters and analyze these concepts through three serial detectives: Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and Harry Bosch. Because this discussion naturally leads to the debate between literary and genre fiction, I will conclude by defining these terms as I understand them, and I will then discuss why I chose to write a crime novel designed for a commercial audience for my thesis.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “detective” originated in the mid-1800s. Most scholars agree that Edgar Allan Poe created the detective genre around this same time when he wrote “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841). The story features Detective Auguste Dupin whose keen observational skills and logical reasoning was new and appealing enough to nineteenth century readers that Poe wrote two more stories about him. Together, these three stories established many of the tropes of the mystery genre. Among them was the concept of the serial detective. Poe's two most prominent successors, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, helped to firmly ingrain this trope into the detective genre by building their careers around their serial detectives. Doyle wrote four novels and fifty-six short stories about Sherlock Holmes, and Christie created two serial detectives, Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. She wrote fifty-one short stories and thirty-three novels about Poirot as well as twenty short stories and twelve novels about Miss Marple. Given the success of Conan Doyle and Christie, it is no surprise that many of the crime writers that followed have focused their careers around one or more serial detectives. Examples include: Ross Macdonald, Raymond Chandler, Chester

Himes, Walter Mosely, Michael Connelly, and Sue Grafton. However, the quantity and popularity of a reoccurring sleuths begs the question: what makes these characters so successful?

It starts by understanding E.M. Forster's theories of characterization. In *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), Forster says there are two types of characters: round and flat (67). He argues that a flat character's role in a story can be summed up in a single line and is the embodiment of "a single idea or quality" (66-67). These types of characters are often accused by critics as being two-dimensional, uninteresting, and weak. Forster shares this criticism and claims that creating a flat character is not nearly as impressive as making one that is rounded. He even goes as far to say that flat characters should only be used in comedy and that a "tragic flat character is apt to be a bore" (72-73). Instead, he believes the characters worth praising are the round ones. Round characters are the ones that feel like they could exist in the real world. Forster uses Jane Austin as an example for how an author creates round characters. He writes, "All of her characters are round, or capable of rotundity" (74). He argues that even though Lady Bertram is flat throughout most of *Mansfield Park*, when scandal strikes she reacts like a human being in her position would, and if the other characters in Austin's novels suffer a tragedy like the death of a townsman, those who are left would respond in ways that would bring out new elements of their characters (74-75).

However, according to Forster, this real-world essence that round characters possess is an illusion. He writes, "[A character] is real when the novelist knows everything about it" (63), and since we do not have the ability to know everything about anyone other than ourselves, novel characters, who are rounded because we know so much about them, cannot exist in the real life (63-64). But this begs the question: can authors actually know everything about their characters to make them feel real and rounded? If not, then is there a line between what is enough

information and what is not? And if there is not a line, then can characters be round? James Wood does not think so. In *How Fiction Works* (2008), Wood says that he “would be quite happy to abolish the very idea of ‘roundness’ in characterization, because it tyrannizes us—readers, novelists, critics—with an impossible ideal” (128). Wood argues that this is because there is a difference between actual people and fictional characters, and that there are plenty of people in the real-world that might be considered flat characters in a novel. He also points out that Forster’s distinction between round and flat characters is biased toward the novel and claims that the short story does not have room for authors to show us everything Forster says is needed for a character to be rounded (128).

This criticism of Forster leads Wood to attack the notion that flat characters deserve a negative reputation. “I must concede,” Wood writes, “that many so-called flat characters seem more alive to me, and more interesting as human studies, however short-lived, than the round characters they are supposedly subservient to” (106). He cites several famous characters as monomaniacs and says that their obsessions make them flat, but that even though their obsessions lead them to make decisions that fail to surprise us, readers still find these characters interesting (130-31). In the detective genre, a common trope is for the detective to be obsessed with the case he or she is solving. After all, without the detective, there is only an unsolved crime.

In *Character and Viewpoint* (2010), Orson Scott Card categorizes the detective genre as an “idea story,” meaning that it is a type of story that’s information is meant to be discovered as one reads it (62, 65-66). In other words, the detective’s obsession with answering the mysteries of the case is what makes a sleuth interesting. According to Card, authors of early British crime fiction, like Agatha Christie, provided only enough characterization to allow everyone to be a

suspect, but that across the pond Americans gave their detectives and the rest of their characters “a little more characterization” (66). This characterization, Card claims, is part of what is discovered during the story (66), but that does not necessarily make them rounded. Card also mentions that most of characters in this genre do not change throughout the course of the story (66). As a result, one has to ask if they are merely “pretending to be round” like Forster might suggest (78), or if their static progression is not really a sign of flatness (meaning dull as Forster defines it) but rather a well-executed device by the author to keep readers interested over the course of a series featuring the same detective.

Card says that because most serial detectives remain static it allows authors to write and thrill audiences with them over and over again (66), but that does not mean every author in the list above wrote flat detectives. In fact, Card is also quick to point out that many authors have rounded their serial detectives, so that they are changed individuals from book to book. However, he mentions the problems with story and plot that character development caused the authors, such as making a detective wealthy and well-off enough to the point that he or she does not actually need to go through the hassle of solving a case, in order to show why many of them keep their characterization to a minimum (67).

One serial detective who has been developed over the years is Michael Connelly’s Harry Bosch. Unlike Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot, who rarely aged, Bosch is another year older with each book. In *The Black Echo* (1992), he was a middle-aged police detective, but in more recent novels he is retired private-eye of sixty-seven. Connelly has been revealing his character for a quarter century, but while there was a lot of potential to Bosch in that first novel, readers did not know all twenty-five years’ worth of information about him. There is just enough in *The Black Echo* to establish a detective, whose character would be revealed as he obsessed over each

case for the next two and a half decades. On the other hand, Holmes and Poirot are not nearly as rounded as Bosch. In fact, in their debuts they are the definition of flat “pretending to be round” (Forster 78), but the amount of literature Doyle and Christie produced starring them shows that readers found, and still find, them interesting. Upon analyzing the characterization of Holmes, Poirot, and Bosch one will see that Wood’s views on flat characters is much more accurate than Forster’s, and that crime authors do not have to create a rounded detective in order for the general public to find him or her interesting, but rather they must create one that has traits that many readers find appealing.

The name Sherlock is synonymous with detective in pop culture, but in *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes is not round. In the novel, two competing police detectives of Scotland Yard, Lestrade and Gregson, enlist Holmes to help them solve a murder case. Holmes serves only to drive the plot forward by investigating and following the clues. If one were to sum up his character using Forster’s single sentence method, then it would be this: Sherlock Holmes believes he is the world’s greatest detective and solves a murder case in order prove what he already knows. But it is how he solves the case and his small personality quirks that makes him interesting for readers to continue reading about him. With one look, Holmes deduces that John Watson served as a doctor during the war in Afghanistan (5), and when Watson accuses Holmes of already hearing the information from someone, he gives a detailed explanation that told him exactly how he knew (10). These same methods of keen observation reoccur throughout the novel (and the rest of the Holmes series). For example, Holmes explains why the victim was not writing “Rachel” when he wrote “Rache” as Lestrade and Gregson believe, but rather the German word for revenge (21-23). And of course, there is his chapter long explanation to Watson about how he solved the case after the events are over (79-91). Like Watson, who

consistently remarks on Holmes's actions with a sense of wonder throughout the novel, readers also find the detective's methods fascinating.

When this work first appeared in 1887, the concept of an analytical genius solving cases was still in its infant stages. Poe's Dupin, who Watson even compares Holmes to (13), was only forty-six years old, but Doyle expands on the idea of an analytical detective by grounding Holmes's deductions in the scientific method. To Holmes, Watson says, "You have brought detection as near an exact science as it will ever be brought in this world" (25), and readers first see Holmes in a laboratory experimenting on a cadaver in the name of forensic science (4-5). Modern forensics has spawned enough crime literature to make it an expected trope in the detective genre today, but in 1887, this was an unfamiliar and fresh idea that interested the readership. In "Art as a Technique" (1917), Viktor Shklovsky says that part of what makes art work is the ability to defamiliarize an object or an idea. *A Study in Scarlet* appeared during the middle of the industrial revolution and a new age of scientific enlightenment as well as the birth of a genre that appeals to human kind's inquisitive nature. As a result, Doyle combined these ideas into a character that compelled readers to demand more and more stories. That when combined with other traits and quirks, such as his expert violin playing, vast political and philosophical knowledge, and beliefs that the sun circles the Earth (9-10), has made generations of readers fall in love with the most famous detective of all time.

However, a case could be made for his roundness. He does have a desire to prove he is a genius, but his only real weakness in this novel is his arrogance. For the most part, this weakness does not hinder his ability to solve the case, nor does it provide a reasonable amount of doubt in the reader's mind to make him or her think Holmes will fail. Thus, Holmes only "pretends to be round" (Forster 78) with all his quirks and mannerisms. Helping to add to this illusion are the

extremely flat characters of Lestrade and Gregson. While Holmes possesses superhuman powers of deduction, Lestrade and Gregson are portrayed as the exact opposite. They often draw the wrong conclusions, like when Gregson believes “Rache” means “Rachel” (21). Their role in the story is to present Holmes with a case to solve and then be helpless to solve it without him. In fact, Lestrade sums up their part in the story perfectly when he says, “We have both tried, and we have both failed. You have remarked more than once since I have been in the room that you had all the evidence which you require. Surely you will not withhold it any longer” (45). These flat characters are more closely aligned to the dullness Forster alludes to, but as Forster says, “A novel that is at all complex often requires flat people as well as round” (71). In this case, Lestrade’s and Gregson’s dullness make the brilliance of Sherlock Holmes stand out, and it makes him seem like a more interesting and complex character.

Another example of a detective “pretending to be round” (Forster 78) is Hercule Poirot in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920). Poirot shares many of the same traits as Holmes: he is brilliant, vain, and deductive. On the surface one could make the case that Poirot comes across as a derivative of Holmes and other literary detectives that came before him. But when I read his debut, he did not feel like Holmes. Christie defamiliarized Poirot by making him a retired police detective, meaning that unlike Holmes he was once part of the system, and she made him foreign, using World War I to create a situation where a Belgian could investigate crimes in England. Also, Poirot is much more sociable and friendly than the snobbish Sherlock Holmes. When the narrator, Arthur Hastings, first goes to see his old friend, Poirot grabs him by the shoulders and kisses him on the cheeks. “‘*Mon ami* Hastings!’ he cried. ‘It is indeed *mon ami* Hastings!’” (21). His enthusiasm at seeing another individual adds a layer of approachability that lets readers imagine that they too could know this man in a way that they could not with Holmes.

Holmes, with his client list, feels distant, but Hastings finds Poirot living in a house with other Belgian refugees down the road from where the murder took place. Christie uses the setting of Styles to help achieve this effect. The smaller village community provides a more sociable and down to earth atmosphere than 221B Baker Street in London.

However, like Sherlock Holmes, Poirot withholds information from everyone around him, including other characters trying to solve the case, like Hastings. Near the end of the novel, Hastings asks Poirot: “What do you mean by deceiving me as you have done?” (215). Poirot, of course, has reasons, claiming that Hastings’ honest nature would have made it impossible to catch the murderer (215). Christie might have used the explanations to make it seem like she was not cheating the reader, but she used this trope because it adds a layer of mysticism to detectives like Poirot and Holmes. In this case, all of the major characters are given a motive for murder except Poirot and Hastings. By keeping information away from the narrator and everyone else, Poirot becomes mysterious and adds a layer of uncertainty to the story. No one knows exactly what Poirot might do next, and that appeals to the readers’ love of suspense. Without this added layer, the murder might have gotten away, justice might never have been served, and the story would have been plotless and uninteresting. But the inclusion of the approachable and brilliant, if not vain, Poirot and watching how he goes about solving the case to unravel what might have been a perfect crime makes the novel and the character one that audiences want to read.

Holmes and Poirot are the embodiment of the interesting qualities early detective readers loved and expected, but Michael Connelly’s Harry Bosch provides an example of how crime novelists continue to make their sleuths appeal to modern audiences. A Los Angeles police detective, much more is known about Bosch’s character in his debut than that of Holmes or Poirot. However, being an American detective, his character is revealed alongside the case, as is

tradition according to Card (66). As *The Black Echo* progresses, readers learn several interesting traits about Bosch: he served in Vietnam, suffers from PTSD, persists at his job, and ignores police regulations and protocol in the name of the job. In his essay “Characterization” (2002), Connelly addresses his own views on character, and developing a detective like Harry Bosch. “The best crime novels are not about how a detective works on a case,” Connelly writes. “They are about how a case works on a detective” (60). He argues that detectives require something that fuels them beyond the investigation, and that this something should set him or her on “an arc that runs parallel but still may be wholly separate from [it]” (61). According to Connelly, characters’ pasts create their “code,” and that they cannot say what their “code” is. Instead, it must be revealed through their actions (61).

In *The Black Echo*, Connelly reveals Bosch’s interesting traits through actions. For example, readers learn that he suffers from a mild case of PTSD through a series of nightmares about being in the tunnels of Vietnam (2-3; 77-79), and the fact that these dreams make him break out in sweats and give him irregular sleeping patterns (80-81). When Bosch arrives at the scene of the first murder victim, the officers there believe it is an overdose case, but the lack of evidence, plus the fact that he served with the victim in Vietnam, leads him to suspect foul play (14-21). His insistence makes everyone there grumble because they want to watch the Dodger’s game that Sunday, but it shows Bosch is persistent. Another example of his persistence is when the LAPD’s Department of Internal Affairs removes him from the case. Bosch bullies the FBI to let him back on the case by threatening to go to the press and report the Bureau’s mistakes (108-113). The latter also serves as an example of how Bosch has a habit of making enemies and going against police protocol in sensitive situations.

Two of these enemies, Detectives Lewis and Clarke from Internal Affairs, seek revenge

against Bosch due to his lack of respect for regulations. After Bosch shot an unarmed serial killer, his popularity amongst the public forced Lewis and Clarke to drop the charges against him. Like Lestrade and Gregson in *A Study in Scarlet*, these two detectives are two-dimensional. They exist only to be blundering villains and complicate the plot for Bosch. However, in doing so, they provide an outlet for Bosch to be a “tough guy,” and to show off his lone-wolf persona. Their weakness highlights Bosch’s hardboiled grit that appeals of many readers. A rugged cop who does not mind breaking the rules to do what is necessary to stop the bad guys is exactly the kind of detective that appeals to many Americans. Bosch is a winner, a modern frontiersman, and a rebel. All traits that Americans tend to hold high in times of prosperity.

