

Touch and Go

M. R. D. Meek



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Chance is a fine thing, thought the nurse who had watched wealthy Muriel Probert die in her Fifth Avenue apartment, so she took that chance – along with other fine things – and ran. To Lennox Kemp, Muriel's ex-husband, the string of gambling casinos in Las Vegas left to him in her will seemed a dubious inheritance, bound to bring out the worst in everyone concerned whether they be prevaricating lawyers or predatory gangsters. But the slow legal process is undercut when a body is found in the East River, and there will soon be another victim as the hunt for the missing nurse turns murderous. Kemp would prefer the nastiness kept on the far side of the Atlantic, but when the final showdown comes it is on his own home ground of Newtown, where the local police force gets a taste of gunplay, Nevada-style.

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Touch and Go
A Lennox Kemp mystery

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PROLOGUE

The woman had been beautiful. Now she was dying. The nurse had never seen the beauty nor would she have been greatly impressed if she had. To her this was simply another case of the kind she was supposed to specialize in because, it was said, she had the expertise.

‘I asked for someone trained in dealing with terminal cancers,’ the doctor had said when she arrived from the agency. ‘I understand you have that experience?’

‘Yes,’ she’d replied, adding no more.

They had been standing in the doorway of the bedroom, and he’d looked over to where the patient lay asleep.

‘She insisted she would not be hospitalized ...’ He had sighed and shrugged his shoulders, but not casually. ‘They’d done all they could, anyway. That last tumour’s inoperable, and she wanted to die at home. She does know ... if it’s any help to you.’

The nurse had nodded, making no comment.

‘You’ll only be required to stay a few days. I doubt if she’ll last the week.’ He had raised sad eyes to take in the luxury of the room as if the white and gold furniture, the peach-coloured velvet drapes

at the big windows high above the muted roar of Fifth Avenue might in some measure mitigate the other misfortune. 'Some of the staff have been kept on, and the housekeeper, Mrs Hermanos, has been with the lady for many years. I think you will find the place quite comfortable.'

Following his glance, the nurse had given a half-smile. 'I've seen worse ... Now I must attend to my duties.'

When he left the doctor was pleased by her attitude. With that blank face, those meek downcast eyes, the drab uniform worn without concession either to feminism or figure, he had had his doubts. But he trusted St Theresa's Nursing Agency; there was nowhere else left to put your trust in with these cases.

I mustn't get too used to this, the nurse thought as she unpacked her few personal belongings in one of the spare bedrooms, itself bigger than the whole of her walk-up flat in downtown Brooklyn.

Her duties proved not to be onerous but from habit she performed them well. The doctor called each day, staying no longer than half an hour to chat with the patient if she was awake, less if she was sleeping.

'It's only at night she's restless,' the nurse reported to him. 'Seems it's then she likes to talk. Night duty doesn't bother me, I'm used to it. I get the hours off in the daytime when Mrs Hermanos sits with her but even then I prefer to think I'm still on call ...' If there had been in the nurse's tone implicit criticism of a lay person by a professional, it was muted. The doctor was relieved; Mrs Hermanos seemed devoted to her mistress but the case needed someone with medical knowledge and expertise. The nurse had both.

'So long as the patient is never allowed to be in pain,' he said, anxiously.

The nurse shook her head. 'The dosage you've prescribed has worked well so far, Doctor, and you can rely on me to see she doesn't suffer unnecessarily. When she's awake at night I'm always there and if she wants to talk, then I just let her go ahead. Lots of patients in her condition will ramble on to a stranger if they don't have any family around. We learn not to listen overmuch.'

This was not strictly true. Although it was the nurse's habit to take a book or a magazine into the sickroom to while away the long hours by the bedside, they remained largely unread. Establishing rapport by a sympathetic squeeze of the hand, murmured words of encouragement, and a proper attendance to the most trivial but essential matters of the patient's comfort, these things came naturally to her and in this case had been very rewarding.

For the life that was too early drawing to a close—the patient being only in her forty-fifth year—had been an intriguing one, lived in many places, and as the memories came and went the thin voice would strengthen and take on vigour in their telling. To the nurse it was like trying to follow a film told in flashback, and much more fascinating than skimming the pages of any novel. She'd never been much of a reader, anyway, reality for her providing troubles enough without getting into fictional ones.

Some nights there were outbursts of vanity.

'My make-up box ... over there. Bring it, please.'

And the nurse would softly cream and powder the waxy skin, deftly touch with rose the hollowed cheeks and flick the little eyebrow pencil over the bony arches. Poor soul, she thought, that chemotherapy sure takes away the glamour ...

She adroitly moved the table-lamp before handing over the mirror.

'You look very nice, madam,' she said, brushing the pale strands of fine hair across the high forehead, 'your hair's soft as a baby's.'

'Nonsense, Nurse. I look like a whited sepulchre, and you know it.' The dying woman was no fool but she recognized a good effort when she saw it. 'I'm sorry. You did your best ...'

On the last night they had a fashion show.

'In those wardrobes ...' The voice from the bed was breathless. 'Open them up ...'

The nurse did as she was told. 'What will madam wear this evening?' she asked, entering into the spirit, even as her eyes took in the tussore silk suits, the tweeds and worsteds, the riding habits with their satin stocks, the pretty day dresses and the avenue of formals, chiffons pale as streams of water, dark velvets starred with diamanté ...

'My Mandarin jacket ... the scarlet one with the embroidered dragons. Put it round my shoulders.'

She was sitting up high on the pillows as the nurse slipped the red and gold garment across the bones standing out at the top of her arms.

'I used to wear my rubies with this. They were specially set in gold for me ... Get them for me. They're in the jewel box.'

The nurse hesitated. 'Madam will tire herself,' she said, at her most soothing. 'Perhaps another night ...'

'Not too many other nights ...' But the patient's voice was faint, and her brow had puckered as it did before the onset of pain. The nurse took away the jacket, prepared and administered the relieving drug, and settled the sick woman gently down into fresh cool sheets, pulling away the soiled linen with no fuss as she had been trained to do. Such tasks were of no consequence to her, the incontinence of her patients simply a part of their illness and accepted by her as nature's failure, not theirs.

She replaced the scarlet coat, and closed the wardrobe doors but not before letting her eyes wander once more across the richness stored inside.

She tidied the bedside table, washed up and replenished the water carafe in the adjoining bathroom, then settled herself in the big armchair near the bed with one of her magazines. She yawned. She had not had her usual sleep during the day because there had been some sort of crisis in the kitchen department.

Normally she never went downstairs, everything was found for her on this floor, even her meals being served to her in the room allocated for her stay. Sometimes they were brought to her by Leonie, the maid, a silent creature who the nurse had diagnosed as being subnormal, or by Mrs Hermanos herself. The nurse couldn't make head or tail of Mrs Hermanos. On the surface she was friendly enough, though distant as if the nurse's position was far inferior to her own in the household. As well it might be, for Mrs Hermanos was more than housekeeper to the dying lady, she was much too familiar with her for that, calling her by her first name and, in the nurse's view, taking liberties.

