

TWO BIRDS



The smell of urine slapped him first thing. Just hours old, but not near foul enough to leave a noticeable grimace on that face so unaccustomed to expression. Orwell said by age fifty everyone has the face they deserve. Ed Thomas had earned his early and paid extra for it.

“Same everywhere,” Edward thought. *“At least this isn’t fetid...not like Portland...not some soon-dead street sot. This was left by a healthy twenty-something, caught-short and give-a-shit drunk.”*

Just hours old, and still a visible stain on the door jamb, the hinge jamb, knee-high and down, then running sticky, out a bit from the left side of the stoop, and down again, onto the drizzle-soaked sidewalk a step below. The rivulet had pooled against a shoe in the middle of its travel across the stoop, leaving a partial outline as it diverted out a bit more to the center. But drunken unsteadiness had mooshed the tread signature nondescript. No other footprints presented themselves in this little mess...*“surprising considering the number of people must be up there now”*.

“His first step must have been backwards, stumbling down. The concrete’s wet now...?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Edward muttered, looking up at the entry alcove’s soffit as he pulled on a rubber glove. Four foot square of dusty plaster with a light fixture far left-center, circa 1930, antique globe missing. Stretching his five-ten frame to its limit on tippy-toes, careful not to brace himself on the inside walls of the alcove, he could just reach the bottom of the bare bulb with the tip of his

finger. The bulb was loose, flickering on and off again when he touched it. Looking down at his feet he had narrowly missed stepping in the pee...and only because he knew it was there.

"This might matter," still lost in thoughts half-aloud.

Detective Thomas backed off the stoop and walked the downtown half-block again to verify what he hadn't noticed when he first passed. None of the recessed entries to the second floor lofts had recently been used as a urinal. None except the victim's. Each of others, five in all between the street corner and the alley, had a soffit light burning bright even though it was after 10 AM.

"Always on...?"

Back at the 517 alcove he sniffed at the lock jamb and the side walls, assuring himself this light hadn't been out for very long. Edward was careful where he put his hands and knees, though not at all conscious of how silly he looked crawling around in his corduroy's and leather-elbowed tweed jacket.

Noting the smudges in the dust high up on the door head trim, *"left-handed...?"*, he swung open the loft's entry door, as ready as he ever was to face the inevitable crowd upstairs. The old, wood framed door, beveled glass amazingly still in place and unbroken, pulled with it the heavy, acrid odor of ginseng. This smell pissed Edward off.

Only his few close friends would have noticed his jaw suddenly set rigid and his expression go intently, strictly, placid. And every one of them would have remained alert and guarded until Ed Thomas finally said whatever it was he had to say.



"Hi ya, Tommie."

"Good morning, Frank." The 'Frank' at the end was slowed, to let Frank know, again, Ed still didn't want him using that nickname in front of everyone. But it wasn't said mean. Ed was well aware the only un-begrudged respect he was given by all those in the room listening, channeled through his good friend, Frank Layton.

Captain Frank Layton, probably the most respected and well-liked man on the Wichita Police Force, had hired

his old high-school buddy as a consultant on a tough case eighteen months before, right after Ed left Portland in disgust. And now, Frank surely the main reason, Ed Thomas was a permanent 'floating' detective with the department, and a sometimes consultant for the county sheriff as well. Detective Thomas was called in only when a case was especially enigmatic, or whenever Frank thought something seemed 'hinky', his favorite euphemism for that gut-feeling of experience. This free-wheeling status gave Ed a distinction most in the department wanted or needed to consider unearned.

"What's up, Eddie?" Frank saw Ed's jaw right away.

"Where is she?"

"I sent her away already. CSI's sending another crew. Be here in ten."

"She's tainted the whole scene...again."

"I know, I know: 'another hippie love-in fog'. I had to give her one more chance, Eddie, but now...no more."

"Good...and a pity. Did you see the pee downstairs?"

"Yeah. That important?"

"I don't know yet...yeah, maybe. Depends on what you have up here. Walk me through it?"

"The victim is Melanie Doss, 26, single, receptionist. Lived here seventeen months, with a boyfriend off and on the last eight. No criminal record beyond traffic citations. Her family's pretty clean too. Boyfriend's Tristan Barker, 24, single, bartender. He's...well...he called 9-1-1, at 3:44 AM. I had the call forwarded to your voice-mail, you'll know why when you..."

The rest of Frank's sentence was lost to their shuffle through the bedroom doorway. They had walked the length of the long, narrow shotgun loft while he spoke, and straight on down the short hall which was just big enough for the bathroom and bedroom doors. The bedroom was empty except for the demure, granny-night-gowned body on the floor, and the blue-jacketed man leaning over her with a camera. This surprised Ed, the outer room had half-a-dozen officers milling around...*"and the new scene-team isn't even here yet."*

"Hi, Bert. You know Detective Thomas, right? What do you see so far?"