While Forster’s claim that creating round characters is more difficult than making flat ones is probably true, he is wrong when he says that serious flat characters are dull and uninteresting (72-73). Serial detectives, such as Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and Harry Bosch, are flatter than Forster would prefer in their debuts, and instead they masquerade as round. But their success shows that audiences find them interesting as Wood suggests they can be (106). This is for the same reason why Odysseus, Hercules, and Superman are popular with a lot of people. They are larger than life figures that capture the imaginations of everyone but the most skeptical of literary critics, and like these mythic figures, each one of the detectives I have examined provides readers with enough quirks and traits that generate that fascination. Whether it is Holmes’ superhuman intelligence or Bosch’s ruggedness and persistence, the obsession to solve a case is the underlying motivation and desire that allows audiences to enjoy reading about these detectives. At times we might pretend that we are as clever as Hercule Poirot or marvel at the hardboiled grit and take-charge attitudes of America’s Prohibition-era private-eyes. And at other times, these detectives make us ask questions about ourselves. Would we be willing to lay

down our lives to stop a madman, like Holmes did against Moriarty in “The Final Problem”¹? Or could we pull the trigger and take a life if it meant saving another, like so many modern detectives do in their novels? If the danger was obvious, maybe? But would we trust our instinct if there was any doubt? Could we live with the consequences if we were wrong? If so or if not, then what does that say about us as individuals? Serial detectives let us return to their lives story after story and let us contemplate these questions. While most of us will never have to deal with the problems of the criminal world, many suffer from moral issues like fear, arrogance, and selfishness. Seeing detectives contemplate their choices and situations allows us to reflect on our own character and grow as individuals. Thus, while they entertain readers and keep them coming back for more, the detective genre shows us the worst in humanity so that we, like the men and women at its heart, might have the courage to stand up against it.

But alas, Forster is not alone in his critique of flat characters, and while his claim about flat characters might be an overgeneralization, many literary scholars distinguish between artistic fiction that defamiliarizes, as Shklovsky put it, craft elements like character, plot, and form, and the less defamiliarizing genre fiction, like the detective story. These scholars define the latter as plot-driven stories that use formulaic devices to entertain children and the masses. As Dr. Thomas Balázs explained it to me, people like Forster view popular fiction as the literary equivalent of a Big Mac. In other words, popular fiction like *Sherlock Holmes* might satisfy the brain for a short time, but it won’t be memorable.

Even though the definition of literary fiction seems clear to me now after looking at it through the eyes of Forster and Shklovsky, for years I struggled to understand the differences

¹ Even though Conan Doyle was pressured by fans to create a scenario where Sherlock Holmes miraculously survived his fall, “The Final Problem” was intended to be the death of Holmes, and thus, Sherlock still made—or was at least willing to make—the selfless sacrifice.

between genre and literary fiction. One of the earliest attempts at explaining this concept to me in a nonbiased way happened when I was a senior at The University of Tennessee in Knoxville. I was in an advanced short fiction workshop, and ironically the examples being used to illustrate the literary versus genre debate were two detective short stories. Two of my classmates had each turned in a crime fiction piece to workshop that day: one of them genre and the other literary. The genre piece had an interesting detective who matched wits against a psychopath kidnapping little girls. Like Card discusses in his book *Character and Viewpoint*, it was an idea-driven story (65-66), and it followed that definition by having the premise move the story forward. The detective was intriguing because the plot required him to display a level of competence that made him interesting, but if the premise never happened, then there would not be a need for this character to reveal any of the traits that made him that way. Like Sherlock Holmes before him, he would have been flat in Forster's eyes because he needed the plot and premise to bring out the fantastical qualities of his character, and thus, as a class, we labeled this story popular fiction.

The other story featured a murder and a detective on the case, but the murder itself was unimportant. It was only another obstacle in the way of the detective's personal life. This story focused primarily on the relationships and internal struggles of the protagonist, who happened to be a detective, and Forster would be much more satisfied with his characterization because it did not rely on other elements within the story to reveal why the detective was interesting. Thus, this story firmly rooted itself on the literary and artistic side of the isle.

However, I cannot stress enough that these were two of the best writers in the class, and the author of the genre piece had proven in an earlier story that he was capable of writing something that classifies as literary. Moreover, even though the professor's goal was to explain the distinction in a nonbiased way, evidence of the attitudes pertaining to literary superiority

were made present by several voices throughout the discussion. And the arguments like this one almost always start over the subject of character. In particular, the question: what makes a character interesting? The fact that such a debate over this question exists is evidence enough to show that the answer is not as cut and dry as Forster would have us believe, and that Wood has a point when he makes his argument against him, which brings me to my own novel, *The Zumbrota*, the first Act, of which, makes up my thesis.

My protagonist, a twenty-five-year-old private investigator named Wes Grizzly, is rounder than the characters I wrote before coming to graduate school, but he would certainly fall flat of Forster's expectations. Like with "Murders on the Rue Morgue," *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Mysterious Affairs at Styles*, *The Big Sleep*, *The Moving Target*, *The Black Echo*, and countless other crime novels and short stories, I aspired to follow in the footsteps of the grand tradition of the serial detective that goes back almost two centuries.

Set in 1940, *The Zumbrota* is my first attempt at a detective novel, but all my fiction to date would classify as genre fiction that privileges plot over character. There are probably all kinds of psychological reasons for this, but whenever I tell a story, I write it for one person—my fifteen-year-old self. I did not read for pleasure until I was fifteen despite my mother's stubborn insistence that I would like it if I ever found the right book. For me that book was *Pendragon: The Merchant of Death* by D.J. Machale. *The Merchant of Death* is the first novel in a young adult science fiction adventure series. It is not a detective story per se, but it has the same mystery plot structure and contains many cinematic and pacing elements that I find appealing and use throughout *The Zumbrota*. However, while Machale's dialogue snaps back and forth, that might be the only stylistic trait literary critics, like Forster, praise when it comes to his work. Thanks to *The Merchant of Death*, I can enjoy both Tolkien and Fitzgerald, and it set me down a

path to becoming an English MA-student at The University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, and to writing this thesis.

So when I say I write books for my fifteen-year-old self, what I mean is that I write stories that I think will appeal to people who do not like to read the assigned texts in high school. My goal is to introduce as many reluctant readers as I can to the magic of reading, like Machale did for me, and even if that number ends up being only one, then I can say my writing made a difference in someone's life. Then hopefully, that person might write stories and inspire someone else, continuing the cycles.

I chose the detective genre as my thesis project because of the sleuth. The rugged detective character type fascinates me, and I love reading about how they solve crimes. However, for *The Zumbrota*, I allowed myself to return to my roots as a reader even more than I had done in recent years. As a result, Machale's influence can be seen in the creation of Wes. I wanted Wes to be someone who could become the greatest detective in New York. Because of this he possesses many coming-of-age heroic elements, like Bobby Pendragon in *The Merchant of Death*, and less of the hardboiled edge that we see in American private eyes that were actually written in the 1940s. However, instead of teenage problems, I gave him struggles that mirror my own. Like me, he is in his mid-twenties and has recently moved to a new city. Wes's primary frustration also reflects upon my own at times in that he is old enough to be seen as an adult, yet he lacks the experience for people to take him as seriously as he would like. However, just as Wes begins to earn some credibility at the end of the story, the completion of my Master's degree and the experience that I have gained as a graduate student help firmly establish my own ethos. Thus, by making myself one with this novel in places, I feel as though I have not only placed my stamp on a story that has been told many times, but also created a character who is

relatable enough to appeal to a variety of readers because everyone who lives past infancy is either coming of age or has come of age.

Another element that might make *The Zumbrota*, appealing to the reluctant reader is the fact that it is plot-driven, like much of the genre fiction that has gone before it. In my case, Wes solving the case also means that he saves the world from the Nazis plotting to undermine America's economy. Readers like Wes because, like other serial detectives, he keeps trying to solve the "how" as well as the question: what happens next? This is certainly true of Agatha Christie, the queen of plots, and I am always impressed when a story seems to have all the information foreshadowed early on. However, plot-driven novels have led to many published works where the characters are flat and function as slaves to the plot. Bookstores are filled with these creations, leading people like Forster to critique them for their poor character development. While this is true for much genre fiction, it is also a stereotype of this kind of fiction, and I tried to avoid it in my novel.

The hardest part of writing *The Zumbrota* was Act III. While it is not part of this thesis, Act III is worth discussing because it illustrates how genre writers can create more complex characters while still relying on books that have all of the appealing elements of plot-driven fiction. My original ending would not have worked following the sequence of events I started to write in Act III, and this ending was important to me because it solidifies character relationships as well as allow for the possibility of sequels. At the end of the novel, Wes chooses to keep his best friend's family intact, instead of ratting out his friend's uncle and sister—a mafia boss, who has been helping him stop the Nazis, and a young woman who happens to be this mob boss's niece and bookkeeper—from the police detective, who has been hunting New York's most dangerous criminal for a decade. While fear keeps Wes from doing this throughout most of the

story, it is friendship and the realization that the world is not as black and white as he once thought that prevents him from telling the detective at the conclusion. However, in my original outline, Wes was supposed to witness this mafia boss commit cold-blooded murders and hurt innocent people in an attempt to discover the Nazis' plan. Wes, who is still rather innocent despite the arc he undergoes in this story, would have never kept quiet if he saw these atrocities. It also undermined the mafia boss's character, who had been established in Acts I and II as someone in control of every situation and not a psychopathic killer. Thus, while plot drives this story, I spent many days reworking the plot so that it fit the characters as opposed to what many genre pieces do and force character to fit plot.

Naturally, because literary fiction is known for favoring character over plot, many genre fiction readers falsely accuse these works of not having one. For example, Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist* is a winner of the Pulitzer Prize (America's top prize for literature), but uses a three act structure. And while most literary and genre stories can be defined by which element they place the most emphasis on—character or plot—as evidence by my workshop illustration above, the best distinction between these two categories goes back to Viktor Shklovsky's "Art as Technique," and his concept of defamiliarization.

Genre fiction relies on tropes. Different writers may reshuffle these tropes and even mix different genres together, but they all bare some resemblance to stories many readers have seen before. Whether it is a murder investigation, a love triangle, an orphaned farm boy destined to save the world, or an epic trying to combine all three, these formulas have been used time and time again, and are thus familiar. On the other hand, literary fiction tries make the familiar unfamiliar. Often writers achieve this through a concept Shklovsky calls deceleration. Deceleration is when authors intentionally slow the pace of a story or scene down, and in doing

so, it forces readers to notice the ways literary authors go about defamiliarizing the elements in their stories. Once genre tropes become defamiliarized, then it becomes a work of art and not something distinguished as a form designed purely for entertainment.

In *The Zumbrota*, I do not try and defamiliarize the tropes, preferring to merely reshuffle in order to tell a story I find interesting. In doing so, I acknowledge that my work is not literary or artistic, according to literary critics like Shklovsky. This choice goes back to what made me a reader in the first place. The deceleration technique, in particular, tended to be the element of fiction that bored me as an adolescent, the same way I was more likely to watch a blockbuster instead of an Indy film back then. It was the faster pace of Machale's *The Merchant of Death* that appealed to me, as well as the fact that it felt like an *Indiana Jones* movie. So in an attempt to appeal to the reluctant reader, I knew I wanted to tell a familiar and faster story. Also, many members of my target audience are not as familiar with these tropes when it comes to fiction. Some, like me at fifteen, might only have seen the crime story on a TV network drama, and to them it might be unfamiliar in prose form. For these people, I hope not only to get them into reading, but also to introduce them to the genre of the serial detective because in the nearly two centuries since Poe published "Murders on the Rue Morgue" in 1841, there have been many great mysteries and quirky sleuths to keep them up at night wondering "who done it."

CHAPTER II

CREATIVE SAMPLE: EXCERPT OF THE ZUMBROTA

One

It was July 1940. I was sitting in my office flicking through a stack of ten newly minted comic books that my landlord had left on my desk and couldn't decide which one to read first. It was his way of thanking me for helping him find a rat that had been causing terror on the upper floors the day before. Personally, I would've preferred a discount on my month's rent, but he reminded me of my papaw, and I thought I had been helping him for free, so I couldn't complain.

As I debated which comic to read first—in the name of pretending to be employed despite my lack of cliental as a private investigator—my eyes wandered over to the typewriter. I flirted with trying my hand at a short story: “The Case of the Unruly Rat,” but thought better of it. Paper was expensive, and finding the rat wasn't very hard. I just had to follow the screams coming from all the building's secretaries. However, I'd cut down a tree myself and use its paper to write an encyclopedia on the case if it meant not having to read the monthly letter from my father lying unopened on my desk.

“The Case of the Unruly Rat” had been a fun distraction for an out of work private-eye, but it was just the kind of job that would fuel my father's skepticism and cause me to consider moving back home to Tennessee, where I was likely to find a boring and mundane job that offered “financial security.” And I was always welcome to help him and my three older brothers

plow the fields of our small family farm.

Both options sounded about as much fun as going to the dentist.

I crumbled up the letter and tossed in the trash without bothering to read it. Not out of anger or anything. I just wasn't in the mood. Besides, my father would send it to me again in a few weeks. Between him and the rest of my concerned family, I could become a sanctioned post office.

Don't get me wrong, I was grateful that so many people care about me, but between my mother's insistence that I was never going to meet a decent girl in New York City and my mamaw not believing my lies when I told her that I ate enough, it was hard not to be frustrated by their insistence at running my life despite being a grown man who lives a thousand miles away from home.

In my mind, I heard their voices critiquing my every choice, hope, and dream, so I decided to drown them out by selecting the second issue of *Batman* from my stack of comics and started reading about the world's richest private-eye. I was three pages in when the woman flung open the door and barged into my office. I jumped and nearly dropped my comic book as I looked up to see who it was.

I scrambled to my feet when I saw her. She was a middle-aged woman. Probably around fifty-five or sixty. She had tried to hide most of those years by caking over her wrinkles with makeup, but she hadn't bothered to dye the layers of gray poking up through her brown hair.

"Ma'am," I said, holding out my hand.

She tentatively took it as she looked around my office. The frown on her face told me I had disappointed her. I hoped it wasn't because of my southern accent. I'd been trying to lose it for the last two years, but every time I said a word with a long vowel sound, like "ma'am," it still

crept out. It was going to be a long and hard sell if I had to convince her that I was wearing shoes on the other side of my desk.