Lunch that day had not arrived at one o'clock as it usually did, nor was there any sign of it an hour later so the nurse had gone down to investigate. She had found the kitchen in a state of chaos, and some sort of row going on between Mrs Hermanos and her husband, José. There was a broken cup on the table, and the remains of a plate on the floor by the sink where it had obviously been thrown at someone's head. The nurse had heard it shatter as she came down the stairs, at the same time as she'd heard the yelling voices. Leonie was nowhere to be seen so the uproar was a private quarrel between the Hermanos but the nurse had witnessed all too many of such scenes in other houses to let it bother her, so she simply asked if she could please have her lunch, pronto, and left them to it. About half an hour later it did arrive at the hands of Mrs Hermanos who looked both chastened and defiant as if daring the nurse to comment. The nurse had heard enough to know what the row was about but saw no reason to pass any remark. It wasn't her business anyhow.

José Hermanos's position on the staff—if he had any at all—was uncertain. The doctor had said that Florence—Mrs Hermanos—had only married him recently and it was she who had introduced him into the household as an English butler. On this point the doctor was sceptical.

'About as English as Hoboken,' he growled, 'and as for being a butler—a Spanish waiter more like! Florence now, well, she's been around our lady for years ... I don't take to her myself but she keeps the place going, and she seems fond of her mistress.'

The nurse would not have put it in such terms. In her view Florence Hermanos had gotten herself a good job and was hanging in there, with expectations. However, she could be relied upon

to run things smoothly enough, the invalid meals she served were both sensible and tasty even for a fast-declining appetite, and sometimes it was only through Florence's coaxing that the patient could be persuaded to eat at all.

'Madam tells me that she and Florence go back a long way,' she remarked, 'so she must have been in her service many years.'

'I wouldn't know.' The doctor had only known his patient since she had arrived in New York for treatment, by which time the disease had manifested itself in a form both rapid and relentless.

'She got no family of her own, then?'

'Apparently not. Nor many friends either that I can see. A firm of lawyers manages her affairs ... It's none of my business, of course,' he went on brusquely, for he was by nature averse to gossip, 'I'm only responsible for what physical wellbeing she has left ... and to see that she dies with dignity.'

'That is my duty also, Doctor,' said the nurse quietly as she showed him to the door.

This conversation had taken place late that afternoon but the nurse had not found it necessary to mention the scene she had witnessed in the kitchen earlier in the day. She felt it was not her place to do so.

Now she relaxed and stretched out her legs to rest on a little tapestried stool. Despite all the running around she'd done in the course of her work her ankles were still slim and she was proud of them. She yawned again, and let the magazine slip to the floor.

She was roused by a restless movement by her patient. She glanced at her watch. She must have been asleep for about three hours. She got up and went over to the bed, adjusted the dim night light and took hold of the hand, stroking the fingers that twitched like captive mice.

'It's all right, madam. I'm here. Are you in pain?'

The pale blue eyes showed no sign of distress. 'No ... I don't think so ... No pain. I feel a bit light ... floating, somehow ...' The sweet voice articulated slowly but clearly. 'What were we talking about earlier? I can't quite remember ...'

The nurse poured some water, held the glass to the dry lips.

'Don't you try,' she said, 'just take it easy ... Are you quite comfortable?'

'Yes, but I don't want to sleep. We were playing a game, weren't we, Nurse?'

'We had a little fashion show with your lovely dresses. It was fun, wasn't it?' Placating, pleasing, the words came easily to her as she felt for the pulse. Reassured, she seated herself by the bed still holding the thin, transparent hand.

'I remember now ... I was going to show you my rubies ...'

'Yes. Yes. In the morning you can show me.'

'Not in the morning. Now. Bring me the case.' There was new vigour in the voice, and a peremptory tone, so the nurse rose and went over to the dressing-table. In a top drawer there was a box—my trinket box, the patient called it—containing a jumble of pieces of jewellery. Sometimes she liked to have it brought to her and she would spread them out around her on the counterpane, trying on necklaces and playing with the rings.

'Not that box. These are only trinkets. I mean my real jewels ...'

'Madam? I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean.' The nurse had turned with the pretty little japanned box in her hands.

The other woman gave a gesture of irritation. 'Everybody knows what's in that box. Costume jewellery, cameo brooches, paste and pearls. I don't mean *them*,' she said scornfully. 'They're rubbish and I don't care who has them.'

The nurse replaced the box and closed the drawer quietly and without fuss as she did everything else. The whims of the dying were nothing new to her. Now she crossed to the bed and laid a cool hand on the patient's forehead. 'Don't upset yourself, madam. Rest now. Such things are of no importance.'

But the blue eyes were wide open and alert.

'My jewels are to me. I want you to listen ...'

‘I am listening.’

‘In the bottom of the wardrobe, right at the end, there is a small suitcase. Will you get it for me, please.’

It is in the patient’s best interests to accede to any request so long as it is feasible. The nurse went over and opened the wardrobe doors. The interior was large enough for her to walk into and this she did, brushing past the silks and velvets, feeling their softness against her face and hair as she passed. She saw the rows of shoes, neat in their wooden trees, strappy sandals and silver slippers, patent-leather pumps and high suede boots. In the farthest corner under a tartan travelling rug there was a small brown suitcase. She hauled it out, and put it down on the floor, for it was heavier than it looked.

She adjusted the starched cap knocked awry in her passage through the avenue of clothes, then took up the case and brought it over to the bed.

‘How very careful you are, Nurse, about your appearance!’ The woman had pulled herself up on the pillows and was watching with amused eyes.

‘Must be the way I’m made, madam.’ She smiled back. ‘Shall I open it for you? It’s too heavy to go on the bed.’

‘No. Not in this house.’ The words came sharply and the effort made the patient breathless. After taking a moment to recover, she went on: ‘It must not be opened in this house ... and you’re not to tell anyone. Just do as I say.’

‘Yes, madam.’ She would only want to touch it, that was all she had done with the other possessions she was leaving. Touching was still important to a dying patient, perhaps a kind of reassurance. The nurse was not one to analyse such feelings, her job simply to obey within her limits, to soothe and make things easy. So now she held out the suitcase in her own strong hands so that the fluttering fingers could stray across the locks.

‘My rubies,’ the woman murmured. ‘The keys are in my purse ...’

‘Yes, madam, but you say you don’t want it opened?’

‘Not here ...’ As suddenly as the strength had come, so it waned. The voice faded to a whisper and the nurse had to bend down to hear the words. At one point she straightened up ...

‘But that wouldn’t be right, madam ...’

‘Right or wrong, who cares? Never mind the papers, they’re not your concern ... And nothing matters to me any more ...’

The patient lay back, exhausted. The blue-veined eyelids flickered, then closed. She gave a deep sigh.