“Yeah, hi Ed. Captain. Well...first off, I don't see any signs of rape, violent or otherwise. Still has her slip-on slippers...on...even? Anyway, nothing stands out on her upper torso either. There are gripping bruises on both her upper arms, heavy fingertip-marks to the back show she was grabbed from the front. The choke marks are from the front too, and looks like a lot of force used, too much...? Anyway, I'm guessing I'll find her larynx smashed up pretty bad, crushed, from some body weight pushing down on the stranglehold.”

Ed mumbled something about the finger-marks and knelt for a closer look at her left arm.

“Huh? Oh...yeah, they are unusual. Pristine on both her arms, and her neck too, none of the finger-bruises are widened from doubling-up. She was grabbed once and squeezed hard, no struggle left in her...?”

Bert took another picture, then gently lifted the whiff of mud-brown hair away from her right cheek and the just visible bruise it partially obscured. After a couple more photos he rolled her head right and immediately continued shooting the newly revealed wounds from different angles.

“So...a blow to the right jaw, you saw, and this one to the left eye. These don't seem consistent with the marks on her arms and neck. A lighter touch, tentative, no lacerations with either. The blood is, so far, entirely from there on her head. Hell of a blow. See the grey matter? Help me roll her a little, will ya Captain? There, under the shoulder, about eighty degrees. Yeah, hold there...great.”

The back of her body was free of bloodstains, any other signs of trauma. All three men saw the small chunk of black plastic under her at the same time. Bert continued shooting pictures then reached for his tweezers and a small manila envelope. The Assistant Coroner's past experiences with Detective Thomas caused him to hesitate until given the go-ahead. Seeing the body position had already been taped, “...*she is good, pity she has to smell to high hea...*,” Edward nodded his approval.

“What is that, Bert?”

“Striations on the outside, grooves on the inside...like a screw-on cap. From the size of this piece, radius of the curve, I'd say...flashlight?”

“Frank?”

“Yeah, me too. ‘Bout the size of a squad car issue. Four D-cells make a deadly club.”

“This one’s hard plastic though, drugstore, or it wouldn’t have shattered.”

Captain Layton lowered the limp body back to the floor, careful to keep her hair from falling into the blood sop again, then stood up with Bert and his good friend Eddie. The three of them instinctively, respectfully, pausing to take this world’s last look at the young woman. Once bagged she became the corpse...to some, just the latest.

Melanie Doss, probably Mel to most of her close friends (Bert had known a Lanie in college), was pleasant looking, or would have been yesterday. Not short, not tall either, and not quite plump. Just the average girl you see on the street. Somebody’s kid, maybe still somebody’s grandkid, and so, to these middle-aged men standing over her, so much more squandered.



Frank called Eddie in on this one because several pieces of information scattered around the apartment were at least as puzzling as the autopsy results turned out to be, when they confirmed Bert’s suppositions about the victim’s bruises. Pieces to the puzzle incongruous in their presence or their juxtaposition...‘hinky’.

There was no evidence of a struggle anywhere, nothing ruffled, nothing riffled either. The place looked ready for company, or neat-freak ready for bed. The front door was supposedly found unlocked by the boyfriend, and the dead bolt did show signs of jimmying, but most likely from the inside. The bedroom fire escape window had obviously been forced open from the outside, but its glass was then, or before, broken outward, some of it crushed under foot on the outside landing. A couple of large shards from the window were found inside as well, below the low wooden sill, but too close to the wall to have fallen there naturally.

“I’ll finish up with the boyfriend in the other room and get rid of the rubbernecks. Let me know if you want to talk to him here, Eddie. Otherwise I’ll have him taken to the station and held for you there.”

“Okay...Frank...yeah, thanks...”

Edward was already lost in his first mental reenactment of the crime, hoping to find whatever would make sense of all the extra evidence. He normally wouldn't talk to a suspect at a crime scene, too much information laying around to help them concoct a story. *“Know the scene yourself, better than they can remember, use it against them when they try to lie about something.”*

“...yeah...maybe, I'll...”

Detective Thomas usually worked mumbling into the small tape recorder he carried in his left jacket pocket. Edward, deep in thought, stopped often to revise, rethink, or reiterate what he saw and felt as he moved around a crime scene. The transcriptionist he finally settled on as good enough found his recorded observations and comments quite often bizarre, sometimes crazy, and the most interesting part of her job. Lois always followed one of Detective Thomas' cases to the end, reading every report, log, and note-scrap in the file, hoping to understand how his mind tripped and stumbled so effectively.

Bert waited with the body while the new CSI team waited in the hall, all waiting for Detective Thomas to finish with the bedroom. The Assistant Coroner had to stay present until the bag was zipped shut and sealed, and he couldn't call for the stretcher until CSI was finished. After an interminable ten minutes of watching the detective stand here and there in the small bedroom, peering occasionally at surfaces through the not-so-small magnifying glass he used instead of bifocals, Bert was relieved when Ed finally turned toward the door.