“This is your office?” she said.

I blushed. “Yes.”

Calling it an office was more for my ego’s sake than anything else. It was more like an oversized closet and had once been used by janitors to store cleaning supplies for the building I was in. And between my typewriter desk covered in comic books, a two-drawer filing cabinet crammed into one corner, and a coat rack with my fedora and overcoat stuffed into another, it was far from being a penthouse suite in the Empire State Building. But it did have a good light bulb for all the heavy reading I’d been doing lately. And it was cheap to rent. That was important for a twenty-five-year-old with no money.

She looked me up and down. “You’re Wes Grizzly?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, pronouncing the last word more carefully.

Technically, it wasn’t the name I was born with. I changed it to that when I moved to New York. My old name is not known to anyone outside the hills of East Tennessee, and it is not nearly as gritty as the one I picked for myself.

“You’re younger than I thought.” She paused. “No offense.”

“What can I do for you?”

I motioned to the small oak chair on the other side of my desk. It was positioned just far enough inside the room to keep it from being a doorstep.

“Right,” she said, glancing at it. “You’re Wes Grizzly the private investigator?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“The one from the ad?”

Once a month I bought a day-long advertisement in *The New York Times*. For the most part, it was a waste of money, but it was the best I could do. Some months I couldn't even afford that, so I didn't appreciate the skepticism in her voice. But I tried not to roll my eyes. She was a potential paying customer after all.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "What can I do for you?"

She sat down, and I plopped myself in the seat across from her.

"My name is Eleanor Victors," she said. "My husband is Francis Victors of Victor's Construction."

I smiled and nodded when she said it, not bothering to point out that I had never heard of Victor's Construction.

"I'm worried about him," Eleanor said.

"Your husband?"

She scoffed. "Yes."

Save it to say that I didn't like Eleanor Victors. She was arrogant and needed more than one dose of humbling. And if it hadn't been for the fact that I had only had three clients in just as many months, I would have been happy to help make her a better person. But a growling belly made it hard to ignore clients just for being rude.

"I think my Francis is a gambler," Eleanor said. "Not just poker with his friends. He goes out every Monday and Thursday night and comes back half drunk and looking horrible."

"There could be a lot of reasons for that," I said. "What makes you think he's gambling?"

Eleanor's eyes narrowed. "What are you suggesting?"

The gentleman in me didn't want to explain. Besides, given her tone, it was clear she understood.

“All I’m saying,” I said, “is that getting drunk every week is not enough to tell me that your husband is gambling.”

“He’s *not* cheating on me,” she said. “I don’t know what he’s up to, but he’d never do that.”

She adjusted the purse on her shoulder as if she were about to leave. My starving wallet couldn’t allow that.

“So why gambling?” I asked.

“Our accountant came by two weeks ago,” Eleanor said. “He and my husband went on the roof for a smoke, and I caught a glimpse at the books lying on the coffee table. Somehow he ‘misplaced’ ten thousand dollars in the last three months.”

She looked at me as if waiting for some big reaction. But besides the fact that he’d spent way more than my yearly salary in three months and could still afford an accountant, none of it really shocked me. So I nodded.

“What is it you want me to do, ma’am?” I asked.

“I need you to follow him,” she said. “I can’t have him wasting his fortune on cards. I won’t end up homeless like those dirty beggars on the streets.”

“How long do you want me to follow him?”

“For as long as necessary,” she said. “I need to know where he’s going, who he’s playing with, and how much he’s spending. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. “That’s not a problem at all.”

She hesitated and looked around my office again. Her eyes lingered on my stack of comic books for an unnecessary amount of time before she nodded. “Good.”

“You’re aware of my rate?” I asked.

Eleanor took a hundred dollar bill out of her purse and handed it to me the same way I gave the comic vendor a dime to buy the pulp magazines she despised so much. But nevertheless, I accepted my down payment gratefully and stuffed it into my wallet.

“Ten dollars a day from here on after, correct?” she asked.

“Correct. For that I will be your husband’s shadow and give you daily reports.”

“And I have the right to end this at any time?”

Her confidence in me was overwhelming.

“Yes,” I said, “and I have the right to end it as well. Should my client ever become unreasonable.”

She glared at me. I probably shouldn’t have said it, but oh well. Better that she understand that this partnership worked both ways.

Eleanor stood. “Will you start today?”

“I can.”

She handed me a folded piece of paper. “Here’s a photo of him and my address. It’s Monday, so he’ll probably leave sometime after dinner between six and seven.”

The couple lived in downtown Manhattan. I’d been in the area several times in the last year. And each time, I brought the neighborhood’s property value down just by walking through it.

I stuck the note in my vest pocket. “I’ll be waiting.”

She reapplied her lipstick, which didn’t need reapplying, and left without closing my door. That was it. No goodbye. Nothing. She had stayed as long as she was going to in my office.

I listened to her heels clop down the hall before picking my *Batman* comic off my desk and flicking back to the page I was on to continue reading. The day was shaping out to be a good

one. For the first time in two weeks, I had a case and some money in my wallet. I was going to eat well tonight before heading over to the Victors' and seeing just what old Francis was up to.

Two

405 Woodrow Street in southeast Manhattan would have a nice view of the Brooklyn Bridge if a row of crumbling apartments from the 1800s didn't block the scenery outside my window. I suppose the people on the fifth floor might have had a better chance of seeing the East River, but I never asked any of my neighbors. All I knew was that the only things I could see out my second story window was some old lady hanging her laundry to dry every Wednesday on the fire escape and a group of teenagers playing basketball in the alley below.

I unlocked the door to Apartment 2A and welcomed myself home. I tossed my keys onto the table, ready to devour the burger and fries that I'd picked up from across the street on my way home when someone said, "You're late."

Heart racing, I whirled around to see my neighbor, Thomas Pitino, sitting on my couch messing with the dials on my radio.

"I could've shot you," I said. "We've talked about this."

"Yes, you're a regular John Wayne," Tom said. "Good reaction on the draw time by the way. I think if you reach for your gun now, you might be able to still shoot me before I rob you blind."

I glared at him. "What are you doing here?"

"My radio broke." He got to his feet and snatched my carry out bag away from me.

"Something smells good. You bring me anything?" he asked as he looked inside it.

"No," I said, taking it back. "You don't live here."

“Bah!” he said. “Is that anyway to treat the man who saved your life?”

“You didn’t save my life. I know how to swim.”

Tom grunted and walked back to the radio. On a good day he stood barely over four and a half feet tall, and he had six toes on his right foot. He’d spent the last month bumming food out of my sparsely stocked icebox, claiming that he was depressed because the carnival didn’t think he looked weird enough to be an attraction.

I took my hat off and set it on the small kitchen counter to my right. Then I walked over to the living area and sat down in my favorite chair across from the couch where Tom kept getting static. I’d found the chair on the street near my office, and it always molded perfectly to my back.

“Anything new and interesting happen while I was at work?” I asked, loosening my tie.

“Just some nonsense about that nut overseas,” Tom said. “And that worse nut who dares to drag my Italy into this mess.”

Tom had never been to Italy. In fact, at twenty-six, he was a second generation American and no one from his family had been to Italy since his grandfather immigrated to the U.S. in the 1850s. But I’d learned it wise long ago not to point that out. He might be small, but Tom could still pack a mean punch to the gut.

I bit into my burger and savored the juicy taste. I’d spent the last week living off of noodles and toast.

Tom greedily eyed my food. I rolled my eyes and handed him a couple fries. He stuffed them all in his mouth at once and then licked the salt off his fingers when he was done.

“Pete’s?” he asked.

I nodded. Based on my two years living in New York, Old Pete’s Diner served the best

fries in town. “What do you need the radio for anyway?”

“I’m trying to hear the weather,” he said. “I need to let my sister know if it’s going to rain tonight.”

I gulped down my food and leaned forward. “Your sister?”

“Yeah.”

“The one I met last year?”

“That’s the only one I’ve got,” Tom said.

“I thought she wasn’t coming until Christmas?”

A man’s voice giving a weather forecast blared out of the speakers.

“She got bored,” Tom said. “Shh.”

Irritation killed my appetite. I took a deep breath, ignoring the meteorologist. Tom’s sister lived in Philadelphia and visited him once a year. The last time she was in town, I had expected to see someone who looked a lot like Tom. Instead, I’d met a beautiful slightly plumpish girl who I might have really liked had she not refused to accept that I was anything more than an uneducated mountain man from Tennessee. It didn’t matter that I’d spent the last two years trying to become a New Yorker; she only saw me as the stereotype she expected. She’d even gone as far as to read the concession stand menu for me at a Yankee’s game.

I hated that woman.

Once the weather bulletin was over, Tom turned off the radio. “What’s the difference between partly cloudy and mostly sunny? Seems like the same thing to me?”

“Don’t know,” I said. “How long’s your sister going to be here?”

“A week. Why?” His eyes narrowed; then he sprung to his feet and pointed at me.

“That’s my sister remember. If I catch you looking at her funny, I’ll shove this finger in your eye

sockets, capiche?”

I threw my hands up, sending a couple fries sprawling off my lap. The last time I'd seen him go off like that was when I told him that I thought Hitler was worse than Mussolini. “That’s not why I asked.”

Tom inhaled a big sniff and scratched his chest. “Who am I kidding? You’re too nice to try and take advantage of my baby sister. Now Fred on the third floor, he’ll get a good sock to the kisser if he ever goes near her.” He looked at the fries on the floor. “You going to eat those?”

“Take them.”

Tom collected the fries off the floor and plopped himself back down on the couch. “These are delicious,” he said with his mouth full. “You know, you might not actually be such a bad brother-in-law now that I think about it. Vanessa could do a lot worse.”

I froze mid-sip of my Coca-Cola and lowered the glass bottle. The last thing I needed was for him to turn matchmaker and set me up with that crazy woman.

“I’m already taken,” I said.

Tom snorted. “Oh right, the reporter doll. How could I forget the love of your life? Tell me, have you asked her to out yet?”

“She has a name,” I said, “and as she’s pointed out many times, it’s not doll.”

“Whatever,” Tom said. “The point is you haven’t asked her out yet.”

I took another sip of Coke, preferring not to say anything. Unfortunately, I am ashamed to admit that he was right. I hadn’t asked the talented Candace Martin out for dinner or any other activity for that matter. There had been plenty of opportunities over the last year, but when it came to love, I was a coward.

“For all we know,” Tom said, “she thinks you’re an idiot. Now my sister—”

“Your sister definitely thinks I am an idiot,” I said. “Don’t lie.”

“She just doesn’t know you like I know you. Give her time. She’ll come around.”

“She asked me if the reason why southerners couldn’t read was because of a brain defect due to our parents being cousins.”

Tom laughed. “Is that true?”

“No, that’s not true,” I said. “My parents aren’t cousins!”

“She could use someone like you,” Tom said. “Before I have to punch Fred.”

I finished my Coke and set the bottle on the table. “Sorry. Not going to happen. I’m already in love with Candace.”

“You going to ask her to dinner tonight?” Tom asked.

“Can’t,” I said. “I have a case.”

Tom grunted. “Then you aren’t in love. If you were, you’d march over to her place right now and settle this.”

“Sounds like a terrible idea,” I said, getting to my feet and taking my trash to the can in the kitchen area.

“And when she inevitably breaks your heart,” Tom said, “then I’ll be there with my beautiful sister to fix it.”

“Nothing personal against you or your family,” I said, “but I’m not interested in anyone who assumes I can’t read.”

Tom wiped his fingers on his shirt and made his way for the door. “By the end of this week, you’ll be thinking differently.”

“Don’t count on it.”

He winked. “We’ll see about that.”

The door clicked shut behind Tom on his way out. I grinned and shook my head. Maybe the Victors' case would be more demanding than I thought, and I wouldn't see much of either of them that week.

It was a hope anyway.

Three

The Victors lived in a penthouse apartment in a nice part of downtown Manhattan. I arrived outside shortly after six o'clock and waited for Frances to come out. I chatted with a couple of newsstand vendors and some man walking his dog across the street from their suite so as not to seem suspicious, and I had just sat down on bench and opened the funny papers when Mr. Victors walked out onto the sidewalk.

I had concealed the photograph Eleanor had given me inside the newspaper, and upon seeing the man, I glanced down at it. There was no doubt in my mind that it was Frances.

He started making his way down the street. I let him get some distance before I got up and began trailing my target. Two years ago, back when I began my work as a licensed PI, I botched a few jobs by getting too close. My shin still carried the remnants of a bruise that I received after one woman kicked me.

Heels hurt.

I still wasn't a pro at stalking, but I was better at it than hunting wildlife. Of course, that's not saying much. My brothers learned quick not to take me along on their hunting expeditions because my bold aggression scared away the deer. But humans are much more trusting than deer, especially in their natural habitat—civilization. It was easier to track my own kind, and I was confident that I had become good enough at surveillance so that I wouldn't be spotted quite as

easily. At least I hoped that was the case. As I followed Frances onto a subway car, memories from some of my botched hunting trips came back to me, and I hoped I wasn't suffering from the same overconfidence that often ended with dinner running away and my brothers giving me a firsthand lesson on how to cuss.

I smirked as I thought about a few of the phrases they came up with as I filed into the car with a few dozen others. Frances took the last empty seat, and I grabbed a metal handle above my head to keep steady as the train jerked into motion.

The train ride took us all the way across Manhattan and into the Bronx. Even after a couple of years living in the city, my eyes were still drawn to the pillars of skyscrapers that engulfed the train every time it came up from underground, but at least, I no longer drew mocking stares by gluing myself to the window. For obvious reasons that would have been bad on a hunting expedition, so I took a seat the moment one became available and pretended to read news about the war in Europe while I watched Mr. Victors read the sports page of his own paper a few chairs across from me. Thankfully, we gathered enough passengers at each stop that by the time we both got off the train I was sure he didn't know how long I'd been a passenger.

From the subway station, he unknowingly led me on foot through a neighborhood with broken fire escapes and buildings from the last century—where I had to consistently watch my back as well as my target—to a group of buildings along the Hudson River. I watched him climb a small set of stairs, shake hands with a huge man guarding the door, and go inside. Everything about the setup from the unfriendly environment to the gruff guy at the entrance, who looked like he grew up on the docks, told me what I had stumbled upon.

These were gangsters. Either Frances Victors was a mobster or he hung out with mobsters. Both of which I got the feeling might come as a shock to Eleanor. Gambling was one

thing, but the mob tended to do a whole lot more than that.