Startled, the nurse threw the case on a chair, leaned over the bed and picked up the hand now at rest on the coverlet. The pulse was slow but it still throbbed, the breathing was even, there were not, as yet, any of the signs of approaching death she knew to respect. Thank God, she said to herself, for a moment there I thought she’d gone. That sudden clarity of speech, the momentary return of vigour, she’d seen them before, often they heralded the end. As she adjusted the pillows and slid the frail body into a more comfortable position, the patient said: ‘I’ll sleep now, Nurse. I’ll sleep easy in my mind ...’

Of course you will, madam.’ She touched the white forehead gently, smoothed back the once-bright hair. Even though she stooped low the nurse could not quite catch the next words. Anyway, they seemed to be in a foreign language. All she heard was: ‘He told me once.... a long time ago ...’



The woman who had been beautiful died the next morning at nine o’clock. She died peacefully in her sleep with her doctor by the bedside. Correct in all she did, the nurse had called him at seven when she saw how things might be.

‘Did she have a restless night?’ he asked.

‘Not more than usual. She talked with me for a time, then she slept. Her pulse had weakened but she wasn’t in any pain. I’d given her an injection earlier in the evening when she’d had some discomfort but when she woke in the night she didn’t complain. After she’d talked a little she went off to sleep again and she was still sleeping this morning when I called you. I thought she might just slip away, and that you should be here ...’

‘Quite right, Nurse. An easier death than I’d feared. She looks at rest. I thought she might have struggled against it at the end ... She wasn’t old, and she must have been lovely once.’

By midday the nurse was ready to leave. There was nothing to keep her. The doctor had been satisfied with her meticulous medical reports, and pleased at the manner of her attendance. He thanked her, said he would be commending her to the agency which had sent her.

She was scarcely noticed in the household that morning. The hushed bedroom with the drawn curtains was no longer her rightful place. The arrival of the undertakers, the comings and goings on the stairs, the incessant ringing of telephones and doorbells, the procession of long-faced men in business suits treading softly through the empty rooms, all these passed her by.

She had packed her toiletries, her nightwear, her spare caps and aprons, her nursing equipment, her books and magazines, in the holdall she’d brought with her when she came. It was a lot heavier now.

She stood in the bare room that had been her home for six days, and was suddenly in a fever to be gone. But she must not appear to hurry. Meeting the housekeeper in the hall, she paused and was careful to express thanks to the staff and her condolences.

‘A sad occasion for you all,’ she said, carrying the bag in one hand as if it was a light weight though the handles were straining her wrist. ‘But in these situations when there is little hope ...’

Mrs Hermanos hardly looked at her. She had other things on her mind.

‘Goodbye, Nurse.’

Then the door was closed behind her, and she walked over to the elevator at her normal pace.

She drew a deep breath. She would get a cab at the corner. It was a long way to Brooklyn but by now she was frantic to get there. The holdall bumped roughly against her knees as if to remind her of what she must do. She had to run ... and run fast.

She seemed to have spent her life running. In hospital training, running with bedpans, running alongside stretchers holding IVs, running for doctors, running to the telephones ... As a girl she’d run away from school, and run away from a home racked by quarrels, then run back to nurse her dying mother. She’d not run to her father when he lay at the last, fighting death with curses, though he no longer had the strength to hit her. She’d walked in stoically and treated him as she would any other patient in her care. When he died he left her nothing, and she took nothing from the battered frame house she’d once called home.

She’d run back to Brooklyn, back to the crowded streets and the squalid apartment block outside which the cab had just halted. She paid off the driver. She’d have to get another one to take her away ... How long had she got? They traced cabs all too easily ...

She ran along the passage, the noise of crying children behind closed doors following her up the worn stairs. Once in her own apartment she didn’t stop. She threw the holdall on the settee which also served as her bed, took out the caps and aprons and chucked them into the cupboard. She wouldn’t be wanting them again, that was for sure. She packed a suitcase with the few clothes she had, sweaters, blouses and skirts, a couple of dowdy dresses, underwear and shoes.

Frantic now, she stripped herself of her uniform and bundled that too into the cupboard. She emptied out the magazine and books, leaving them scattered on the floor. It made the holdall lighter, but not by much. She saw the little case lying snug at the bottom but left it undisturbed. One quick look had been enough ...

Just after she’d called the doctor—it would be ten minutes before he got there—she’d locked her bedroom door, put the case on a chair and sprung the old-fashioned catches, one on either side.

When she raised the lid she had seen the little boxes and the names on them. With fumbling fingers she'd opened the ones on the top. The rubies had glowed at her, even in the pale early morning light, warm against their gold settings, rings, bracelets, brooches ... There were larger boxes further down nestling on a bed of thick envelopes. She looked no further. She closed the suitcase, and put it carefully along the bottom of her holdall. Then she had straightened her cap, smoothed her apron and returned to the sickroom in readiness for the doctor.

Now she stuffed her washbag and a towel on the top along with clean nightclothes. Her other nightdresses she left on a chair. She dressed herself in the one good woollen suit she possessed, and stood still for a brief moment, quivering ... Had she forgotten anything? Did it matter?

By now she was almost out of breath. No time to sit and take stock. She remembered to unpin the nurse's watch from her discarded uniform. Nearly two hours gone already! How soon would they find out and come after her? That Mrs Hermanos, she would know ... The quarrel in the kitchen, José had been shouting something about the 'jools' ... They knew they were there, it was only a matter of time. The agency had her address, they'd soon be in touch with the precinct police ... She must hurry, hurry. She should have called the cab first, then she could have been away quicker.

She dashed for the bathroom.

Keep your head, she told herself. Remember your training.

She began to feel calmer. She opened the door on to the landing, and stood for a moment listening. There was only the sound of squabbling infants. She went back inside, picked up the phone with a steady hand and made the call to a private cab service—not the one she normally used. She said it was urgent; they wouldn't be long coming. She'd be better to wait in the apartment till she saw it in the street below. Although her neighbours on the other floors were used to her sudden departures when she was called out on cases, there was no need to call attention to herself this time.

She grabbed her short waterproof coat from the old wardrobe with the broken swinging door, put her suitcase and the holdall on the settee, and pushed her hair up under a knitted cap. Only then did she sit down to wait.

The minutes ticked on. She'd put the watch in her pocket but she could still hear it. Had she thought of everything? No need to check her handbag; when on resident duty she always carried all her personal papers in it, and sufficient money for emergencies. She could ignore her bank account, there was never much in it anyway.

In a fever of impatience she got up and went to the window. Now surely was the time to stop and think, time even to go back. She'd made a mistake ... She'd never meant to ... She could explain ...

She'd said that to her father once when he'd yelled at her: 'If I catch you stealing again, I'll belt you black and blue ...' 'I wasn't stealing ... she gave me the things ...' she'd blubbered then, but he'd belted her just the same.