“Okay, yeah, come on in. Thanks for waiting...Officer James, isn't it? Hello.”

“Good Morning, Detective Thomas. Find anything you want us to look at special.”

“Couple, yes. Get me a good photo of that round depression in the carpet, there between the bed and the nightstand. Size and depth, you know. Print and bag those sneakers under the bed...look out of place, don't they...and that glass there under the window sill. Also, check for glass on the soles of all the shoes you can find in the apartment...there's a couple pair on the front stairs. Looking for a match to the glass out on the fire escape, of

course. But first, check the bottoms of the boyfriend's shoes, and then...either way I guess? Yeah, either way...tell Captain Layton I don't want to talk the kid here, so they can take him on in. Let me know right away about his shoes, though. Okay? Thanks."

Ed slipped into the bathroom for a quick look around while accessing his voice-mail and the 9-1-1 call. Also to hide awhile, avoiding the outer room until Frank had a chance to clear the hubbub. The door had been closed when he passed earlier, probably because the room smelled strongly of puke...

"...and ginseng!" Ed was careful where he stepped and turned on the exhaust fan with a gloved knuckle, not able to stomach the combination of odors. *"The boyfriend's mess? From what he saw...or what he did?"*

Most 9-1-1 calls are either hysterically incoherent or dead calm. Tristan Barker's was both. Mixed in with the usual frantic business of getting help were short, quiet comments, like movie flashbacks fading in and out over the ongoing scene:

"...I'm so sorry..."

"...he's gone and killed her..."

"...I shouldn't have..."

"...why did I torment..."

"Excuse me, Detective. Captain Layton's asking for you. There were no glass particles on the suspect's shoes. He's been taken away."

"O...kay," Edward said, lost in the moment of call, bloody love on the floor not breathing, smell of dinner and alcohol in his nose, and the taste too, clutching at the only sane reality available, pressed close to his ear but still so far away. Then, shaking free, Ed gave a "yeah...thanks" to Officer James, along with a smile to give Frank later. This piece certainly was just as messy with extra information as the rest of it.

"There it is...or isn't, I guess. Have CSI photograph the contents as they are, then dust them and the drawer."

Frank was out in the big room, in the kitchen nook, leaning over an open drawer with the privileged young officer of the day. Captain Layton always worked a crime scene by dictating his thoughts to newest member of the

force who happened to be present, encouraging them to share their own observations and impressions along the way. Later at a precinct computer, Frank would sit with them, working up his, their, notes and report together. It was his way of teaching, sharing himself and his experience. His way of staying fresh, too.

“And up here on the counter, maybe used it for support like I almost did. Hey, Tommie. Look at this.”

Ed was already looking over Frank’s shoulder. The drawer was neatly half-filled with emergency supplies. Candles, matches, a couple mini-mag flashlights, and spare batteries...several triple-A four-packs and two D-cell double-packs. The gaping hole in both the arrangement of the drawer, and the list of the items in it, was the obviously missing power-mag flashlight.

“Lately she’s been keeping it next to the bed, on the floor...within reach.”

Frank looked up grinning at his grinning friend, neither at all surprised the other was right there with them. They had always been this way together, in any endeavor, like a couple of joyful boys loose in a hobby shop with pockets full of Christmas cash. Both hurrying toward the same end of the same aisle from different directions.

“Comes as a set, doesn’t it, Eddie? Two little ones and the big-boy in question?”

“Yeah...pretty expensive. Would have been the same brushed metal, yellow to match those two.”

“You found it in the bedroom?”

“No, missing there too. Better have a look for it before we question the boyfriend.”

“Add that to your list?” The direction/question was an unneeded tutorial, since the attentive young officer was already scribbling away. “Detective Ed Thomas, Officer James Morton. Jimmie, isn’t it?”

Even so befuddled by the looks of childish glee on the faces of his boss of bosses and the strange but wondrous Detective Thomas, Officer Morton still managed to show his metal: “Yes sir, but Jim is better....Captain.”

“Ed is best for me, Officer Morton...Jim,” nodding his handshake since both men were gloved. Ed said this without his earlier emphasis, but followed it with a

conspiring glance at Frank. "Who interviewed the neighbors? Anybody see or hear anything?"

Since the detective was still looking at him, Officer Morton started to answer: "Yes sir...Ed, I did. A Mrs. Watk...", but then he hesitated, looking to his Captain for approval. But Frank was, for some reason...?, leaning into the refrigerator he'd just opened. Again the young officer recovered with promising skill: "...Watkins, Alberta Watkins, 76, widower and lived next door to the west for three years. Said there was an argument, nasty back and forth for almost half an hour. About 1AM the boyfriend slammed the front door and soon peeled-out, loud, in his car. Then she heard some muffled banging around about 2:30, and again at 3:30. Then she heard us get here a little after 4:00. I checked, the first squad car arrived at 4:05AM."