I'd met gangsters before, but I had never actually spied on them. There was this little mortality issue that kept me away from such people, but I had a job to do. True, I could've returned the money to Eleanor and told her I couldn't do it, but that would've been proving that arrogant little snob right. The idea of her continuing to think that I wasn't up for the task infuriated me.

Call it youth and stupidity, but I had something to prove. Plus, Eleanor might have been rude, but she deserved to know if her husband was a gangster.

The good news was that there were plenty of workers walking through the area as the shifts changed on the shipping docks. The bad news was that I was pretty sure the man at the door would break my legs and throw me in the river if I tried to get inside. But hey, at least there would be enough witnesses to bring my killer to justice. That was something, right?

I needed to find another way into the building.

There had to be a window or a back door that wasn't guarded by someone who could rip my arms from their sockets. Unfortunately, even though the sun was setting over the skyscrapers in the west, it wasn't quite dark yet, and the gorilla at the front kept a close eye on the area with those beady little eyes of his. And because of how it sat along the river, the only way to get to it was a direct approach. I wasn't getting close to that building without some sort of distraction.

I didn't trust my stealth skills on a little distraction. No, it had to be huge if I was going to get past the guard. Something to keep him interested.

I looked at large line of workers and chuckled to myself as an idiotic idea popped into my head. A brawl among the workers would certainly distract the guard. It was also dangerous and stupid and would more than likely get me killed. But if I could escape the in the middle of it, I

could sneak around the building.

No, I told myself. That was dumb.

The holster with my revolver underneath my suit coat called to me. I carried it only as a last resort, and I had never used it on a job. I was a private investigator, not a cop. Plus, bullets were expensive, and I didn't want to shoot somebody if I could help it.

I glanced back and forth between the guard and the workers. If I fired several rounds into the ground, then the crowd would panic and scatter. It would certainly get the guard's attention. But gunshots might alert the gangsters inside, which would make sneaking in pointless.

I sighed. Back to stupid Plan A. I spotted a tall man with blond hair and charged at him in the middle of the crowd.

"Ayran scum!" I yelled, knowing that would probably be the last thing I ever said.

His eyes widened in confusion as I balled my fist and punched him across the jaw. Shock waves jolted up my arm from the impact. It might have hurt had I not been terrified. Before he could react, I shoved him in the chest as hard as I could, sending him tumbling.

I turned to the next man I saw and, in a terrible German accent, yelled, "Irish dummkopf!" Then I punched him in the face too.

I had no idea if the poor guy was Irish or not, but it didn't matter. Both the German and Irish workers started shouting at each other.

A few men nearby tried to grab me, but I was already on the move. All they managed to get was my hat. My favorite hat, mind you, but thanks to the sounds of fighting erupting behind me, I managed to shove my way out of the riot with that and a torn sleeve being my only wounds.

Once I got free of the mob behind me, I glanced up at the guard. Sure enough, he was

grinning as he watched the street brawl. I made my way to the back side of the building along the river as fast as I could without running. I didn't want quick sudden movements on my part to draw his gaze.

It was only about fifty yards until I was out of sight, but I held my breath the entire time, expecting the guard to take a shot at me and alert everyone to what I was up to. Or for another guard to come running around the back to see what was going on. But no shots were fired.

I peered around the side to see if anyone stood guard over the back of the building and grinned. There was just a narrow strip of grass and a steep muddy drop off into the river. I turned back around and looked at the riot. Many in the crowd were already trying to break it up.

Had I really caused that?

Despite being the moment, I felt guilty and hoped no one would be seriously hurt from my reckless decision to start an ethnic war in the Bronx. But I forced myself to turn away and walk over to the back door.

Naturally it was locked.

Fortunately, I was prepared for situations like this. I reached into my coat, opposite my gun, and pulled out a lock pick set. It had been a going away present from my brother, Steve, who had seen too many movies. But until that point, I had never had the opportunity to use it, except when I practiced on Tom's apartment and scared him half to death in the middle of the night.

The lock clicked right as the door flung inward. I fell down and stared up at two grizzly, unshaven men.

"Told you I heard something," the shorter one said; though, he was still much bigger than I was.

The other glared at me. “Who are you?”

I got to my feet and held out my hand. “Wes Grizzly.”

The second one grunted, and the first one dragged me inside and pinned me against the wall. He patted me down and confiscated my gun. His breath smelled like whiskey and cigarette smoke.

“You one of Veroni’s men?” the second one said.

I shook my head. “I don’t know who that is.”

The second one grunted again. “You look like ya could be one of Veroni’s.”

“I’ve never heard of him,” I said. “That’s the truth. I promise.”

“What’re doing with a gun, then?” the first one asked, waving it in my face while he tightened his grip on my arm.

I bared my teeth not wanting to let them know my pain.

“You should be more careful with that thing,” I said. “It’s loaded.”

He gave my arm an extra twist. I bit my tongue to keep from screaming.

“Why are you here?” the second asked.

“I just want to play cards,” I said, hoping against hope that Eleanor’s suspicions were right and that’s what Frances was up to.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw them look at each other. Then the first gangster yanked me away from the wall.

“Come on,” he said. “We’ll see what the boss has to say about you.”

Four

The ugly gangsters tied me up and dragged me into a deserted parlor. They tossed me onto the middle of the floor and slammed the door on their way out. I had no doubt that one of them stood guard on the other side to make sure I didn't get away, but since they had bound my hands behind my back and tied my feet up, my chances of escaping weren't good. Though, that wasn't going to be for a lack of trying.

I sat up and looked around. The room wasn't anything like the cigar clouded bar that I had expected to find. That room was probably down below. Instead, I stared at an ivory piano and red velvet furniture.

My eyes darted around for anything that could be used to cut me free as I thrashed to loosen the ropes. A square crystal bottle full of brandy sat on the coffee table five feet behind me. It was so big and beautifully crafted; it would be perfect for smashing.

Still firmly held in place by my bonds, I bounced inch by inch over to it, using my legs to propel me backward.

The door flung open and I fell on my side and stared up at the shorter gangster guarding the exit. He glared at me but didn't seem to notice that I had moved. Then he grunted and slammed the door shut.

I exhaled and wormed myself the rest of the way. Once I got to the table, I sat up again and stared at the bottle. How was I supposed to break it without making too much noise?

I glanced back at the door. Their boss was liable to stroll in at any minute. I needed to move.

Inching closer, I leaned forward and pressed my forehead against the cold crystal. I nudged it to the edge and shoved it off.

Thud.

I cringed. It landed sideways on the hardwood, causing the cap to come off and leak brandy everywhere, but the bottle itself remained intact.

Should have flung it off the side of the table, I thought as I belly crawled underneath the table to get to it. Though, without hands and feet, it wasn't like I could put it back on the table to try again. I considered how bad it would hurt to smash both my feet down on top of it when the door opened.

I froze. My pulse beat so fast that I thought it would loosen my ropes for me.

"Mr. Grizzly," a voice said behind me.

I knew that voice. It belonged to Renzo Pitino. The Al Capone of New York. Though, the city knew him as Antonio Vizzini.

"Come out from under there," Pitino said. "We need talk."

It was official. I was getting thrown in the river. Before I had the chance to crawl out, a pair of massive hands grabbed my ankles and dragged me out from under the table. I rolled around to see the short guard standing over me. He stepped aside so I could sit up and talk to the mob boss.

"Hello, Tony," I said. "It's been awhile."

Pitino smirked and looked at the two men who had caught me. "This is no way to treat a guest. Untie Mr. Grizzly."

"You sure, boss?" the big one asked. "He had a gun."

"And you took it away," Pitino said. "I assume you didn't miss anything."

"No, sir," the man said, but he patted me down again before cutting me loose.

As soon as I was free, I scrambled to my feet and dusted off my coat. My knees were

quaking, but the rest of me felt in control. Renzo Pitino and I had met a few times before. Never officially on a case, but at Tom's apartment. Yes, Renzo Pitino, New York's most infamous gangster, was also Tom's uncle. Tom didn't know that his uncle was really Antonio Vizzini because Pitino had managed to keep photos of himself out of the papers, and Tom wasn't in a job that would let him see his uncle as a ruthless gangster. I discovered the truth by accident, and when Pitino figured out that I learned his identity, he only kept me alive because of my friendship with his favorite nephew, informing me that I would be dead within the hour if I ever told anyone his real identity.

Pitino sat down on a brown armchair and made himself comfortable. Then he looked up at me. "Now, what's all this about?"

"I heard there was gambling going on here," I said. "I came to get a piece of the action."

He smiled and shook his head. "Try again."

I was stuck until I found a way to satisfy him. Even if I managed to escape, he knew exactly where I lived and had eyes everywhere down the eastern seaboard.

"It's the truth," I said.

"It's part of the truth," Pitino said.

"He a cop, boss?" asked the shorter guard.

Pitino calmly raised a hand and the man took a few steps back.

"There's gambling downstairs," Pitino said, "but that's not the whole reason why you're here."

Something in my face or voice must have given me away, or maybe I just didn't look like the kind of person he surrounded himself with on a daily basis. Either way, I wasn't getting out of there unless I came clean.

I set my jaw and held his gaze. If I had seen him on the street and not known who he was, I would have profiled him as a gangster. His Italian suit, gray-streaked hair, and clean-shaven face were part of the reason, but mostly it was the way he carried himself. Even though he wasn't much taller than five feet, when he entered the room it was clear that he was one of the most competent and dangerous men in New York City. A man who thought himself untouchable.

"I'm here on business," I said.

He absently held out his hand to the side and the short guard handed him a glass of whiskey. He stared at me as he sipped it, and I felt the hairs rise on the back of my neck.

"Go on," he said.

"I'm trailing a client," I said. "He came in here, and I followed. Believe me, I had no idea this was your place."

Pitino gulped down the rest in one swallow and gently set the glass down on the coffee table.

"What his name?"

"Whose?"

He smirked. "Your client."

"Can't tell you that," I said. "Confidentially and all."

"I see," Pitino said. "I admire your loyalty to this gangster."

"I don't know if he's a gangster," I said. "I'm just here to see if he's a gambler."

If it was possible for my gut to churn anymore without throwing up, then mine did. As I explained myself, I realized there was no way he could let me go. Not knowing that it was my job to report this operation to Eleanor Victors. That's why my jaw nearly dropped when he said, "Very well. Go spy on your man."

“What?” I said.

“You have a job to do,” Pitino said. “Go do it.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes.”

I probably should’ve stopped talking, but it felt like a trap.

“What if it’s one of your men?” I asked. “Are you really going to let me go?”

“I’d be happy to shoot you if you want.” Pitino laughed. “It’s not my man, kid. This is not my building, and the activities going on in the basement aren’t my concern.” He motioned to the other two men in the room. “Them and the man guarding the door are my only men here. This place belongs to Piero Rinieri, who’s not here. I’m just here for business, so as long as your client isn’t part of my business, I don’t care what you do.”

The look on my face must have been priceless because he chuckled again. Then Pitino got to his feet. “We’re done here, Mr. Grizzly.”

The two guards flanked him as he made his way for the door.

“Wait,” I said.

Pitino and his men stopped and looked at me.

“Can I have my gun back?” I asked.

The two men snorted, but Pitino nodded. “Vincent, give him his gun.”

Vincent and the other man exchanged nervous glances, but the bigger man shoved the revolver into my gut.

I coughed. “And my lock pick set?”

“Give him back his lock pick set,” Pitino said, and the short one slapped the leather case into my hand before shooting me one last glare and walking away.

Pitino flipped a fifty-cent piece to me. I caught it out of reflex.

“Try not to get yourself killed,” Pitino said; then he and his men left.

I was alone in the upstairs of a mobster’s gambling layer. Somewhere below Frances Victors was laughing and drinking with no telling how many gangsters, and I had just been given a fifty-cent buy-in to join the fun.

Five

The basement was exactly the kind of environment I’d been expecting all along. The dim lighting and nauseating cigar smoke coated no less than three dozen ragged men in a rowdy darkness. All of them drank pint after pint of beer as they sat around several round tables and on bar stools playing cards and laughing with friends.

I was relieved when I saw it. Having never played in an underground poker game before, I worried that the stakes were too expensive for me to play. I didn’t know what a construction owner like Frances Victors was doing there, but these men weren’t your white collar workers.

I strolled into the underground casino and looked around for my target. No one bothered questioning me. They all went about their business assuming that the brutish guard at the building’s entrance had let me in, which was a huge relief. After how easily Pitino saw through me, I half expected everybody down here to suspect I was a cop.

Mr. Victors played Texas Hold ‘Em at a table in the middle of the room. Five others, all white, were playing with him. Based on the size of the chip stacks, Frances was losing.

“How much to join?” I asked the dealer.

“This table has a two dollar buy-in rate,” the dealer said. “If you want something cheaper, go over there.” He motioned with his head to the back corner while he distributed the cards.

Two dollars! I needed to raise my rates.

I slapped two George's on the table next to the dealer. The six players perked up. To them I was easy money, and they probably weren't too far off. My papaw had taught me how to play this game when I was fifteen. Since then, I'd only played it twice. Though, one of those times had been at New Year's with Tom and his factory friends. For the record, I lost five dollars before I quit.

"Give me some cards and chips," I said, taking the last empty chair to the right of the dealer. Frances sat to my one o'clock.

The dealer passed me a very small stack of green, red, and white poker chips. "Small blind's twenty cents. Big blind is forty."

I picked up my cards: the ten of hearts and the eight of clubs. Not exactly a beautiful hand based on my limited experience, but it had possibilities. I tossed in a red chip to match the large blind.

My opponents stared at me like I was crazy. Then the dealer placed his index finger on the chip and slid it back to me. "Wait your turn."

Sheepishly, I focused on the cards in my hand and pretended that I didn't feel their gazes bearing down on me. Some gangster I was. I didn't even know how to gamble properly.

Turns out that the person who sat immediately to the dealer's right on that hand went last, so I had to wait for all six of them before I could play. Frances raised the bet to fifty cents. Several more men called and re-raised after that and by the time it got to me the bet was a whole dollar. I gaped at the pile. It couldn't have grown that fast.

I threw in half my chips, determined to see the first three cards at all costs. Then I waited as it went around again for everyone else to match or raise that dollar. Thankfully, no one added

any more money to the pot, and the dealer revealed the first three cards: two of spades, four of diamonds, and five of clubs. All of which were useless to me.

“So,” I said, looking around the table. “What do you all do for a living?”

A brown-haired gentleman directly across from me said something in German and the two men to his left laughed. It was clear I had been insulted.