Not this time, she told herself savagely, this time I'm not running away with nothing. This is my one chance. She thought of the red and gold treasures, snug in their little boxes ... She saw the taxi-cab, heard the driver hoot. She gathered up her luggage, threw her coat over her arm and walked out of the apartment without a backward glance. No regrets. It was just a place she had been holed up in. By now she should have been able to afford better with all that money from her private nursing ... Money down the drain, she thought with a sudden flash of resentment, for all the good it had done ... Well, she would be rid of them too. There would be no going back.

As she was driven away she saw that the tree on the scrubby patch at the corner was budding green. Spring was coming; it must be a good omen.

CHAPTER 1

It was spring too, in another town, another country. Lennox Kemp looked out of his office window through the gold lettering that said Gillorns, Solicitors, and saw that the darling buds of May were having a hard time of it. He sympathized; he too had just been shaken by a rough wind, presaging change.

‘That’s wonderful news,’ he lied to his secretary.

Elvira beamed at him. She looked in splendid health. He should have noticed.

‘Great, isn’t it? After all these years.’

‘I didn’t even know you were trying ...’ That didn’t seem the right thing to say. ‘I mean, of course, I’m delighted for you and Bill.’

‘He’s over the moon.... What do you mean, Mr Kemp, you didn’t know we were trying? Just because I’m over thirty doesn’t stop me having my first child.’

Kemp hastily put aside his own feelings. That was the worst of getting middle-aged, you got irritable at the mere thought of disruption to routine. He got up, walked round his desk and planted a kiss on her freckled forehead. The colour could still run fast up into her ginger hair the way it had done all the years he’d known her from the gauche girl with ladylike aspirations at McCready’s Detective Agency down in Walthamstow to the self-assured person she had become now, working for him in Newtown.

‘This calls for a drink, Elvira. It’s something to celebrate.’

‘Oh, Mr Kemp, it’s only eleven o’clock in the morning ...’

‘Blow that. I need it for shock.’ He opened the cabinet and took out the sherry and glasses normally reserved for late clients requiring help to unwind.

‘Well, just a little one, then.’ She seated herself primly on the edge of a chair and put her notebook down on the desk.

‘Here’s to you, and Bill. When’s it due?’

‘Not for ages yet. Christmastime. And I’ll go on working right up to the last minute.’

‘Indeed you won’t. I’m not having you running around humping great files up and down the stairs.’

Elvira grinned.

‘You’re quite out of date, Mr Kemp. Everybody these days goes on working when they’re pregnant. I’ll be here at least till November so you don’t have to worry.’

‘Who’s worried? Anyway, it’s high time you had some assistance. I should have had someone in to help you ages ago now we’ve got so much work ...’ He ran his fingers through his thinning hair. ‘It’s just that I’ve got so used to having you around, Elvira.’

‘I’ll be around for a while yet,’ she reassured him. ‘But it wouldn’t be a bad idea if we did get someone in, someone I could train. It’s no good just making do with temps because—’ Elvira hesitated—‘I’m afraid I won’t be coming back afterwards. I know lots of women do but me and Bill, well, we don’t think like that. We’ve waited so long to start a family ...’

Kemp looked at her with affection. Even when he first knew her, Elvira had been an old-fashioned girl for all that she’d been a child of the swinging ’sixties.

‘Of course I wouldn’t expect you to come back. The baby’s going to be the most important thing in your life from now on, and that’s the way it ought to be.’

Elvira picked up their glasses. ‘I’ll just get these washed,’ she said, ‘before your eleven-thirty appointment arrives.’ She was apt to get a little embarrassed when the relationship between herself and her boss verged on the personal. ‘And perhaps next month we might start putting an ad in the dailies ... They have special days now for legal secretaries. Unless you want to promote someone in the office?’

Kemp shook his head. ‘It’s not fair to pinch other people’s secretaries. I’ll leave it to you, Elvira, to pick your successor. But, please—not a dolly-bird!’

‘I told you you were out of date, Mr Kemp. They’re all career women nowadays.’

Left to himself, Kemp contemplated the idea of a career woman, and was not cheered. He would miss Elvira. She was a link with the past although she was never the one to speak of it. Well, he would just have to get used to the fact of her going.

It was not the only shock he was to receive in that month of May to jog him into remembrance of things past. The letter he received a few days later from New York told him baldly of the death of his former wife, Muriel. She had been Mrs Leo Probert when she died, and the solicitors who had been acting for her went on to say that it had been inoperable cancer from which she had suffered for over two years.

For a moment Lennox Kemp could read no further. He was shaken by a sense of unspeakable sadness. As if she was there in the room, he could see her face with its halo of golden hair brushed up in the fashion of twenty years ago, hear her high, sweet, schoolgirl voice, her tinkling laugh ... He got up, pushed back his chair roughly, and went over to the window. The solid blocks of Newtown misted before his eyes, and he saw instead the green canopy of the Forest which had lain at their door, and he was walking with her down a glade between the hornbeams on a summer's evening in another world, another time.

She didn't deserve to end like that, he thought fiercely, not Muriel. She had been so beautiful, so much in love with life, reaching out for its highest peaks and the fast-running excitements that buoyed her up in hopes that would not wait ...

For all she had made him suffer, the ruin of his early career, his forced penance on the wrong side of the law, the long years' endurance, he would never have wished her such ill-fortune as had now befallen her. She had been only a year younger than himself.

His hands were still shaking when he took up the letter again, and read on:

'You may wonder why we have contacted you since there has been no communication, to our knowledge, between yourself and our late client for many years. Something has arisen, however, which we as executors of the deceased's estate find it necessary to bring to your notice. It is, in our judgement, too delicate a matter to be dealt with by correspondence. One of our partners is travelling to London early next month and we are suggesting that he call upon you at the first opportunity to discuss the situation. By that time it is hoped that our Mr Van Gryson will be in possession of all the available information, and he will be able to speak with you in the fullest confidence of your own discretion.'

Kemp read the paragraph once more. He recognized the form of words lawyers tend to use when they want to convey something of importance without actually saying anything at all. He noted that Mr Van Gryson was fairly high up in the list of counsellors attached to the firm; if he was coming all the way to London it either spoke volumes for the 'delicacy' of the matter or, more probably, fat fees for the executorship. Perhaps both. Muriel appeared to have died rich.

Kemp lifted the phone and cancelled all interruptions for the next thirty minutes. Emotions could wait—there would be time enough for those—now he had to think.

No mention of Mr Probert. Leo Probert had been a well-heeled gentleman of sporting instincts when Muriel had married him, but he had not been young. He was a middle-aged American on vacation in London when she met him. He offered escape, and a dazzling future when he whisked her off to Las Vegas where he owned casinos, giving her the entrée to that greater gambling world she had just begun to taste the sweets of, the sugar already on her teeth.