"Did you shake down her story? She hear what the argument was about?"

"Yes sir...and no. She was certain about the times and didn't falter on any of the details...but I'm skeptical. These party walls are a foot thick of brick covered with sheetrock," with this Ed headed around the kitchen counter and toward the shared wall, "I just can't see how she could hear anything at all. Anyway, she said it's not the first time they've fought, checking his notes: "not by a long shot," she said, but she mostly "tried not to listen". Said: "A good Christian grandmother doesn't need to hear such nasty nonsense."

Ed started tapping on the wall with his knuckle, sounding the dull thunk of solid brick and direct glued sheetrock, "...*shoddy*." Midway down the wall it changed to the distinct echo of stud construction. After three more drum raps of bone on gypsum, a not-so-small elderly voice rasped at them through the wall:

"What are you doing there? Who's knocking? Who are you, what do you want?"

"Mrs. Watkins?" Ed answered in a party-loud, though not yelling, voice.

"Yes! Who's that?"

"I'm Detective Thomas, Ma'am," Ed started backing away from the wall, keeping his voice at the same level, "with the police department. Can I ask you a quick

question about last night?”

“Yes, of course. About what?”

“About last night, Ma’am.” Ed was in the center of the loft’s big room now, half-a-dozen short steps away from the wall, still talking at the same volume.

“About what?” Mrs. Watkins was talking a little louder herself, and the clink of a water glass on her side of the wall proved she was adjusting Detective Thomas’ volume as well. That age-old expression of ‘the light goes on’ passed over Officer Morton’s face, but Frank and Ed just grinned at each other.

“Mrs. Watkins, Ma’am, have you been having trouble with the electricity lately? Have the lights been going out after dark?”

“No, no, not at all. Electricity is fine, never out, and there’s always lights on. Can’t turn some of them off. Landlord says he’s paying for them, but I bet I am. Why wouldn’t I be...my stoop, my stairwell. Always on. A waste, terrible waste.”

“Ma’am, who changes the light bulbs? Pretty high up in the stairwell, do you change them?”

“No, no, couldn’t if I wanted to. No ladder. Never had to though. Always on, always. Say, what’s all this nosiness about? Who are you again?”

“Detective Thomas, Ma’am, Wichita Police Department. Thank you very much, Mrs. Watkins, you’ve been very helpful.” Ed’s voice had now trailed off to polite conversation level, and evidently it was still loud enough.

“Okay, sure. Any way I can help...though sounds like so much nonsense to me.”

“*Me too,*” Jim thought, but kept it to himself by not looking at either of the older men. Scribbling intently into his notebook with an ear cocked toward them for a clue.

Ed was disappointed the young Officer Morton didn’t ask, he liked sharing his experience and insight as much as Frank. But still, he didn’t offer it up himself. Finally, Frank asked:

“Okay, what?”

“The outside entry light isn’t out, bulb’s just loose.”

“Oh, yeah...huh!”

"Huh?" Jim, of course, wrote this down too.



Ed clumsily extracted his jacket-sleeve buttons from the headset cord, for the third time, and calmly tossed the balled mess of foam, plastic, and wire out the window. With an, "I tried," his often used combination proclamation-lament, Ed went back to shifting gears with his tape recorder in hand, "...not *that* difficult."

"Neighbor, Alberta Watkins, confirms 1AM departure, but Barker couldn't name names for drinking alibi through 3:30. Interviews of the bar staff will have to wait 'til they open later this afternoon. Frank said Barker's record includes a couple of arrests for assault, but only convictions for disturbing the peace...drunken college-boy stuff two years ago. And there was also a vacated restraining order by an old girl friend, same time frame. Officer Morton is running down full files and reports from Riley County to fill in specifics and color. So far, at the least, we have a boy with a temper, and he uses it on others."

"Signal, you dip."

Waiting to enter one of the new turning circles in Riverside Park, Ed watched the third person in a row exit without letting him know their intent. Still, today for a change, he remained in his 'laugh-at-them' mode, probably because he was mostly lost in the case.

"Signal to get on, but not to get off. Perfect."

Lois would transcribe these digressions along with the rest with a half-cracked smile, one of the reasons she was chosen, allowing Detective Thomas to edit out what he wanted. But he seldom did. Wichita drivers were one of his on-going pet-peeves. After so much of his time spent in big cities on both coasts, these indignant, ignorant drivers here were still considered a constant danger to him. Ed usually avoided the park during the lunch hour, since this, his short respite through nature, was their short-cut back to work. "*It needs to be said by someone.*"

"The supposed stalker, and Barker's suggestion for a murderer, is Robert Granger, 55, self-employed architect. No priors...for anything, not even a traffic citation for twenty-some years. Honorably-discharged vet, too...one

stint in the Air Force. This...citizen...was hit from the rear by the victim a couple of months ago. He was stopped at a light, she was cited with inattentive driving. Barker says he's seen Granger several times since, near the Doss loft and around the hotel where Barker works. Says he'd given Granger some lip at the accident scene and in a returned letter, and had flipped him off once in front of the loft. After that he was pretty sure it was Granger he'd seen, several times in a plain dark sedan, rather than the green pickup Doss hit in the accident."