I looked at Frances. “What about you? You seem like decent fellow.”

“None of your business,” Frances said, his words a little slurred.

“I raise fifty cents,” the man to my right said in a Russian accent. Then he looked at me. “I load beer trucks. The bet’s to you.”

I folded. The important thing was to stick around.

“Beer trucks, huh?” I said. “Sounds interesting. I work in construction myself.”

Frances studied me but didn’t say anything.

“You’re a little scrawny for construction,” the German across from me said. “Do you work for Herr Victors?”

“I just started last week,” I said. Then without looking at Frances, added, “Who is Herr Victors?”

“I take that is a no,” the German said. “I raise twenty cents.”

The rest all folded and the German collected his prize.

“Who do you work for?” Frances asked.

Good question. One that I should’ve considered before telling a lie.

“The PWA,” I said, a little faster and louder than what was necessary.

Frances grunted.

I mentally sighed in relief and thanked my uncle for going to work for the Public Works

Administration as soon as FDR hatched his New Deal.

The next round of cards was passed to me. This time I had a pair of red kings. The two men to the dealer's left folded, but the German raised fifty cents and Frances tacked on another dime. To call would put me all in, and I still hadn't figured out what Frances was doing all the way out in the Bronx. Was it just to play small stakes poker?

I felt the fifty-cent piece from Pitino burning a hole in my pocket.

"Call," I said.

The German smirked. By the time the dealer revealed the first three cards, it was just me, him, the Russian, and Frances. We all took a moment to look at the jack of hearts, three of clubs, and seven of diamonds. Naturally, none of those went with my pair of kings.

The dealer set aside all the money that I could win into a side pot, and I decided to sit back and watch Frances at work. Once I was out of the way, the German bet two dollars.

"You're bluffing," Frances said. "I re-raise two dollars."

Everyone, myself included, looked at the Russian on my right. He stared at his cards for a moment then called Frances. I casually put my hand over my mouth and rubbed my chin to hide my gawking. Half my month's rent was on the table.

The dealer flipped over the next card: the seven of clubs.

I perked up, realizing that I now had two pair.

"Three dollars," the German said.

"Five dollars," Frances said.

The Russian tossed in five dollars' worth of chips. "You westerners are full of it."

My eyes widened. I couldn't help it. A whole month's rent was on table as the German called.

The dealer revealed the fifth and final card: the King of Clubs.

I leaned forward, suddenly wishing I was part of the big pot. I had a full house.

“Ten dollars,” the German said.

The other two called.

“Let’s see them,” the dealer said.

The Russian had a full house with jacks. Frances had two pair with aces and sevens, but the German refused to show. They all looked to me. My gut twisted, knowing that I had had a chance to win more than two months’ rent. But I still won three dollars. That would be enough to keep me in the game for at least another hand.

I grinned and threw my cards face up. “Full house, gentlemen.”

Several people who had folded at the start regarded me a little differently. No doubt, they realized how lucky I’d been and that they could probably take me for more money. Frances glared at me and the Russian. But the German seemed indifferent and the Russian just chuckled as he collected the bigger of the two pots.

“Always pleasure to take money from western imperialists,” the Russian said. “Good cards, kid.”

I nodded my thanks and looked at Frances’ dwindling chip stack. If he didn’t win or put up more money, the next hand would be his last. Though, I wasn’t sure what to do with that information. On one hand, I had done my job. I could go back to Eleanor and confirm that her husband was a gambler. But there was more to this story than that, and I wanted to know what it was.

A crazy idea came to me as the dealer passed me a pair of nines. Maybe if I was aggressive, they’d see me more as an equal and open up more.

“All in,” I said.

“The bet is four dollars,” the dealer said.

The same two left of the dealer that had folded last time folded again, as did the German across from me.

“Call,” Frances said.

The man to his left folded, but the Russian raised again to put Frances all in. Mr. Victors sneered and tossed the rest of his chips into the pile.

The dealer went to separate my potential winnings from the rest when the Russian stopped him. “Small money. Let boy play.”

He nodded and set the first three cards on the table: ace of hearts, three of diamonds, and eight of spades.

“So you work in construction?” I asked Frances.

Mr. Victors ignored me, and since no one could bet, the dealer revealed the last two cards: the two and five of clubs.

“Pair of aces,” Frances said.

I winced and showed everyone my kings.

“Pair of aces is good,” said the Russian. “But two pair is better. Fives and eights.” He tossed his cards onto the table and looked at my cards. “Pair of kings. Also good. Better luck next time.”

Frances slapped a hundred-dollar bill onto the table and got to his feet. “I’ll be back.”

The Russian stood. “I think I’ll take break too. I need drink.”

“Beer sounds good,” the German said. “I’ll be back.”

“Why doesn’t everybody just leave?” said the man between Frances and the Russian.

“Everyone take a ten-minute break,” the dealer said. “I’ll get Mr. Victors his chips. The blinds will be seventy cents and a dollar when we come back.” He looked at me. “Buy-in moves up to four dollars.”

“No thanks,” I said. “I’d best be going.”

My eyes darted around the room for Frances. But I saw no one that I recognized except for the German and the Russian from my game at the bar. The Russian waved me over. Not wanting to be rude I went over to him.

“Your full house beat mine,” the Russian said. “But you could not win money. So I buy you drink.”

I had only had one beer in my life and thought it smelled and tasted horrible. But what the Russian put in front of me was not beer. Like any good Soviet gangster, he bought me vodka.

I stared at the small shot glass of clear liquid.

“What?” he said. “You do not like vodka?”

I snatched it off the table and down the glass in one gulp. Then I immediately coughed my lungs out. My eyes bulged as I braced myself against the counter. I was sure my throat was melting.

The Russian roared with laughter and slapped me on the back. “You are brave and reckless. Maybe stupid. I like you.”

He grabbed another drink for himself and walked away still laughing.

I looked at the bartender. “Water,” I croaked.

He handed me a glass of brown tinted liquid. I picked it up and stared at it.

“Tap water,” the bartender said. “Probably from the Hudson. Hopefully it doesn’t kill you.”

Dirty or not, it still relieved my throbbing throat. I shivered at the taste and set the empty glass back on the counter. Then I searched for a bathroom to throw up in.

I found the restroom shoved off into a corner of the casino. I went in and nearly had a heart attack. Frances Victor's dead eyes stared up at me from the floor between the stalls and the sink. His throat had been slit.

At first I just stood there. He'd been alive not ten minutes before. Now there he was, broken on the concrete. And whoever did it was probably still in the building.

Adrenaline overpowered the fuzzy feeling in my head from the vodka, and I did what any terrified PI would do in the circumstances. I snuck back upstairs to the parlor where I had met Pitino and called the police, informing them that a murder had taken place in an illegal gambling casino owned by the mob.

An army of cops raided the place within the hour.

Six

There were a lot of surprised and angry gangsters to stay the least when the police arrived. Led by Detective Paul Braker, one of the most experienced and finest lawmen in the NYPD, a team of two dozen cops rounded up everyone in the casino and asked rigorous questions. When Lt. Braker saw me, he looked surprised and immediately deduced that I had been the one to call without me saying anything. He pulled me over to the side for questioning separately, and I relayed the story in as much detail as I could, starting with Eleanor's abrupt visit to my office. However, I left out the part about my starting the riot outside for obvious reasons, and the part about Pitino. The latter was mostly for my own safety, but I also didn't want him to know that I was on real name terms with the most dangerous criminal in the city.

While it was unsettling to know that I didn't blend in well on undercover assignments, I was more than happy to let the police assume I was not capable of being a true suspect in this murder investigation.

Two hours later, I found myself back in the bathroom with the late Mr. Victors and Lt. Braker. I couldn't take my eyes off Frances as horrible as the sight of his newly decaying corpse was. Though, it smelled worse than it looked. Frances had soiled himself sometime after dying, and let's just say that all the alcohol flushed his system out good. But I'd been in there long enough while the police searched the bathroom for any evidence to have gotten to the point where I didn't gag every time I took a breath. All I could think about was how I was going to break the news to Eleanor.

What was I supposed to say? "Sorry, ma'am but I followed your husband. He was a gambler all right. A bad one. Oh, and by the way, he was also a gangster and now he's dead. Just thought you ought to know." No matter what I said, it was going to be an awkward conversation.

"So walk me through what happened one more time," Braker said, a notebook and pencil in hand. "I need to make sure my facts are straight."

"I followed Frances Victors to this house several hours ago," I said. "There was a riot going on outside the building—not sure how that started—and I used it to sneak into the back. Once inside, I went downstairs to see if Eleanor was right about her husband's gambling habits."

"Did you win anything?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I lost three dollars."

Braker chuckled but then looked serious. "This riot," he said. "The guard at the door said it started before our man was killed. Is that true?"

"Yes," I said. "It happened right after Victors went inside."

Detective Braker nodded and scribbled something down on his notepad. “That was a big coincidence.”

I hesitated. “What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “That riot was a lucky diversion.”

“Yes, it was,” I said. “Sounded like the Germans and the Irish fought their own little World War II.”

Braker looked up from his notepad and met my eyes. “Don’t worry. It ended before anyone needed more than a few stitches and a steak for their black eyes. In case you’re wondering.”

I swallowed, feeling unnerved and relieved at the same time. “Glad to hear it.”

Shouting erupted from outside and one officer yelled, “You can’t go in there, miss.”

“I’m with the *Times*,” she said. “Out of my way.”

My heart fluttered. I knew that voice. That striking voice that was capable of giving anyone who got in her way a piece of her mind and, as I discovered on one occasion, sing a song that could captivate an entire room full of police officers.

Braker groaned as the most beautiful woman on the planet pushed her way passed the officer standing guard over the entrance and strolled into the bathroom. My knees buckled a little when I saw her. She looked as stunning as ever. Her light blue suit skirt and matching hat only managed to bring out the brown eyes that hid from no one behind her oval glasses.

Candace Martin stopped when she saw Frances Victors on the floor. Then she raised the camera she carried and the bulb flashed.

Braker snatched it out of her hand.

“Hey!” she said.

He yanked the film out. “You can’t take photos of my crime scene. We’ve talked about this.”

“I had another story on there,” she said.

Braker tossed the camera back to her. “You should’ve thought about that before.”

Candace glared at him, and I took a step back.

“Evening, Detective,” she finally said in an attempt to restart their conversation.

He grunted. “Miss Martin.”

“Evening ended hours ago,” I said. “It’s early morning now.”

She flashed me a quick glance. If she was amused by my attempt to lighten the mood, or if she cared about my existence at all, then she buried it under a scowl.

Candace knelt down to look at Frances. “What happened to him?”

“He died,” I said.

She turned her glare on me, and I scolded myself for saying dumb things.

Braker gave me an amused pity look and bailed me out by kneeling down beside her. He ran his finger across the air above Frances’s throat. “On the record, someone used a knife to slit his throat.”

“And off the record?” Candace asked.

“I think a professional did this,” he said, standing back up.

“A professional?” I said.

He nodded. “Look at the wound.”

I glanced down at the disgusting image. It just looked like a slit throat to me.

“What about it?” Candace asked.

“It’s clean,” Braker said. “The victim didn’t have time to struggle.”

Once he said it, I saw what he was talking about. The wound was almost a perfect straight line, and the edges were smooth. It seemed so subtle a detail, but clearly Frances Victors wasn't this killer's first victim.

"Who hired him?" Candace asked

Braker snorted. "Nice try, Miss Martin."

Candace grinned. "Off the record?"

"Don't think so," Braker said. "But here's something you can put in your paper. We are currently pursuing all leads that come up in this investigation, and I am personally doing everything in my power to bring this killer to justice."

Candace lowered her chin and rolled her eyes. It was a cute expression she always did that made my heart flip for joy.

"That's cliché," she said. "I'll need a better quote. It's the least you can do for destroying my film."

"Afraid you're stuck with the classics until I make an arrest," Braker said. "And before you ask, I don't know how long that'll be. Hopefully soon."

Candace looked down at Frances and scrunched her nose as if smelling him for the first time. Then she looked back up. "Two questions."

"Just two?" Braker said. "I can't be that lucky."

She smirked. "Is this really one of Rinieri's underground casinos? And how did you find him?"

Finally, my chance to insert myself into this conversation had come. Unlike my good friend Detective Braker, I had no qualms telling her everything I knew about these suspicious circumstances if it earned me a conversation with the most gorgeous reporter from *The New York*

Times.

“I found him,” I said.

Candace turned to look at me, and I saw the thirst for the truth in her eyes. She was more than just a reporter looking for a good story. Curiosity and the urge to enlighten the public drove her, and I desperately wanted to help her find those answers.

“You found him?” she asked.

“I was trailing him for my client,” I said. “His wife suspected that he was a gambler.”

Candace scribbled down my comments on a notepad. As she wrote, it dawned on me that I had just revealed the identity of my client to a reporter.

“Could you maybe not write that part down?” I asked. “It’s bad for business if clients think I talk to the press.”

She studied me from behind her notes. Then she rolled her eyes and tore the piece of paper out and crumbled it up. “I suppose I can for you, Wes.”

“Thank you,” I said, not realizing that I had been holding my breath.

“Is there anything you can tell me?” she asked.

Eager to redeem myself and show her I really was useful, I said, “It is Rinieri’s casino.”

“Which I am going to have to ask you not to report,” Braker said.

She blew a strand of hair out of her face. “Why?”

“This is all very sensitive information,” Braker said. “I’m not going to ask how you two even know about this, but it would help the investigation if you didn’t report any of this.”

Candace straightened. “Sorry, Detective, but your team just carried out the biggest mob raid in months. The public has the right to know what’s going on. I’m a reporter. It’s my job to tell them.”

Braker grunted.

Candace slapped her notebook shut and stuffed it in her purse. “Clearly talking to you two is a waste of time.” She started for the door before whipping around. “Don’t think you’ve seen the last of me on this case, Detective. There’s a front-page story in here, and I’m going to shadow this case to the end.”

“Wouldn’t dream of getting my hopes up,” Braker said. “Just don’t take anymore pictures.”

She gave him a knowing look before pointing at me. My heart nearly gave out. “You I’ll see tomorrow,” she said.

I couldn’t believe it when I heard. Surely she hadn’t just told me that.

“Tomorrow?” I said.

“Yes,” she said. “You and I have a lunch date. Clear your schedule.”

With that, she marched out the door past a rattled looking beat cop who still hadn’t recovered from her earlier entrance.