Kemp sighed. One could moralize on that, and denounce sugar as poison to the system, medically and on principle, letting Muriel's addiction sink her without trace. But the facts were otherwise; she had flourished according to report, someone meeting the Proberts in later years having told Kemp she was still a lovely woman and living in style.

The letter ended with the usual expressions of condolence, in this case mere platitudes since neither the writer nor the recipient were acquainted.

Kemp dictated a reply, as carefully worded as Eikenberg & Lazard's communication had been to him, and saying no more than that he would look forward to receiving a call from their Mr Van Gryson whenever he was in London.

Speculation at this point as to the reason for such a visit would be unwise. Certainly at one time Muriel had owed her life to him, it might well be that across time and distance she had remembered him in her will. Then why couldn't her executors simply tell him so without this cloud of secrecy?

Later he would think about Muriel, the light-hearted girl who'd shared that house on the edge of Epping Forest. Now he reflected that to most individuals death was the end of their life's story; to lawyers it was often just the beginning.

CHAPTER 2

Flaming June had run nearly three weeks towards another hot summer when a hearty American voice on the telephone asked if that was Mr Kemp.

'Yes, Lennox Kemp speaking.'

'Dale Van Gryson here. I've just arrived from New York.'

'Kind of you to call so soon, Mr Van Gryson. Your firm told me you would be coming over this month.'

'Wa-al ... Things took longer than we'd anticipated. I'd like to meet with you, Mr Kemp.'

'And I with you. As it appears to be personal, and doesn't involve my firm, I would not trouble you to come all the way out to Newtown. Where are you staying?'

'I'm at the Hilton. It would suit me just fine, Lennox, if we met here. It's a private matter, as you say, and better discussed in civilized surroundings, eh? Could you come in and have dinner with me tonight?'

'That would suit me, Mr Van Gryson.'

'Fine. Fine. And it's Dale. High time you and I got together on this ... I'll have you paged in the downstairs bar around seven. I've gotten myself a pretty decent room in this place where we can talk business afterwards.'

And well he might, thought Kemp when the meeting arrangements had been completed; Eikenberg & Lazard would be paying—and presumably out of the estate of the late Mrs Muriel Probert.

Dale Van Gryson turned out to be as hearty as his voice. He was a large, loose-limbed man with the kind of shoulders that moved separately from the rest of his body as if he could as easily freewheel through a public house brawl as a crowded cocktail-party.

Kemp watched him lope across the carpet of the lounge, and knew him instantly, the wide, welcoming smile, the open palms; the type of outgoing American who would sell you anything from Christian Science to long-range missiles.

Kemp had risen from his seat anyway on hearing his name paged, and now found his hands grasped fervently in the manner of one white man finding another in a jungle. Indeed, Stanley and Livingstone were models of Victorian restraint by comparison, he reflected, as he allowed himself to be piloted to a secluded table.

While drinks were being ordered and brought, Dale Van Gryson continued to demonstrate his joy at meeting Kemp as though he had searched the earth for just such a one as he. There seemed little need to respond save for a muttered, 'Likewise ...'

'You visit London often, Mr Van Gryson?' He eventually managed to interpose the question.

'Dale, please ... Once or twice a year on business. I just love your city.' It was the bestowal of an accolade as well as a hint of part-ownership. The only bit of London Kemp might lay some claim to was the lower end of Walthamstow and he didn't think Van Gryson would care much for it, but he guessed the other man was being expansive to some purpose.

Over dinner they continued to discuss London, and the weather in the streets. They took a stroll through recent Anglo-American politics, probing at the undergrowth of their own political inclinations without either of them breaching the confidence of the ballot-box, like a couple of devils at an ecumenical conference. They talked of the courts and laws of their particular countries, and the rise in the crime figures, of education and the training of the young. Van Gryson made it known that

he had a boy and girl already well set up in careers, they having had the inestimable benefit of a good home and strict upbringing. Kemp had nothing in this respect to offer in return, so confined himself to opinions of a general nature, making sure he had washed and rinsed them out first.

He was vastly amused by the whole charade, and well aware of what was going on. Van Gryson was engaged in the practice of a technique used by head-hunters the world over: getting to know the essence of your man before you swallow him up. Whatever revelation was to come anent the estate of the late Mrs Probert, Van Gryson had been sent to sound him out as to his lifestyle, his character and his likely acceptance or rejection of some dubious proposition which the American would get around to in due course—probably at the cheese-and-biscuits stage.

Kemp wasn't in the least worried. Many people, most of them a good deal less brash than Van Gryson, had in the past tried to discover the inner man of Lennox Kemp, what fuelled his thinking, what made him tick. For all his innocuous outward appearance—chubby verging on plain plump, rather vacant grey eyes and receding hair—his was a secretive, even subversive nature, sceptical to the point of cynicism about the motives and actions of others but reserved in judgement of them. He had found life for the most part to be unfair, and considered that perhaps that was what it was meant to be, though he would not tell a client so, and would do his utmost to achieve justice for them if it was deserved. He had his sentimental side too, vague romantic notions of good and evil, which at times evaded his logic and thrust him into situations where instinct had to come to the rescue of intellect.

Trying to keep at distance his companion's egregious bonhomie, Kemp began to wonder if this might not turn out to be just such a situation.

Van Gryson had a well-used face across which the expressions chased themselves so freely they tended to catch up with each other before the eyes had time to adjust. In fact his eyes were averted, scanning the contents of the sweets trolley, when he finally spoke of the matter he had come so far to discuss and his voice was suitably muted.

'Divorce is a sad time,' he observed sententiously, 'for all concerned ... But of course it must be nearly twenty years since yours. And I understand that you and your ex-wife ... May I call her Muriel?'

Call her what you like, thought Kemp, as he nodded. She's dead and can't hear you. In fact the friendly American habit of latching on to first names did seem vaguely obscene in the circumstances.

'I understand,' Dale went on as he acknowledged a plate of baked Alaska, 'that Muriel and you parted on amicable terms?'

'We did,' said Kemp shortly, giving all his attention to his fruit salad.

It had had to be amicable—a lawyer's word, covering many sins. Muriel had wanted that divorce. She was conventional at heart; she would not have run off with Leo Probert without marriage in view. Her gambling instinct confined itself to games of chance, not real issues.

'I only met her once,' Van Gryson said, 'the first time she came to Eikenbergs—that would be about two years ago. She was a real lady, Lennox, and still beautiful although she was already ill. She'd had a mastectomy out there in Vegas, but they reckoned there were secondaries ... and they had to tell her.'

'I wish I'd known!' The words were out before he could stop himself but as he spoke Kemp knew they were true. Two years ago he'd been in Cornwall and contemplating marriage to Penelope Marsden. They had talked about Muriel then ... He was suddenly struck by the poignancy of people who lose touch with each other, and the loneliness that comes of it.