"Excuse me. Is this where Robert Granger lives?" Ed had just pulled in behind a small pickup matching the accident report in front of him on his laptop screen. A rather buxom middle-aged woman was starting to knuckle tap one of the duplex's screen doors, but stopped with a flirty smile for Ed as soon as she saw him.

"Bobbie? No, there, next door. Who are you?"

"Detective Thomas with the Wichita Police."

"Really. Something wrong, officer? Is Bobbie...okay?"

"Yes, fine. I'm mainly just following up on his accident," pointing to the obviously injured little green pickup. "Do you live around here?"

"Why yes, Detective Thomas, that building there. West apartment. I'm Cynthia Lee. Eh...'mainly', you say?"

"Well...yes, and another incident, last night. Mister Granger might have been a witness...downtown."

"Oh, I doubt that, quite the homebody, he is. And keeps himself 'home-alone' too. Pity...though he's pretty nice about it. Anyway...never goes out much at all, except for his recent health-kick walks. Truck's always right there, especially at night. That's his door. He's home now, of course."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Sure thing, Detective Thomas...anytime. You need anything else, you just let me know. I'm right over there if you need me...Detective."

Ed took the porch steps two at a time while looking distracted by fumbling in his pockets. It was a wonder he didn't fall trying to make his getaway. Forty to fifty

something women scared the hell out of Edward. Especially those quick to bubbling friendly...like this one, mouthing her name so slowly with so much tongue. Very scary.

Pressing the doorbell at Granger's, Ed heard the tapping resume next door, but he was peripherally aware that "Cyn-thi-aaaa" was still smiling him down.

"Yeah, come in, I'm kinda tied up here. Watch the cats. **Don't** let 'em out."

"Mr. Granger, Robert Granger?"

"Yeah. Come **on** in...it's unlocked isn't?"

It was, but Ed first leaned down to look under his reflection in the glass panel and through the screen below, to see what he'd be getting himself into. A bearded man, graying but not looking nearly fifty-five, was sitting on the couch trying to extricate himself from a mess of wires and computer equipment. Several open boxes were spread around him on the floor. Several cats spread around in and on the boxes.

"I'm Detective Thomas, Wichita Police Department. Can I ask you a couple of questions?"

"Really," Granger stopped fighting his snare, "...huh. Sure, sure, come on in, will ya? Billie! Damn it!"

Right at the end of Granger's 'Billie!' two paws hit the door hard, claws through the screen and nose high to Ed. The cat's head pressed between them...suddenly pushing out the nylon screen mesh toward Ed and very close to his face.

"Damn it!" Ed's simultaneous exclamation was accompanied by his half-drawn revolver, but he recovered quickly. "Whoa...big kitty," to get up head high with Ed, even leaning over, the cat was still more than four-feet stretched out, "...is it safe?" A knee-jerk cat owner's joke to a cat owner. Evidently Ed's voice met approval because Billie then disappeared from view.

"Ha...yeah...come in, quickly, please."

Careful to keep his legs together, Ed slipped through the door he opened only partially, expertly pulling it shut behind him despite the resistance of the closer. Sure enough, another cat meowed a complaint with her aborted dart through the opening.

"Thanks for stopping her...Edna...be good." Granger

was again shuffling himself free of the stuff around the couch and pointed to the straight-back chair by the door. Edna remained at Ed's feet, very much in his way, so he shrugged and sat down. Since Granger was already disadvantaged by his tangle, Ed jumped right into it:

"Mr. Granger, do you know a Tristan Barker?"

There was a small hesitation of recognition but the answer was: "No...I don't think so. Why?"

"How about Melanie Doss?"

This name straightened Granger upright on the edge of the couch, then settled him back into it and turned him slowly toward Detective Thomas. "Yes...and the other is the boyfriend, isn't he? Why? Why are you here? What's happened?"

"How do you know them?"

"I was in an accident. She rear-ended me, while I waited at a stoplight...nearly three months ago. But surely you know that already. What's happened? Please tell me why you're here."

Granger's demeanor had changed, he looked wounded, easily fifty-something now. He had also leveled his gaze directly at the bearer of this new beating, shifting his posture to wait. Ed knew he couldn't work it any longer:

"Melanie Doss is dead."

"Oh my God. I was afraid...what happened."

"She was killed."

"By whom...I mean, how? When?"