Braker looked at me like he was impressed.

“It’s not a date,” I said. Though, it was everything I could not to smile.

“Be careful,” he said. “She’s a handful. Reminds me a lot of my daughter.”

Having never met his daughter, I just smiled like I understood and pretended to act casual by inspecting the dead body at my feet.

“Just turned seventeen,” he went on. “Thinks that means she’s a grown woman and I should like all the boys that she brings over to the house. The last one didn’t think I was funny.”

“You’re not funny,” I said.

“Listen to yourself,” Braker said. “Get a date with a lively young woman and suddenly

you're a critic."

I grinned.

"Well I was funny," Braker said. "I told him I was polishing my special bullets for only the worst offenders."

"And what're the worst offenders?"

"Boys who disrespect my daughter." He chuckled. "What else would it be? Personally I thought it was good enough to get me on Ed Sullivan."

"You have a strange sense of humor, lieutenant," I said.

"If I didn't, I'd be a bad father," Braker said. "Now, about our victim, did you say his wife's name is Eleanor?"

I nodded.

The giddiness I felt from Candace's visit faded. Her presence had distracted me from the worst part of this case, but now that she was gone, my thoughts returned to what Eleanor was going to feel when I told her that her husband was dead. No, she wasn't the nicest of people, but I didn't wish the death of a loved one on anybody.

"Do you have an address?" Braker asked.

I gave it to him. He jotted it down and then lit a cigar.

The scent freshened Mr. Victors' stench.

"Do you have any advice for telling someone that their husband's dead?" I asked.

He removed the cigar from his mouth and looked at me. "Yes," he said. "Let me take care of it."

"She's my client," I said. "She deserves to hear it from me."

"You can tell her your story after I break the news," Braker said. "It's a delicate situation,

and I've unfortunately got a lot of practice with this sort of thing." He puffed on his cigar.

"Besides, it's a police matter now. Your case is done."

A host of counterpoints filled my brain, but none of them were as logical as the one he'd laid out. Still, Eleanor Victors was my client and her husband was my responsibility. As far as I was concerned, I had a moral and professional responsibility to the woman.

"Fine," I said and then did my best at a fake yawn. "Do you need anything else from me?"

He looked me up and down. "I'll call you if anything comes up. You're free to go."

I nodded. "Night, Detective."

I had almost escaped through the door when Braker said, "I mean it. Don't tell that woman about her husband."

"I understand," I said. "It's a police matter."

Braker grunted behind me as I left. I made my way through the maze of police officers still questioning gangsters and to the dark streets of the Bronx. The riot I had caused had long dispersed, and a fleet of squad cars sat in its place.

I may have understood Braker's reasoning, but being a private-eye meant he wasn't my boss. It was going to be a long train ride to south Manhattan.

Seven

I arrived at Eleanor Victors' apartment a little after five in the morning. Frances' death wasn't my fault. I knew that. But my knees shook as if it was as I knocked on her door. When she didn't answer the first time, I pounded my fist against it, hoping that I wouldn't wake up the entire building.

“You have a key!” I heard her yell on the other side.

The door whooshed open. Eleanor stood there in a nightgown.

“Oh...,” she said. “What do you want?”

I took my hat off and held it over my chest. “Ma’am.”

“Don’t just stand there.” She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me inside. “Where’s my idiot husband? It’s five-fifteen and he’s still not home.”

I had rehearsed this moment over and over again on the train, but seeing an angry and worried Mrs. Victors made me scold myself for not listening to Detective Braker. I just stood there not wanting to upset her.

“Well?” she said. “Speak up. I assume you’re here for a reason.”

There was no good way to say it.

“Ma’am, your husband is gone,” I said.

She frowned. “Gone? What do you mean he’s gone? Where did he go?”

“Your husband is dead,” I said. “He was murdered tonight at a casino in the Bronx.”

Saying it once was tough, but the second time made me feel incredibly guilty as if I had been the one that killed her husband. Seeing the anger and life drain Eleanor’s face as she slowly sat down in a nearby chair told me that this was the worst pain I had ever caused someone. Then she sucked in air and let out a sob that I still hear in my head every once and awhile.

Her face went red as tears poured down her cheeks. I stood there and watched her cry. Comforting people was never my strongest suit. At twenty-five, my only experience with death had come from elderly church members and an aunt that I wasn’t close to. So all I said was “I’m sorry,” knowing that it was far from being enough to make her feel better, and waited to see if she had questions.

Five minutes later, she composed herself and began asking those questions.

“How did he die?” she asked. “Was it quick?”

“I think so,” I said. “Someone slit his throat in a bathroom.”

“Well have you told the police?”

“Yes, ma’am. They’re investigating it.”

She got up and grabbed a bottle of brandy from a pie safe across the room. The living room was bigger than my entire apartment and furnished with more stuff. Eleanor gulped two glasses before offering me a drink.

“No thanks,” I said, remembering how I felt after the vodka incident.

She stared at the bottle. I thought she was about to drink a third glass when she set them both down on a glass coffee table and walked back over to her chair.

“Who killed him?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You were following him. Didn’t you see anything?”

“It happened in a bathroom. I didn’t follow him in there.”

She scoffed. “Why not? I paid you to watch his every move.”

“I’m not sure your husband would’ve appreciated that, ma’am.”

“He’s dead,” she said. “Think he’d prefer embarrassment to that.”

Her words made me rethink the situation. I had never paused to consider if I could have stopped it, but if I had been there, would it have made a difference? The answer was probably no, especially if Braker was right and it really was a professional killer. Most likely, I would have ended up on the bathroom floor next to old Frances and both murders would have been covered up by the mob. Then no one would know anything.

“You’re right, ma’am,” I said. “I should’ve kept a closer eye on him. I’m sorry.”

She stared off into space for several long minutes, and I waited for her to snap at me. It was her right after all, but she didn’t. Instead, she took a deep breath and said, “Thank you for telling me this. The professionals will handle it now.”

I clinched my teeth. I could’ve handled yelling or accusations that this whole thing was my fault, but who was she to judge my competence? I wasn’t a soldier. My job was to investigate and report. And I had done that to the best of my abilities. Yet, grief or no grief, I was still just as big of a disappointment and failure to her as I had been when she’d hired me less than twenty-four hours ago. That attitude irritated me more than anything.

Sensing that she wanted me to go, I got to my feet and saw myself to the door. On my way out, I stopped and turned around. “I will solve your husband’s murder, ma’am. Don’t worry.”

Before she could mock me or my capability again, I shut the door behind me and walked down the hall. I meant what I told her. A murder had happened on my watch, and while I had no doubts about Braker’s ability to solve this case, I wanted to provide her with the answers. I needed to show her and anyone else that thought twice about hiring a young private-eye that I was good at my job.

That meant I needed to follow my one lead. I had to track down Piero Rinieri and ask the second most dangerous man in New York if he had Frances Victors killed. I’m not sure what it says about me, but I was looking forward to that conversation a lot more than the one I’d had with Eleanor.

At least those tears were likely to be my own.

Eight

I didn't go after Rinieri right away. If I was going to accuse one of the most dangerous men in the city of murder, I figured I ought to get at least a few hours of sleep first. So I returned to my apartment at 405 Woodrow St. and crawled into bed. Despite the night I'd had or the high probability of ending up at the bottom of the Hudson in a few hours, my mind didn't have a hard time drifting off.

But my nap was short lived. The smell of burnt powdered eggs woke me up. I rubbed my nose, only half noticing, when a woman's voice said, "You're burning them."

"I'm giving them more flavor," Tom said.

I bolted upright and stared across the room at the kitchen area. Tom was standing barefoot over the stove in his bathrobe that was too long; next to him his sister, Vanessa, sat at the counter, looking like she'd been dressed and awake for hours.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Making breakfast," Tom said. "What's it look like?"

"In my apartment?"

"I was out of eggs," Tom said. "You can have some if you want."

I rolled my eyes and climbed out of bed. "That's very thoughtful of you."

"I made toast," Vanessa said. "Do you have that in Tennessee?"

If she hadn't said it with such sincerity, I would've accused her of mocking me. But if she was going to believe every southern stereotype she heard—and this was a new one for me—the least I could do was have some fun.

"No," I said. "Is it what you Yanks call a biscuit?"

She shook her head. "It's cooked bread."

“Oh!” I said. “Like cornbread?”

“Not exactly.” She looked at her brother. “How would you describe toast?”

“He knows what toast is,” Tom said, walking over to the couch with a plate of eggs and toast. “I taught him everything he knows.”

“Glad to hear you’re helping him.” She looked at me. “I went to Tokyo once. I know how hard it can be to adjust to a new culture.”

I wanted to smack them. “Tennesseans eat toast.”

“Not the way my sister makes it,” Tom said. “She’s not just good with numbers; she can cook like you wouldn’t believe.” He flashed me a knowing look.

Thankfully, Vanessa didn’t seem to notice. With everything that had happened the night before, I had forgotten Tom’s quest of trying to set me up with his sister. Vanessa was beautiful and smart, I’ll give her that, and thanks to a friend of her father’s, she was one of the few female accountants in the country. She was great with numbers, and I’m sure Clock Timers was glad to have her. But she was without a doubt the most annoying person I’d ever met.

“It’s just toast,” Vanessa said. “Anybody can make it.” She took a bite of the eggs and frowned. “But apparently you can’t cook eggs.”

“That’s cause they’re not real eggs,” Tom said. “Imagine how bad they’d taste if I didn’t burn them.”

Vanessa offered me the frying pan full of blackened scrambled eggs. “Would you like some?”

“No thanks,” I said. “I’ve had Tom’s ulcer cooking before.”

Tom propped his hairy feet onto my coffee table and shoved a forkful of eggs into his mouth. “More for me then.”

I eyed the stack of golden brown toast on the counter. Unlike the eggs, it seemed harmless enough, so I grabbed a couple pieces and went over to my favorite chair to chow down.

“Ain’t that good toast my sister made?” Tom said.

It was about as delicious as toast could get, and I wasn’t sure what it said about Tom’s matchmaking skills if this was his selling point.

“It’s very good,” I said.

“You shouldn’t use ‘ain’t’, Thomas,” Vanessa said. “How is poor Wes going to learn good speech if you make him think words like that are acceptable?”

And just like that, the toast went bland.

Tom chuckled. “This is New York. He’s heard worse. Ain’t ya, Wes?”

I smirked. “Ya got something wrong with the way we southerners talk, Miss Pitino?”

“It’s nothing personal,” she said. “And it’s got nothing to do with your accent. In fact I think the southern accent is kind of romantic.”

Tom grinned and bounced his eyebrows up and down at me. I considered throwing my last piece of toast at him but refrained so as not to draw attention to him. Last thing I wanted was for Vanessa to get any funny ideas about my romantic voice.

“But words like ain’t,” she said, “and the usage of double negatives are the signs of ignorant culture.”

“Now, now,” I said. “I’ll have you know my grandpappy got a fourth-grade education before he quit his schoolin’ and went to work on his daddy’s farm.”

“Our grandfather quit after the second grade to work in a factory,” Tom said. “And he lived in New York his whole life. That’s what she’s not telling you.”

She hesitated. “Times were different.”

“Have you ever been to the South” I asked her.

“No,” she said. “But I’ve read all about it.”

“You should go sometime,” I said. “You might be surprised at how much those ‘ignorant’ people actually know.”

“Sounds good to me,” Tom said. “You could take her.”

“Maybe,” she said. “I’ve always wanted to see a cowboy.”

Mentally, I smacked my forehead. That definitely was not what I had in mind.

“You’re not going to find too many cowboys in East Tennessee,” I said. “At least not the kind you’re thinking of.”

“What should she see?” Tom asked.

“Not much,” I said. “A lot of cattle. Mountains, mostly. But you don’t have to go all the way to Tennessee to see those.”

Tom grunted and gave me an annoyed look as if to say I was doing a horrible job making myself attractive to a beautiful woman. I gave him a pleased look that said that was exactly what I was going for.

“My brother says you had a case last night,” Vanessa said. “Anything interesting.”

Yes, I thought. Your uncle tied me up and then I lost three dollars and found my client’s husband with his throat slit in another gangster’s bathroom.

I desperately wanted to tell Tom and anyone who would listen about it, but then they’d never leave. And I didn’t fancy Tom’s uncle putting a bullet through my brain. At least not without good reason.

“Nothing that interesting,” I said. “The wife was right. Her husband was a gambler.”

“Sounds like a boring case,” Tom said.

I shrugged. "They usually are."

"We're going to the park today," Tom said. "Do you want to come?"

"Can't," I said. "I have a lunch date."

"That sounds exciting," Vanessa said. "It must be nice to meet someone who's not a cousin."

I bit off a large piece of toast to keep myself from saying something rude.

Tom looked skeptical. "A date with who?"

"Candace," I said.

He snorted. "The reporter?"

I nodded.

"Thought you said nothing interesting happened last night," Tom said. "When did you see her?"

Good question.

"Ran into her on the train," I said. "I thought about what you said and asked her out for lunch."

He studied me for a moment and then grinned as though he saw through my lie.

"Where are you going?" Vanessa asked.

I started to answer and then stopped. That was another good question. Only this time I didn't have an answer. Candace never said.

"I guess we didn't pick a place," I said, not believing my luck.

"You didn't pick a place," Vanessa said. "What's wrong with you?"

"He's a romantic," Tom said. "When it comes to women he thinks with his heart, not his head."

“That’s a stupid reason,” she said. “You should call her.”

Tom got to his feet. “We’ll get out of your way. Hopefully we can do something tonight. Come on, sis.”

I grunted, still not believing I hadn’t clarified where we were eating lunch.

Tom rushed his sister out of my apartment and then winked at me once she was out of ear shot. “I think we got her interested,” Tom said. “Playing hard to get was a nice touch. Creating that fake date and everything. No wonder you’re a detective. You know just how to solve the mysteries of a woman’s heart.”

I shook my head in disbelief. Was that really what he thought? “You and I were in two different conversations,” I said. “Besides, I’m not interested in your sister. And I wasn’t lying about the date.”

He grinned and gave me a playful punch to the stomach. “Whatever you say, lover boy. By the end of the week, we’ll all be headed back to Tennessee for a southern wedding. You’ll see.”

“No, we won’t.”

“Remember,” he said. “I’m best man. And I’ll see if my Uncle Renzo can help us pay for the train ticket. He always said Vanessa was his favorite niece.”

“Please,” I said, “don’t go bothering him about all of this.”