Van Gryson was shaking his head vehemently. 'She wanted no one told. She'd come to New York for treatment. She'd rented an apartment on Fifth Avenue where she could be near the hospital where she had to undergo operations, none of which did any good. It sure was a bad time for her ... Anyway, she came to us and asked us to handle all her financial affairs for her. Mr Eikenberg and myself she asked to be trustees. You get the picture?'

'She was putting her affairs in order,' said Kemp slowly, 'because she knew she was going to die ...'

Dale was crumpling his napkin. He threw it down on the table, and got to his feet.

‘We’ll have the coffee and liqueurs in my room. And I’ll have another bottle of that claret sent up. You’re not going back to Newtown tonight, Lennox.’

Kemp demurred. ‘I rather thought I was.’

‘Nonsense. I’ve already booked you a room.’

My ex-wife must have left rich pickings, Kemp mused as he followed the American from the restaurant. The man wasn’t a time-waster; he must have felt he had accomplished something during dinner. Perhaps he had found Kemp to be a fit and proper person to have a delicate matter laid before him?

If so, then Kemp was determined to get him to come to the point. The first question he asked when they were alone and comfortably settled was:

‘Is there a will?’

‘I’m glad you asked that,’ said Dale in the eager manner of a Prime Minister about to hedge on a tricky question raised by the Opposition of which notice has been given. ‘Mrs Probert made a will that same first day she came to us. It was properly drawn up, and executed in our presence.’

‘And that was her only will?’

Van Gryson side-stepped the question. ‘Don’t you want to know what was in it?’

‘Only if you want to tell me.’

Van Gryson took a small sip of coffee, and a larger one of Grand Marnier. ‘When Muriel came to us she was in a very emotional state of mind. Don’t get me wrong, Lennox ... It was understandable. The thing was ... You know Mr Probert had died?’

‘No, I didn’t. I’m sure you’re very well aware of the fact that Muriel and I have been out of touch for nearly twenty years. I knew absolutely nothing of her life in America. I gather she had been living in Las Vegas?’

‘When her husband died, you mean? Oh yes, they had a large house there. He owned several of the casinos as well as having franchises in all kinds of things.’

It was clear that the strict upbringing of the Van Gryson offspring, if the father’s influence was anything to go by, would have protected them from the darker underside of American life. Leo Probert was spoken of with some disparagement despite the respect accorded his considerable wealth for all its dubious origins. In a hushed tone Van Gryson described the fortune left as substantial.

‘And it all went to his wife,’ he ended. ‘She got the lot.’

‘That must have been a right turn-up for the book,’ observed Kemp sardonically. Meeting the query in the other man’s eyes, he explained: ‘It’s an English expression. I only meant there must have been a lot of sour faces around. Leo would have had business partners?’

‘He had, and they sure were mad as hell. There was trouble, and I suppose when your Muriel got ill she wasn’t up to handling it.’

‘What sort of trouble?’ asked Kemp sharply.

‘She wasn’t specific. The estate had been settled in her favour by the time she came to us so we’d no part in it. Of course we checked things out with her law firm back in Vegas, and they confirmed everything was hunky-dory for her.’ Dale looked at the expression and didn’t like it much. ‘Except as far as her health was concerned of course,’ he finished, lamely.

Kemp felt it was time matters were brought to a head. ‘So what was in this will she made with your office?’

Van Gryson had his briefcase open on the sofa beside him. He took out a fat folder, extracted a document and handed it to Kemp.

It was a will made in proper form by Muriel Probert, widow, dated March 1987 and running to several pages. Details of the assets in personalty and real estate consisted mainly of business concerns and properties in Las Vegas. Apart from some gifts to various charities, the principal beneficiaries were Preston John Madison and Clive Edwin Horth. At the end of a short list of legatees who appeared

to be women friends or servants Kemp found his own name: To Lennox Kemp, my former husband, in fond remembrance and deep gratitude, my largest ruby necklace in the hope he has got himself a lady more worthy than me.'

Kemp grinned to hide a deeper feeling. 'At least she remembered me,' he said, 'but surely you haven't come all this way just to hand it over?'

Van Gryson put a hand to his forehead. 'God! If only it were that simple!'

Puzzled, Kemp gave the document back. 'I don't see any problems,' he said. 'Who are these two lucky chaps, Madison and Horth? They're described as casino operators. I'd make a guess and say they're the late Mr Probert's partners.'

'And you'd be right, Lennox. Madison—he's called Prester John in gambling circles—he ran things for Leo Probert, and Horth's one of his henchmen.'

'So Muriel was just putting things right with them when she made this will. I don't see anything wrong with that. She'd no family of her own, and she couldn't have children. You knew that?'

'Naturally we inquired as to other possible heirs in view of the terms of the will.' Dale was huffed at the suggestion that Eikenberg & Lazard might not have been thorough. 'She told us she was childless.'

Kemp thought of the operation Muriel had undergone in the early years of their marriage. Just fibroids, the doctor had told them when she went into hospital, but afterwards the surgeon had been uneasy, and a hysterectomy was mentioned. Muriel would have none of it; she had been young then, and hopeful ...

'Well,' said Kemp, 'all these assets were accumulated by Leo Probert. It seems perfectly fair to me that they should go back where they came from. Nice men, are they, Prester John and his pal, Clive?'

'The worst,' said Van Gryson morosely. 'Julius Eikenberg and myself, we both wondered if they'd put pressure on her. Make a will in our favour or take the consequences. We explained the undue influence thing to her pretty thoroughly, Lennox, just to be sure, but she was adamant that she was making the dispositions of her own free will so we had to take her word for it. Perhaps when she'd become ill she didn't have the strength to resist ...'

Kemp nodded. 'That could well be. She'd been threatened by their like before. Poor Muriel.'

Van Gryson sat up. 'I'd sure like to know about that. She said something about it when your name came up. What did happen, Lennox?'

Kemp sighed as he dredged the old story up from where it had lain half-buried for years. 'She ran up gambling debts in London,' he said slowly. 'The kind not legally enforceable. She was told she'd get acid in her face. She tried to commit suicide. I paid them off.'

'She said you put your career on the line for her?'

'You could say that. I embezzled trust moneys. Well, it was an emergency ... and I loved her.'

'You actually stole the money? You broke the law for her?' Van Gryson was staring at Kemp with undisguised astonishment. Eikenberg & Lazard might wheel and deal along the thin edge of legality for profit's sake but they knew their limits. 'Did you go to prison?'

Kemp laughed. 'It was a close-run thing. I sold all I possessed and reimbursed the trust fund just in time. But the Law Society got wind of it and I was struck off for six years ... Don't worry, Dale, I've long since been reinstated on the right side of the law.'

Van Gryson was still shaking his head in bewilderment. 'You did all that for a woman!' he said solemnly. He was silent for some moments as if this revelation of Kemp's lapse had given him food for thought. 'Have another drink, Lennox,' he said at last. 'You're going to need it.'