"Tell me what's on your mind, Mr. Granger." Edward thinking: *"...the 'who' had come first..."*

Granger sighed, then slowly leaned away toward the far end of the couch. When both his hands disappeared over the edge, Ed stood up fast. But seeing only file folders on the side table, he sat back down without Granger's noticing his second reach for his weapon. Granger handed the detective four typed sheets, stapled two and two.

"I knew I should have warned someone."

Granger bent over slightly, defeated, leaning with his elbows on his knees, staring down at the floor. Ed quickly read the two page-and-a-half letters. The cat Billie had

sensed something wrong and jumped to his owner's side on the couch, purring loudly, looking for assurance.

The first letter was to Farmers Insurance Group, telling a collision adjuster that, because her damage 'estimate' was a thousand dollars low, she was either terrible at her job or her job title should be changed to reflect what she was really doing to people. Ed carefully didn't grin at "...your karma, and society as a whole, would surely be better served if you found a different way of making money." The letter went on shortly describing further action Granger was taking with the state insurance commission.

The second was to Doss. It was passive, almost apologetic, explaining why Granger just couldn't let it go without explaining what he'd been through since the accident: How her insurance company did her business, forcing him to claim on his own policy to get a fair settlement and so costing him his deductible up front and maybe increased future premiums. The half-dozen doctor's visits for neck and back pain, the time spent having x-rays taken, the worry, and the awful side effects of a steroid shot. It ended with a plea for safer "attentive" driving, please, and Granger's hope she would share all these consequences of their "fender-bender" with the young man who came to help her at the scene. It was a nice note. The careful wording a little pathetic here and there, but not at all aggressive or threatening.

Edward looked up at Granger, who hadn't moved and was still looking down at the carpet, but had somehow managed to placate his cat. The living room was dead quiet now. At Ed's slight movement and rustle of the papers, Granger turned his head slightly, still without completely looking up, and said:

"Yeah, on the back."

Both letters were slightly waded and smoothed. Deeply indenting the back of the latter was a crookedly scrawled, hand-written response:

To, **Robert** Granger

This is Robert Granger. you your letter and **you** wrote it. **Feel** free t#o never write us **again!** You amu#se me with your lies + your medical non-sense. I feel you are trying to recieve amounts of money **that** are not owed to you. Let

me explain who I am. My **Name** is Tristan C. Baker. I ~~#~~will **not** allow your to take adv~~#~~antage of my insurance agency or **Myself** + my Partner. Game **ovr**. To persue your selfish + stupid **escepage** makes Me laugh. For you too~~#~~ think our agency or ourselves will give in to yours crys for help makes ~~#~~me laugh. **If** you dont mind. Never write us again or I will make you **look** like a fool in the court's of Law. Some is said about **those** who ~~#~~represent Me. **Thank You ###**

The signature was an angry illegible mess, with the 'i' and middle initial dotted so hard it punctured the paper.

"What did you do after you received this?"

"What...Oh. I got angry. Those letters were my civil way of saying: 'I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore.' You know, like in the movie. But he shot back at me: 'You'll take it and shut up about...or else!' So I got angry, sad and angry."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. I sat on it for awhile. Overnight. Then I reread it and I kinda got scared. I was afraid he wasn't just young and stupid, or just a some kind of drunk. I began thinking he might be a little crazy, maybe dangerous."

"From this alone?"

"No, no. Not just that. Right after she hit me, minutes after, he showed up there, right up in my face. Chasing me around screaming and cussing, vile, fists doubled. Acting...well, crazy. And he wasn't even in the wreck."

"There was a fight?"

"No, I kept moving away, even though he kept coming. But I finally...I had to puff up my chest and stand ground...give him something else to think about. Then he backed off."

"He wasn't with her in her car?"

"I think she might have been talking to him on her cell phone...when she hit me, 'cause he showed up so soon. Plus he was acting like he heard some of my own cussing right after. I feel bad about that...I wasn't myself. I apologized to her later."

"It's the adrenaline makes us react strongly in

situations like that.” Ed was a pretty good interviewer, coaxing extra detail whenever he could.

“I suppose, but she did bring some of it on herself. First thing she said, pointing up to the light, was: ‘It turned green...you didn’t go.’ Like it was my fault she hit me! The gall. ... Anyway, I really lost it at that, for at least a couple of ugly sentences. I wasn’t myself at all.”

“That happens quite often. How bad was it? Did you get threatening?”

“Oh, no...I don’t think so. I got pretty nasty...demeaning...in the crassest language possible. I guess that can be threatening? I don’t know, I never approached her, if that’s what you mean...I was pretty bad, though...but the look in his eyes was absolutely scary, like he wasn’t...I don’t know...like a *person* wasn’t even in there.”

“Is that all that happened?”