He chuckled and left me slightly terrified that he was going to tell the infamous Antonio Vizzini that I had the intent of marrying his favorite niece.

Nine

Candace did not answer her office phone, and I didn't know her personal number. I paced back and forth in my apartment debating on what I should do. Should I wait an hour and call again? Did she think that she had told me a time and place? I didn't want to think I stood her up.

Women like to be waited on, my papaw's words echoed in my head. *It shows them you care about what they think*. He was married to my mamaw for sixty years, so he ought to know something.

But on the other hand, the trail for Frances Victors' killer was growing cold. I needed to find Piero Rinieri and ask him some questions before the day was out. I doubted my grandfather's courting ideology accounted for homicide.

At least I hoped not.

I picked up the phone once more and called Candace's office, but again she didn't answer. I left a message with a *Times*' secretary and hung up. Then I grabbed my hat and coat and headed for the nearest subway station. Love could wait. I needed to meet a gangster.

Piero Rinieri had been in power since Prohibition. Like all your classic mobsters from back then, he made millions off of bootlegged alcohol. When President Roosevelt ended it in thirty-three, he turned his attention to selling opium and cocaine, and rumor had it that he had spent the last year making a fortune in the British and French black markets. The only one he feared was the infamous Antonio Vizzini, and Rinieri kept out of Brooklyn and Manhattan. The Bronx, however, was Rinieri's turf, and it was well-known to anybody who paid attention to New York's crime world that the King of the Bronx lived in a penthouse suite between Yankee's Stadium and the Hudson.

The subway station in the mornings was always too crowded for my taste. Thousands of

people bustled about every which way. Dozens of vendors sold newspapers, comics, soda pop, and a whole lot of other unnecessary stuff. Being an election year, I already saw people passing out flyers for FDR's third presidential run. And at least one person always seemed to ask me for money. Even though I had lived in the big city for two years, morning train rides were still one of the few times I remembered that I was a long way from the dirt roads and watermelon trucks of East Tennessee.

I bought a copy of the *Times* to read on the train. The headlines were about the war and Europe's status one month after the Nazis took France. Normally, I would have bought a comic to read on my way to work or a copy of *National Geographic*, so that I dream about solving cases in the exotic places it showed, but I wanted to see if Candace had written anything yet on the case from the night before.

I found a cramped seat between two soldiery looking men at the back of the train car and flicked through the paper. There was nothing on the murder of Mr. Victors, and I assumed that was because it happened too close to the deadline for the morning paper to print the story on time. But Candace did have a positive review on the newest Bing Crosby song. I read it with a smile plastered across my face. I could always hear her voice when I read her articles. Her bluntness as well as her passion for anything she wrote about.

Almost an hour from the time I left my apartment and two train switches later, I emerged from the toilet reeking tunnels and felt the warmth of the sun beat down on my face at the edge of the Bronx. I hadn't dared give too much thought about what I was about to do. I had read a lot about Rinieri in the papers, but the only gangsters I'd ever officially met were Pitino and his men. Perhaps I was stupid, demanding an audience with Rinieri without any backup, assuming he was even there that day. But like with starting the riot the night before youth and stupidity

trumped logic and reason.

I set out from the train station with the intent of getting answers, and ten minutes of walking later, I stood across the street from a thirty-story hotel. Rinieri lived on the top floor. Supposedly, it had a three-sixty view of the city. I couldn't help but be a little envious. The man was a murderer and sponsor of all sorts of illegal activities. Yet he lived like a king while I, a humble, starving private investigator, ate fake eggs and drank spoiled milk every day.

Part of me hoped he was guilty of killing Frances so I could take him down.

However, his guilt was not my biggest question at the moment. First I needed reach the top floor. Something told me Rinieri's bodyguards didn't let just anybody go up and harass their boss.

I studied the area for a minute. The hotel was newer than most of the classic brick buildings in the area. It looked like it belonged more in downtown Manhattan than in the Bronx, and the people going in and out looked like tourists. Middle class tourists with families, suitcases, and everything. None of them probably had the slightest idea who lived at the top, and only paid attention to the fact that it was cheaper to stay there than in a Manhattan hotel.

All of this played to my favor as I jaywalked across the street to Rinieri's hotel. A bellhop greeted me at the door.

"Do you have any luggage, sir?" he asked.

"I'm just here to visit a friend," I said.

He seemed to understand and went to greet a man coming in behind me. I smiled at the ease with which I had come up with that excuse and continued into the lobby. When I was fourteen, my grandparents celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary at one of the fancier restaurants in downtown Knoxville. I forget its name, even though I've been reminded of it

dozens of times, but I remember being in awe at how nice it looked inside with its tile floors, gold-framed paintings, and crystal glasses. If royalty existed in Tennessee, that would be the place they would dine every night. And since then, I have always used that restaurant as a standard for how fancy a building was, and Rinieri's hotel, despite attracting the middle class, was more glamorous than that Knoxville restaurant.

I couldn't shake the feeling that everyone in the lobby was watching me as I strolled past the main desk. Of course, the notion was ridiculous. There were too many people on the main floor for anyone to pay any attention to me. The dangerous part wouldn't come until I reached the top.

As I made my way to the elevator, I passed several more bellhops and I knew how I was going to get past Rinieri's guards. It might have been as clichéd as the Ancient Greeks, but you couldn't beat a classic when it came to life and death situations. Of course, once I told Rinieri who I was and accused him of murder, those same guards would probably chuck me out the top story window, but I told myself that I would handle that later.

The elevator opened and a black man greeted me.

"Morning, sir," he said. "What floor are you going to on this fine day?"

"I'm a new bellhop," I said, holding out my hand. "They told me to go upstairs and get a uniform. Do you know where that is?"

"Upstairs?" He grinned. "Somebody's messing with you. Uniform room is downstairs in the basement."

I looked down, trying to appear as though I had been tricked.

"Don't worry," he said. "You're not the first. Was it Willy who told you?"

"Yes."

“Thought so,” he laughed. “It’s always Willy. Best not to trust a word he says.” He pushed the lever down and the floor jolted as we descended.

A couple seconds later, the doors slid open and the man said, “You want room 005.”

“Thanks,” I said and hurried out.

A half dozen maids and bellhops walked back and forth down the hall. None of them acknowledged me as I made my way to the far end where room 005 waited for me. The door was unlocked and the room was empty of people and barely bigger than a large closet. White and black maid’s uniforms hung along one wall and bellhop clothing took up most of the space on the opposite one on my right.

I looked for one that was closest to my size and changed into it, stashing my clothes and revolver (I actually wanted to get close enough to Rinieri to talk to him) on a shelf up above that held shoes. Glancing at myself in a mirror that hung on the back of the door, I realized that I had forgotten to shave and the stubble gave me a more rugged look than I would have liked.

I reached for the knob to leave when the door opened, and I nearly collided with a young woman.

“Sorry,” she said.

My heart fluttered. “Candace?”

Her eyes widened and she rushed inside. “Wes? What are you doing here?”

“Investigating,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

“I had to get answers from *somebody*.”

“So you picked a mobster?” I said. “Don’t you think that’s a little dangerous?”

“You mean you don’t,” she said.

Fair point.

“I take it we have the same idea,” I said.

“I think I’m a more convincing maid than bellboy,” she said. “But yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Neither of us said anything for a moment. She just looked at me as if expecting me to do something, but I was still in shock that I’d run into Candace in a gangster’s basement of all places.

“So about lunch,” I said. “I tried calling your office, but you didn’t answer.”

“We can discuss that later,” she said. “You need to go away so I can change.”

“Er...right,” I said. “Are you sure you want to do this? I could go in and—”

“Stop,” she said. “If you’re about to give me some chivalrous nonsense that results in you having all the fun, then don’t. I survived three older brothers. I can handle the mob.”

“I’m glad one of us thinks that,” I said. “And I wouldn’t call getting thrown out a thirty-story window fun.”

She started going through the maid outfits. “I’m not going to be thrown out a window. You, I’m not sure about.” She grabbed one off the rack and turned around, holding it up to her. “What do you think?” She smirked. “Think it matches my eyes?”

Everything matched her eyes, which I found myself staring into. There would no changing her mind. She was going to talk to Rinieri with or without me.

“Looks good,” I said.

She scoffed. “You know nothing. It’s hideous. Now go away. I’ll be out soon.”

“Just wait a second.”

Candace sighed. “What?”

“I have an idea,” I said. “One that will most likely end with me getting tossed out the

window. And if that happens. We can try your way.”

“I’m not staying down here,” she said. “You can forget that.”

“I know,” I said. “All I’m asking is that you let me go in first and ask the questions. That way you can overhear and if I get thrown out a window, you’ll still have the answers.”

Candace stared at the floor to the right of her. It was an expression she always did when she put any serious thought into something. “Do you really think he’ll throw you out a window?”

“Not him specifically. He’ll have one of his guards do it.”

She glared at me.

I smiled. “I have a backup plan if he tries.”

“What’s that?”

“Punch the nearest guy in the face and run away as fast as I can.”

“I guess we’d better say goodbye now, then,” she said. “All right. We’ll do things your way.”

“We’ll be fine,” I said. “Just keep your head low. I don’t envy you trying to run in heels.”

I turned to leave. But she grabbed my arm and pulled me back around.

“Be careful,” she said. “I still need your interview.”

I winked, and perhaps it was the fact that my ego was soaring after Candace had expressed even the smallest concern for my wellbeing or maybe the prospect of facing down one of New York’s most dangerous criminal empires had given me new-found courage, but I became much bolder with my feelings for her than I had ever been before.

“It’d take a lot more than gangsters to keep me from our lunch date.”

With that I strutted out of the room ready to take on Rinieri and whatever certain death was headed my way.

Ten

I hitched a ride with my new friend the elevator operator and went up to the top floor without Candace. None of the white people who got on the elevator during our ride up, besides me, bothered acknowledging him, and that was too bad because he was a fascinating person to talk to. His name was Randall, and I learned that he was a fellow southerner. He grew up outside Richman, Virginia, and his grandpa took him fishing in a backwoods pond like my granddaddy did. Only difference was he apparently was good at it, whereas I mostly just caught my own bait.

All and all, I was happy for the new friend as it was probably the last one I'd ever make.

"Be careful out there," Randall said. "Don't want to go angering, Mr. Rinieri."

Too bad that's exactly what I intended to do.

He opened the elevator door, and I stepped out.

"Thanks for the ride," I said.

He nodded and closed the door. A guard stood in front of another door ten feet in front of me with a machine gun in hand. Other than the two of us and the staircase next to the elevator, the small hallway was empty. I walked up to the guard, carrying a suit and shoes. His bored-annoyance expression didn't change as I approached.

"Weren't you just here?" the guard asked.

"That was somebody else," I said, hoping my voice didn't sound as quaky to him as it did to me. "He forgot to bring up Mr. Rinieri's suit to see if it fits."

The guard grumbled about the boss ordering tailors now or something to that effect. I couldn't really understand what he said.

"I'll take it to him," the guard said.

I revealed a brush and shoe box underneath the suit. "I got orders to shine them if he's

not busy.”

I held my breath while the guard looked me over and tried not to stare at the gun aimed at my chest. None of this would matter if Piero Rinieri was occupied with gangster things.

“I ain’t ever seen you before,” the guard said.

“First day, sir,” I said.

He grinned, clearly liking that I had called him sir. “Arms out. Spread your legs.”

As he patted me down, I fought the urge to joke around and ask him to marry me. I probably would’ve had it been a cop, but the machine gun kept my manners in check.

“You’re clean,” he said. “Go in.”

The guard opened the door, and I walked into the most lavish room I have ever seen. It looked like a slightly modern version of Versailles. A couple other gangster fellows eyed me as I entered, but other than that, they didn’t say anything.

You can’t get past all of them if this goes south, I told myself. It finally dawned on me—really dawned on me—that I might have bit off more than I could chew.

I fought the urge to look back at the door. Candace should be coming through at any moment. If I quit now, she was liable to blow her cover, and that would only result in us both getting killed.

Chivalry is stupid.

I continued across the room to where Rinieri and a few of his men were sitting on a couch drinking and laughing away. None of them even looked at me. I made my way around a tall lamp and without moving my head glanced with my eyes over at the door.

Candace still wasn’t there, but I didn’t have time to wait on her.

I stood in front of Rinieri and three others and waited for them to acknowledge me.

Rinieri finished a joke about an Italian and an Irishman in a bar. The other three laughed, but it went way over my head. Then Rinieri looked at me.

“Yes?” he said.

I swallowed. Like Pitino, Rinieri wore the finest Italian suits money could buy, but that’s the only way I could compare the two’s appearances. Where Pitino was short, Rinieri had once boxed in the city’s heavyweight division. Had I not recognized him from his photos in the paper, I would have assumed that he was Rinieri’s muscle man, not Rinieri himself. And the three sitting next to him weren’t much smaller.

“Your suit, sir,” I said, offering it to him.

“Suit?” he said. “I didn’t order any suit.”

I glanced at the door again. Where was Candace?

Rinieri snapped his fingers. “Hey. Hey. Look me in the eye, boy.”

“Sorry, sir,” I said. “But I was told to bring this up to you.”

“Let me see that,” he said.

Before I could hand it to him, one of the men closest to me snatched it from my hands and handed it to his boss.

The gangster boss barely looked at it and laughed. “What is this some kind of joke?” He shook the sleeves at me. “Look at these seams. A dog’s not fit to wear this.”

For obvious reasons, I didn’t bother pointing out that the suit in his hands was nicer than the one I wore to work every day.

“And look at the size of this thing,” he said. “I haven’t been this skinny since I was twelve.” He tossed it into my face. “Here, kid. Merry Christmas.”

Where was Candace?

“Would you like to see the shoes, sir?” I asked, holding out the box with my other hand. He snorted. “Sure, kid. Let me see what you got.”

I handed him the box. He tossed the lid aside and took out one of the shiny black shoes.

“Look here, boys,” he said. “More junk.”

The others chuckled as I stole another quick glance at the door. Still no Candace. I strained my ears to hear if she was yelling at the brutish guy outside, but Rinieri was so loud, it was pointless to try.

“Cheap plastic impersonating leather.” Rinieri threw the shoe at me. It bounced off my chest and I barely caught it before it broke a glass of whisky on the coffee table between me and the gangster boss. “Look, kid. I don’t know what idiot downstairs sent you up here to give me this, but you go back and tell him that if he sends me clothes like this again I’ll shove this shoe somewhere he ain’t going to like.”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

Common sense told me to turn around and leave. That I should go look for Candace and make sure she was all right. But just as I was about to walk away, a guilty image of Eleanor Victors crying got the better of me. There wouldn’t be another time to question Rinieri. Not now that he’d seen my face.