He's decided to let me in on the secret, Kemp was thinking as he sat back and savoured the good wine. Muriel has probably given that necklace away to some woman friend who had been kind to her, or to a maid down on her luck. Muriel had often had these sudden generous impulses, and she

would act upon them without further reflection in a way that had been both irritating and endearing. It really didn't matter. It was good to know she hadn't quite forgotten his sacrifice ...

'This will—' Van Gryson was tapping it on the edge of the sofa—'would have been fine if Muriel Probert hadn't taken it into her head to make another one.'

It was Kemp's turn to sit up. 'She did?'

'It was all most unfortunate. We're a big firm, Lennox, and a busy one. It's not always easy to keep track of clients ... I'm not making excuses for us ...'

But that's just what you're about to do, thought Kemp, amused. And it's high time you got on with it.

'Julius and I were in Washington on Government contract business for most of April.' Van Gryson put on an air of importance which was not sustainable for long. 'The New York office was understaffed, and there'd been an unexpected late snowfall so that everyone was determined to get home ...' Dale paused to drink, which he did thirstily. 'It was nearly closing time anyway when Mrs Probert came in and asked for either Mr Eikenberg or myself. Well, she was told we were not available by the only professional left in the office, a new recruit straight out of law school, our Miss Janvier. She saw before her a client in obvious distress who wanted help. Muriel apparently said that it was extremely urgent she make a will there and then—mark you, she never said change, she said, make a will—because she was soon going to die. Miss Janvier did what she saw to be her duty—more or less. She drew up the will, which was short, she got Muriel to sign it in the presence of one of the cleaners and a junior, neither of whom knew any more about the firm's business than Miss Janvier herself—and that wasn't much. Our little Miss Janvier had never drawn up a will for a client before, and her law school training doesn't seem to have included how to use a filing system ...'

Van Gryson stopped as his tone turned savage, and he wiped his brow with a large silk handkerchief as if trying to erase any memory of the unfortunate Miss Janvier.

Kemp had listened to all this with a mixture of amusement and understanding. He could appreciate the situation, one not totally unknown to solicitors. Gillorns were small fry compared to the magnitude of Eikenberg & Lazard as evidenced by their notepaper but even the junior staff in the Newtown office were carefully instructed on wills procedure. First, you asked the proper questions, and then, no matter what the client said, you checked. Poor little Miss Janvier had possibly been overwhelmed by her responsibility that snowy evening; she was new, she was eager, and perhaps no one had told her ... She had seen only the emergency, the necessity for action, the woman in front of her was going to die ...

'Go on, Dale, tell me the rest of it.'

'She took it with her.'

'What, the original? The engrossment?'

'If that's what you call it. Yes. Said she wanted it by her. To keep it safe ... Oh, Miss Janvier protested about that but Muriel was adamant. She took that newly-made will away with her in her handbag. Miss Janvier—downright pleased with herself no doubt for the speed with which she'd handled the matter—scribbled the attestations on the copy, and went off on holiday.'

'Not even a photocopy of the original?'

'The photocopying room was locked up by then. Everyone in the office had gone home.'

'So now you have two wills, one superseding the other,' said Kemp briskly, 'but the later one must hold up in law.'

Van Gryson reached for his glass. He drank deeply and refilled it.

'There's worse to come.'

'Don't tell me,' said Kemp, who had already guessed. 'You can't find the new will. You know it was made, you have a perhaps inadequate copy in your office, the client took the original and now it's missing.'

'How did you know?'

‘Happens all the time,’ said Kemp airily. He was beginning to feel the effects of the wine. ‘Nine times out of ten when a client takes an original will from their solicitor’s office it’s gone when they come to die.’

‘You’re a cynic, Lennox.’

‘No, just realistic. How did this one disappear?’

‘God only knows. It wasn’t in her handbag when we looked, and it wasn’t anywhere in that apartment. We’re her executors, damn it, don’t think we didn’t ransack the place. Besides, the staff swear Mrs Probert never went anywhere in the house except her own bedroom and the adjoining bathroom ... She used the same rented limousine every time she went to the hospital, and the same chauffeur. He says she went nowhere else on these trips except for that one evening when she had him stop by our office. And that was only a couple of weeks before she died.’

Kemp sat still for a moment, deep in thought.

‘Muriel took the will away with her,’ he said carefully, ‘and she returned to her apartment with it. She must have had a reason for doing so. She had been happy to let you keep the other one so why would she want to take the new one? Perhaps to show it to someone ...’

Van Gryson shook his head.

‘She was having no visitors at the time. And she never left the apartment again—of that we’re absolutely sure. According to the doctor, her condition suddenly deteriorated—he’d been expecting it and was keeping an eye on her. She could hardly move from her bed. When he advised hospitalization she wouldn’t hear of it, said she wanted to die in her own house so he ordered home nursing to see her through to the end ...’

Kemp pursed his lips.

‘Reliable man, this doctor?’

‘Absolutely. Don’t think we didn’t check.’ Van Gryson was terse.

‘What about the servants and the nurses?’

‘Lennox, you gotta remember we couldn’t go around badgering folk. It was a tricky enough situation for our firm. There was a bit of a time-lapse before we—er—discovered about the second will.’

Kemp raised his eyebrows. ‘How come?’ He felt he might as well slip into the idiom.

‘Well, as I said, Miss Janvier went on holiday that night. Her secretary didn’t get round to doing the filing for a week or two ...’ His voice trailed off.

Kemp could barely hide a smile. So things like that could still happen even in the best-run offices.

‘And in the meantime your firm assumed there was only the earlier will and so took no action?’

‘In the meantime—’ Van Gryson gulped as if he’d swallowed a draught of bitter medicine—‘Mr Eikenberg and I attended the funeral flanked on either side by Messrs Madison and Horth in good black overcoats with velvet collars ...’

Kemp let out a soft whistle.

‘Showing a proper respect as the heirs-at-law ... I can restrain my curiosity no longer, Dale. Indulge it before it bursts out of me. You have a copy of this later will?’

Van Gryson withdrew a single sheet from his folder, and held it out between thumb and forefinger as if it was a leaf of stinging nettle. Kemp reached over and took it from him.

‘OK, OK,’ said the big American. ‘I guess you can stand the shock.’

Then he got up and took his hunched shoulders for a walk round the room like a boxer who has just put his man on the canvas.

It was a simple carbon on flimsy with the name of the testatrix and the names and addresses of the two witnesses written in hurriedly beside the attestation clause. The will itself was brief and to the point:

After cancelling all previous dispositions, Muriel Probert, widow, left everything of which she died possessed to her ex-husband Lennox Kemp, of Newtown, England, in recognition of the great service he had rendered her in the past. It was dated the fifth day of April in the present year.

CHAPTER 3

Lennox Kemp had only just seated himself at his desk the following morning when Elvira brought in the mail. She looked down at him with mild disapproval. 'I waited,' she said, 'because you're late. You don't look very well.'

'If you must know, I've got a hangover, and I didn't get much sleep.'