“He started up again, once more, before the police arrived. But when I told him to: ‘leave me alone, I’ve just been a car wreck,’ and stood my ground again, he did. Then, when we were all done with the forms and let go by the officers, I went over to her to apologize, like I said, for cussing and getting mad. She was crying, sobbing, and looked really scared...nice to me though, sincerely sorry, I thought. But he still looked fuming angry. And cowed too, like the officers had given him a talkin’ to.”

“So what did you do...about this response, I mean?”

“Nothing. I thought to write her father, warn him for his daughter’s sake. I had his name and address on one of the insurance forms. Figured if I was a father I’d want to know something like this about my daughter’s boyfriend. But then I thought I might start something else with another letter, since the one had gone so bad. I let this idea let me be lazy, selfish. Did that get her killed? What happened? Tell me. Please.”

“We haven’t determined what happened yet. Still investigating. Have you seen either Ms. Doss or Mr. Barker since the accident?”

“No...no, wait...yes, him. Once. Why would you ask me that? Why are you here?”

“Collecting background, as they say. Eliminating

possibilities. When did you see Mr. Barker?”

“Day or two after I got the letters back. I was driving downtown, around lunch, saw him out in front of their place. He acted just as crazy then.”

“You know where they live?”

“I did at just that moment. The address was on all the forms...517. I was driving on Douglas and happened to remember, so I looked for which one exactly. He saw me looking before I saw him. Came running into the street after my truck, flipping me off. Screaming and cussing again. I’ve used 2nd Street ever since. He scares me a little, what he might imagine to do. Besides, I didn’t completely feel good about holding in my impressions. Felt guilty, I guess.”

“And you haven’t seen him since? Or her?”

“No, that’s the only time. Her never! Now please tell me what’s happened to that little girl.”

“She was killed in her home last night. That’s about all we know, so far. And Mr. Granger, you surely understand I couldn’t tell you more than that...even if I knew more.”

“Of course. I’m sorry. This is just awful. I feel so...he did this, didn’t he? He killed her. I knew I should have...”

“You shouldn’t beat yourself up about this, Mr. Granger. Life happens. It’s probably better you did let it go...considering what’s happened.”

“But does she deserve to die just because she’s with someone like him? Picked a thing like that and loved it? Made who he was ok...kept him legitimate?”

“You should really let it go, Mr. Granger. Really. Now, I need to ask you one more thing: Where were you last night? For my report...to close these notes.”

“Oh...of course. Right here. Haven’t been out since mid-afternoon yesterday.”

“I have to ask: Anybody vouch for that?”

“Well, these three were with me the whole time, but I bet they aren’t talking.”

Granger wasn’t smiling along with his half-hearted joke, but Ed let himself grin a little. He was surprised all three cats had stayed with them there in the living room.

Even the female was still acting attentive to their conversation. The third, not yet named, was up on a table and had been allowing Ed to scratch its chin for the last few minutes.

“Anybody else?”

“Well...my nosy neighbor down the way. *She* seems to know all about everything I do. But all she’d be able to say is that she didn’t see me out and about. Her name’s...”

Ed was already writing ‘Cynthia Lee’ in his notebook, trying not to shudder. Then Ed stood, motioning Granger not to get up even though he wasn’t making a move to anyway. A now much older Robert Granger looked too exhausted to do so.

“Thank you, Mr. Granger. You’ve been quite helpful. I’ll probably just call,” thinking of ‘Cyn-thi-aaaa’, “if there’s anything else.”

Granger didn’t reply.



“What was that movie? Network, that’s it. With Albert Finne...no, Peter Finch...” Ed had moved his car to the church lot next door and parked with a distant view through the trees of Granger’s duplex. He had no definite reason for watching Granger, it was just his usual procedure to see what happened right after an interview. He fiddled with his laptop, *“...and that woman in the Condor movie, uh...Faye Dunaway!”* then grabbed his tape recorder while waiting for his network drop-box to open:

“...so all this considered, I’d say Granger is ok unless something else comes up. Even with that remorse of his seeming a little...,” Ed hesitated, refusing to use the word ‘hinky’, “...unusually strong. He did manage to hiccup some anger with it, a little at the finger pointing, and more about the accident. All in all not much, but enough I guess, considering. The boyfriend remains the ‘slam-dunk’ so far.”

The hackney was for Frank, to make him blanch as he read Ed’s notes. There were no ‘slam-dunks’ in their business, they both knew it and both hated the term. But Frank didn’t like it used even in jest, not by anyone in his department, and certainly not in a formal report. *“Maybe someday you’ll stop calling me ‘Tommie’ in front of a crowd...Frank, ol’ buddy.”* Of course, nothing at all about

this case was a slam-dunk, except maybe that someone had tried too hard to make it appear that it wasn't.