So I did something really, really dumb.

“I have a confession to make, sir,” I said. “Vizzini sent me to talk to you.”

Rinieri’s smile died, and everyone in the room, including the men guarding the door, tensed up. I’m not sure why I said it. Maybe in the back of my mind I had planned to use that cover story all along, but I certainly wasn’t going to tell them that I was a private investigator who suspected him of murder. Especially not after seeing his reaction to the suit. And Antonio

Vizzini was the only person whose reputation could protect me from a man like Rinieri.

“What does that midget want?” Rinieri said.

Several of the bodyguards near the door had their guns turned on me. I tried not to look at them and focused instead on Rinieri.

“Did you kill Frances Victors last night?” I asked.

“Franny who?” he asked.

“Frances Victors,” I said. “Someone murdered him in your casino last night.”

Rinieri just looked at me. Then he got to his feet and walked into my personal space. He was a head taller than me and twice as wide across the shoulders. It was all I could do not to take a step back as I glanced up at him. He tapped me on the cheek by only moving his fingers, but he was so big that it jerked my head to the side.

My heart beat so fast I could feel it in my toes, but I didn't say anything.

He grabbed my chin in a vice grip and moved my head around. “Do you know how much force it takes to snap a human neck?”

“A lot,” I said, my words barely legible due to the fact that I couldn't move my jaw.

Rinieri tightened his grip. “Speak up?”

“A lot!” I yelled.

He continued to move my head around as if it were toy. I wanted to kick him as hard as I could, but in this position, something told me he would kill me the moment I tried.

“I'm a business man, kid,” he said. “Right now, you're an investment. Go back and tell that ugly dwarf that I didn't kill the architect, and if he sends anyone back, he'd better hope it's someone he doesn't like.”

Rinieri let go of my face and laughed a throaty laugh, amused, I'm sure, by my look of

relief. Then he clubbed me upside the head with his massive paw, and everything went black for a split second.

“Get going,” he said, no longer amused.

I might have been a dummy, but I wasn’t that big of a dummy. Without looking back, I hurried out of the suite. Candace wasn’t in the hall, and the guard outside didn’t pay any attention to me as I waited on the elevator.

When the elevator chimed and the doors slid open, I half expected to see Candace step out wearing a maid’s uniform. Instead, I froze as the German from the poker game the night before walked past me. He didn’t seem to recognize me, but there was no doubt about who he was.

“Everything go okay?” Randall asked me as I mindlessly walked in.

I mumbled a “yeah” as the gears in my head turned. Unfortunately, my brain only really wanted to focus on the fact that I was still alive.

“Where to?” Randall asked.

“Basement.”

I needed to find Candace.

We were halfway down the building when I calmed down enough to return to my senses and put two and two together. The German had something to do with the murder. Or at least it was a pretty big coincidence, showing up the day after the murder, if he didn’t. Either way I needed to find out.

I laughed at my own stupid luck.

“What’s so funny?” Randall asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “I need to go back upstairs.”

Eleven

“Back upstairs?” Randall shook his head. “I always thought white people were crazy, but you’re too crazy.”

“I forgot something,” I said. “Can you put this thing in reverse?”

“After I take this next person down.”

He opened the doors and Candace rushed in. She saw me and glared. “You,” she said, pointing. “I spent the last fifteen minutes scrubbing a toilet because of you and your stupid idea.”

“You’re alive!” I said.

“Course I’m alive,” she said. “Dirty and disgusted by what I just had to do, but alive. Did you talk to Rinieri?”

Candace looked at Randall, who was pretending not to listen, and then raised an eyebrow at me.

“Yes,” I said. “He threw me out.”

She gave me an impressed look that said, “And you survived!” It made my heart pitter-patter and my ego soar once again high above the city’s skyline. But it crashed the moment when my good friend Randall decided to participate in our conversation.

“He wants me to take him back up there, miss,” he said.

Candace’s face went from “you’ve never been more attractive” to “you stupid boy; have you lost your mind?”

“Take us to the basement, please,” she told Randall.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“No,” I said. “Take me back up to talk to Rinieri.”

He shook his head. “Sorry, sir. Far as I’m concerned, she outranks you.”

I turned to Candace. Behind her glasses, her eyes reminded me of Superman's before he blasted his enemies with heat vision. Only hers were more terrifying because I knew how delightful they normally were.

"We need to go back upstairs," I said. "Trust me."

"I trust that you've got some bullheaded idea that relies too much on luck."

That, I grudgingly admitted, was probably a fair assumption. To state the obvious, I was extremely lucky that I hadn't already been killed by Rinieri and his men.

The doors opened to the basement. Candace marched out and I followed.

"Look out for him, miss," Randall called out behind us. "He needs it."

She hurried toward the uniform room without looking back. I ran in front of her and cut her off. She tried to move around me, but I side stepped and kept blocking her path.

"Look," I said. "Someone from the poker game last night went in to see Rinieri as I was on my way out."

"There were a lot of games," she said. "All of the players worked for Rinieri."

"But not all of them played at the high stakes game with me and Frances."

That's when the glare started to fade; though, it was clear she wanted to keep it. I had reached her at her inquisitive core. The battle was mine to lose, so I continued with my attack.

"There were a couple of Germans playing with us," I said. "One of them was one of the more confident people playing, and he's the one who's upstairs right now. Probably bragging about how he murdered Mr. Victors."

The glare finally died, but she still didn't look happy. "And you don't know where he went after the game?"

"No," I said, thinking of the Russian. "I was a little preoccupied."

Candace brushed past me without saying a word. I couldn't believe it. Had I misread her interest? Did my words mean nothing?

She stopped at under an air duct and looked both ways. Then she turned to me. "Give me a boost."

I grinned. "Are you going to crawl up the air duct?"

"Don't be stupid," she said. "I'm terrified of cramped places. You're going to crawl up the air duct."

"Then why do you need a boost?"

She sighed. "To see if it's big enough. Surely you didn't think we were going to start thirty-one floors down?"

I started to help her and stopped.

"What is it now?" she said.

"Do you really think I ought to be doing this with you in a dress?"

She rolled her eyes. "I have pants on underneath."

I didn't think that was possible given that the skirt came down to her shin. "Really?" I asked.

"Put it this way," she said. "If you test it, I'll gouge your eyes out with my heel. Now, ready to be a gentleman?"

Those heels of hers dug into my shoulders as she turned me into a stool. I winced. She was heavier than she looked, but for the record, I was a gentleman—if not a terrified one. Instead, I devoted my attention to making sure no one came down the halls and caught us by surprise.

"So," I said, "when we do this for real, do I stand on your shoulders?"

“That’s the plan,” she said. “Why? Think I can’t do it?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You thought it,” she said. “Guess you’ll just have to trust me.”

Candace climbed down and grinned.

“Works?” I asked.

“Good news. It’s plenty of big enough for you to crawl in. Bad news is that you will have to be slow to make sure you don’t let them know that a blundering detective is crawling around overhead. Think you can do it?”

I grinned. “Guess you’ll just have to trust me.”

Twelve

Randall was not happy to see us. He must have seen our determined faces because he said, “I’m not taking you to floor thirty.”

“Good,” Candace said. “Because we don’t want to go there.”

He nodded. “Glad you talked him into his senses, ma’am.”

“Floor twenty-nine, please,” Candace said.

He eyeballed me.

I shrugged. “You heard her.”

“I could report you to the manager,” he said. “I’d be doing you a favor.”

“You could,” Candace said. “But we don’t work here.”

He laughed as if confirming something he’d long expected. “What are you really doing here?”

“Vizzini sent us,” I said. “Do you really want to get his way?”

Candace and Randall looked at me. He was clearly suspicious, but I think Candace was impressed. Though, I doubt she would have thought that way a half hour before when I told the same story to Rinieri.

Randall grunted and pushed the lever to send us up. “I liked you better as a dumb bellhop.”

He didn’t talk to us for the rest of the trip. I’m not sure if he really thought we worked for Vizzini, or if he just wanted to get as far away from our amateur plot against a ruthless mob boss as he could. Either way, I didn’t blame him.

A minute later, he shuffled us out onto floor twenty-eight and said there were usually guards on floor twenty-nine. Candace and I thanked him and hurried to find an air vent.

I was starting to worry that we would be too late and that either they would have already discussed Frances’ murder and moved onto other topics of conversation or that the German had already left. But I did my best to shove those thoughts aside.

“There,” Candace said, pointing.

The air duct was ten feet over head. “You sure you can lift me?”

She knelt down and cupped her hands together. “Do I have a choice?”

Her body shook as she struggled to give me a boost. For a moment, I braced myself for a collision with the floor, but she let out a frustrated roar and slammed my head through the metal vent. Thankfully, it wasn’t bolted in, and I quickly grabbed the sides of the metal duct.

“You okay?” Candace asked as I hung between her and the ceiling.

“Yeah,” I said. “Give me a second.”

Pull-ups were never my thing in school. I could do push-ups and sit-ups easy enough, but pull-ups usually ended with my friends mocking me. My arms wobbled uncontrollably as I tried

to climb inside.

“Hurry,” Candace said. “Before someone comes.”

Candace grabbed the bottoms of my feet and shoved me upward. Between that and the fact that I was bigger than I had been in school, I managed to crawl all the way inside the air duct.

“Good luck,” Candace whispered. “I’ll be waiting in the lobby.”

I nodded then realized she couldn’t see my head anymore. “All right. Be safe.”

I rolled around and wiggled the vent cover back in place. Then I started to crawl forward.

It was a tight squeeze. I could see why Candace didn’t want to do it, but I had plenty of room to combat crawl. As for where I was going, I only had one choice. Forward. I just had to hope that way led up to the thirtieth floor.

There was a lot more dust than I expected to find in an air vent. I sneezed twice, and then scolded myself for making too much noise. A couple of times the metal underneath me bent and creaked, and I couldn’t help but think of it as a minefield ready to cave in and kill me at any second. But it always held my weight.

Then in a few other places the duct narrowed and I got stuck. I tore my nice new bellhop uniform coat each time, but I managed to wiggle my way loose. At one point I considered shedding the jacket and blamed myself for being dumb enough to go in with it on in the first place. But I couldn’t move easy enough to take it off.

The conversations I overheard as I crawled along were some that I could care to forget. For instance, I learned way more than I liked about Greg’s boil puss and apparently Sally’s sister talks too much. The latter was apparently common knowledge to everyone in the Carol family, but what you might not have known—at least I certainly didn’t—was that Sally’s mother-in-law

uses too much vinegar when she cooks steak. For the record, that last thing grossed me out more than Greg's boil puss.

What made it all worthwhile though were the steep inclines I went up every so many feet. I redoubled my pace with more confidence and crawled as fast as I could without letting any of the trigger happy guards below think a pack of rats was tearing up their air vents. Or that some lunatic private investigator was sneaking around about to spy on their boss. Neither of those conclusions could possibly workout for me.

But somehow I managed to reach the vent in Rinieri's suite without getting caught. And I was thrilled to see that my good friend the German was sitting on the gangster's couch, drinking and laughing. Having caught a peek inside the mobster king's natural habitat, I kept my head away from the edge of the vent and turned my head to listen.

"I must say, Herr Rinieri," said the German, "this second bottle is good brandy. Where did you get it?"

"My grandfather," Rinieri said. "He brought back three bottles from Italy seventy years ago. They're only for special occasions, and the last one is for when the rodent's finally dead."

"I'm glad my news was to your liking," the German said. "My führer is looking forward to proceeding with the plan."

My eyes widened and I dared to inch a little closer. Führer! This man was a Nazi. A real live Nazi.

"And old Adolf's agreed to my terms?" Rinieri asked.

"Yeah," the German said. I could hear the disapproval and anger in his voice at his nation's leader being referred to as 'old Adolf.'

"That's what I like to hear," Rinieri said. "You've made me a very happy business man,

Mr. Braun. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got other investments to make."

I heard them both getting to their feet. "Just one more thing, Herr Rinieri," the Nazi—
Braun—said.

"What is it?"

"My superiors are worried that your idea of keeping Achille Giovanni alive compromises our interests. What if he tells his story?"

I snuck another peak and saw Rinieri put a massive hand on the Nazi's shoulder. "You leave Frances' killer to me. He's the main reason I'm doing this, so if you want me to help you 'murder America' as you put it..." He leaned in close and I could barely make out what he said. "Stay away from him."

"Just see that he's not a threat."

With that, Braun showed himself to the door. I stayed frozen in place, processing what I had heard. The murder of Frances Victors was solved. Just like that. I should be happy. But murder America? What did that even mean?

Slowly, I crawled backwards. Detective Braker needed to know about this. Maybe Candace could stop whatever mad scheme the mob and the Nazis had cooked up by blowing the whistle on it in the *Times*.

All of these thoughts and possibilities streaked across my brain as I desperately searched for a way out that didn't involve me dropping in on any gangsters. But if I thought belly crawling forwards was bad, then backwards had to be one of the hardest things I'd ever done. Harder than when I tried to catch a squirrel with my hands when I was eight.

After my jacket got caught a good dozen more times and I accidentally kicked my heel into the metal roof above me, causing the whole shaft to rumble like an East Tennessee

thunderstorm, I found a spot that I think might have been near where I started and jumped down, landing in a crouch.

Behind me a maid screamed.

I tipped my bellboy hat to her and said, “Ma’am.”

She looked like she might start yelling again, so I bolted for the stairway. If I was going to make sure no one murdered America—and anything that implied—I needed to survive the hotel and solve my next case: why was Frances Victors was killed? Whatever that answer was, one thing was certain. I’d gotten myself into more trouble than any Tennessee farm boy ever should.

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VITA

Jacob Irwin first fell in love with writing when his fifth-grade teacher taught him that it was more than a homework assignment. It was about telling a story. From then on, Jacob began filling notebooks with character ideas, story concepts, plots, new places, and backstories. After writing several novel-length works as a teenager, he decided to pursue creative writing in college, and in December of 2014, he earned a Bachelor's Degree in English from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. However, upon graduating he realized he missed the feedback his stories received in creative writing workshops, so in the Fall of 2016, he moved south and enrolled in the English graduate program at The University of Tennessee, Chattanooga. For the last two years, he has grown under the guidance of the English faculty at UTC, and he is confident that their lessons have prepared him to enter the workforce and face the next phase of his life.