Edward didn't read Granger's remorse as being out of character. *"How did that go...? 'Death is a perceptible thing to me now. With definable features.' That movie said quite a bit about being a man middle-aged, didn't it Bobbie."*

Just like he had, Ed thought most men got a little pissed when middle-age fell on them. Of course, a few got more than just a little pissed, and too often pretty much stayed that way until it killed them. A few others went sulking off the other direction, getting all mushy inside and mealy-mouthed about it. But they didn't live any longer for this choice, or any happier either.

"Just haven't found your way to be older, have you Bobbie? Still back and forth. Good start, though, staying away from 'Cyn-thi-aaaa.'"

The scream Ed had installed against regulations on his department issue laptop, screamed...his mail-box was open. Popping up on the screen were icons for three (another scream and now four) notes from young Officer Morton, and a folder labeled: Riley County. Edward clicked the folder first, liking where his head was at the moment and not yet ready for the exuberance of youth.

Tristan Barker was the proverbial piece-of-work punk. A juvenal record was indicated, eight counts, details expunged. The assault reports showed he had a habit of violence and suggested his family had a habit of bailing him out. In both cases Barker had smashed someone over the head from behind.

"You chickenshit little..." Ed thought, *"...at it again?"* The first victim was blindsided with a beer bottle, the second with a glass bar-mug, *"...ouch!"*

Each time the injured party was taken to the hospital...the latter with a concussion requiring a three day stay. But both eventually recanted and refused to press charges after they were released from care. Each had been visited by Barker's family's attorney before they left the hospital, and neither paid the bill themselves, or filed a civil suit. Both refused to discuss if they had received a settlement from the Barker's.

Since one witness statement in each case professed

Barker had acted in self defense, 'disturbing the peace' charges were the only recourse available. The second case also mentioned Barker's resisting arrest and his counter-claim of excessive force, but neither had made it to the prosecutor's desk.

"This guy doesn't just have a temper, he has a problem. Granger's probably right about him being crazy."

The first line of the restraining order sheet evoked a stunned sigh, but Edward wouldn't let himself react further, or stop to reflect, until he had read all of it.

A typical list of domestic violence drivel went on and on, *"...why do women tolerate this crap!?"* The eventual restraining order had multiple violations by Barker, but he hadn't been arrested for any them. Each time the complainant was either forgiving at the scene or complicit by inviting Barker to her home in the first place, leaving the responding officers no choice. After a short three months the twenty-two year old woman went back to court to have it vacated. *"...why? God! Just look what you did to yourself."*

Ed then read the first line again, the young college student's name: "Melanie Doss." Once and recent girlfriend of Tristan Barker, now dead and morgue-bound victim of...?: "Melanie Doss."

Letting this piece of information soak into everything else his mind had ingested that morning, Edward opened the first note from Officer Morton:

"Detective Thomas, CSI never found the missing flashlight. Officer Morton."

The second:

"Detective Thomas, I checked with the building owner and he does indeed check and replace the exterior and stairwell light bulbs. Usually does a walk-through every day. Officer Morton."

"Good work Jimmie."

The third:

"Detective Thomas, the restraining order against Barker was for Melanie Doss. Thought you'd want to know this right away so I sent you the files. Officer Morton."

The last:

"Detective Thomas, I started wondering about who

was the witness for Barker on the assault incidents, so I called Riley County again for the missing sheets. It was Melanie Doss in both cases. Officer Morton.”

“Excellent work...I was wondering t...” Edward stopped-short mid-thought, wide-eyed and open-mouthed for a moments reboot, then grabbed his cell phone:

“Officer James Morton, please. Detective Thomas. (___) Officer Morton. I read your messages and the files. Good work, Jim. Did you happen to ask Riley County if Barker’s files have been requested by anyone else lately? (___) They probably flag a file when they copy it like we do. Give them a call back now, will you, and ask. I’ll hold. (___) Really, last month? Got a name on that request? (___) County clerk is all? Probably means a private citizen. Make some calls and run that name down, will ya? (___) Thanks. Call me right back at this number when you get it. Say Jim, did you get a good look at Barker this morning? (___) No, that’s ok, me neither. Is Frank there? (___) No, no, I’ll call him on his cell. You get on the other and call me right back, okay? (___) Okay. Good work, Jim. Thanks.”



Ed speed-dialed Frank just as he approached the steps to Granger’s porch. His mind was racing back through the interview and short phrases kept jumping up bright and bold as he passed them: *“Does she deserve...”* *“...kept him legitimate?”* *“You’ll take it and shut up about...or else!”* *“...not going to take it anymore.”*

This time the door was closed behind the screen. Rather than ringing the bell again, Edward tapped his knuckles on the screen door just like the busty neighbor had done earlier. Just then, Frank came on the line:

“Hey Frank, it’s Ed. How tall is the boyfriend?”

Granger’s entry door swung open quickly, with a swooping flare of motion, elation. Frank’s: “’Bout five-nine,” hit Detective Thomas’ ear at the same time Bobbie Granger’s big grin hit his eyes...

...hit his eyes dead level.