'Well, if you will go out on the town ...' She put the letters down in front of him. 'Black coffee's what you need.'

Despite two strong cups of it, Kemp still found it hard to concentrate on his correspondence; there were too many other things on his mind. He wanted a clear head, he wanted a second opinion. He thought of Tony Lambert, his most intelligent colleague and an expert on probate, but dismissed the idea. He couldn't talk it over with anyone else, not yet. The last thing Dale Van Gryson had said to him before they parted enjoined confidentiality.

'Give us time, Lennox. Let us get this thing straightened out at the New York end. It's only six weeks since the death, we can procrastinate for a while ...'

'But there's got to be a showdown at some time,' he'd told the American, 'it can't be kept under wraps for ever. Not unless ...' Kemp hadn't finished the sentence, watching the expression on the other man's face.

Van Gryson had said nothing but Kemp grinned to himself now. He knew damned well what was in that astute counsellor's mind—perhaps even in the corporate mind of his firm:

'Unless I, Lennox Kemp, disclaim any interest in the estate of the late Mrs Probert, and no meeting has ever taken place between myself and any of her trustees ...'

It had gone unsaid, and might very well remain so, but the very idea of himself running a clutch of dubious gambling dens in Las Vegas was enough to make him choke over the breakfast table the two of them had shared in the hotel that early morning.

They had discussed the matter more soberly than on the previous night, Kemp probing for information, Van Gryson prevaricating and, in Kemp's view, revealing the depths of his ignorance. Kemp had been struck by the difference in their approach. The American's main concern was how to keep his firm out of trouble, which meant carrying out the duties of trustees and executors while keeping the snake in the basket by sitting firmly on the lid. Kemp, who was often ruefully aware that he'd have made a better detective than a solicitor, was more taken up with the investigation possibilities.

He had been careful, however, to lay fairly and squarely before Van Gryson his own view of the position at law.

'I don't know whether it's the same under the United States legal system,' he'd said, 'but here in England a will contained in a copy or even a completed draft may be admitted to probate on an application to the Court if proper evidence as to its being made can be adduced, supported by the necessary affidavits—in this case those of Miss Janvier's and the two witnesses.'

'Madison's lawyers would counter that by saying how could they be sure it was Mrs Probert. We haven't even got a photostat copy showing the signature.'

'Sworn statement by the chauffeur confirming time of the visit to your office,' said Kemp promptly, 'along with identification of the deceased from photographs shown to Miss Janvier. I think we can discount any suggestion of an impostor should they bring it up.'

'What about evidence of the existence of the second will after the death?'

'That's where the crunch will come ... I have to admit it's crucial to any such application on a lost will to the probate courts in this country.'

‘The other side would have a field-day on that one,’ Van Gryson agreed gloomily. ‘They’ll say Mrs Probert had second—or even third—thoughts. She destroyed the new will after she got home.’

‘Could she have done that without someone on her staff knowing? You say she could scarcely rise from her bed ... Even torn-up paper has to be dealt with.’

‘She could have burned it.’ Van Gryson was by now entering into the spirit of playing devil’s advocate; presumably it made a nice change from government contracts.

‘Do you know if she smoked? She used to when I knew her. It’s unlikely, of course, in a cancer patient but even doctors indulge such foibles when all hope has gone. How else would she have a lighter or matches at her bedside?’

Van Gryson had begun to take notes. He looked up.

‘I’ll make inquiries, Lennox. As to her flushing the will down the john, Miss Janvier gave her the will in one of our special envelopes. Difficult to dispose of—the fibres would’ve blocked the pipes.’

‘What if she simply got rid of it on the ride home from your office? Having had, as you put it, third thoughts?’

‘We’ll have to question the driver again. He’d have noticed. He knew her well from all those trips to the hospital. The car was ordered from the security desk downstairs in the lobby of the apartments and she always had the same chauffeur because she liked him. She had become sensitive about her appearance on those visits to the hospital and he was a sympathetic man.’

‘Right. Now, what about those servants?’

‘Florence Hermanos had been with Muriel for many years in Las Vegas as her personal maid, and latterly as her trusted friend and companion. That’s why she took her with her when she came to New York.’

‘Was she the one called Florence Bate mentioned in the first will? I saw her name above mine.’ He quoted: ‘To my personal maid and friend, Florence Bate, all my jewellery except the ruby necklace.’

‘You’ve a quick memory, Lennox,’ said Van Gryson admiringly. ‘Yes, she’s the one. And under that will it meant a considerable fortune. Apparently your Muriel was a collector of jewels, mostly rubies. She told us Leo Probert gave them to her on each anniversary.’ He hesitated. ‘I didn’t like to tell you this before, Lennox, but we found no rubies, neither your necklace nor anything else, not in the apartment nor in the bank. There was some stuff in a box on her dressing-table but nothing of great value.’

‘So the rubies are missing along with the will? Interesting, don’t you think? Tell me more about Florence. How’d she get to be Mrs Hermanos?’

At that point Dale had thrown down his table napkin.

‘I told you before ... We’d no cause to go prying into the affairs of the servants. It was a delicate enough matter for us without blowing it up out of all proportion. We had to tread very softly, and the last thing we wanted to do was alienate these people.’

‘I’d have gone through them with a fine-tooth comb,’ said Kemp succinctly. ‘You said José Hermanos and Florence were a married couple, she was the housekeeper and he was a sort of handyman-cum-butler—an unlikely combination.’

‘Apparently she met and married him soon after coming to New York. He’s a spic—sorry, a Spanish or Mexican American. Didn’t take to him myself ...’

‘But he’s married to Muriel’s trusted companion so he gets a job on the staff. And the others?’

‘Just a girl who did the cleaning and gave Mrs Hermanos help in the kitchen. There was no need for more servants, Mrs Probert was ill, she never entertained, and the building itself has its own security staff, doormen and concierge—well, you know how we live in New York nowadays ...’

‘I don’t but I can guess. That’s why you’re so sure of Muriel’s comings and goings?’

Van Gryson shrugged. ‘Makes it a lot easier to keep track of people’s movements. No one could get in or out of that lobby without being spotted. If there had been visitors they would have

been announced. There was no one during those last two weeks except the doctor and the nurse he'd engaged.'

'Just the one nurse?'

'That was all he considered necessary—and only for night duty. During the day Mrs Probert insisted that Florence look after her. And, as you seem to have a suspicious mind, Lennox, there was nothing in the death itself or the manner of it to justify further investigation. All Mrs Probert's medical records were always available to us as her financial advisers. She had cancer, neither the operations nor the chemotherapy could save her, and the nursing during her last days was meticulously documented. She had drugs to alleviate pain but in the end it was the disease which killed her.'

Perhaps Van Gryson thought such pain-speaking was necessary but he had been surprised to see his breakfast companion wince.

'I'm sorry, Dale,' Kemp said after a pause. 'My curiosity for the moment overcame my better feelings. I'm sure Muriel's death was due to natural causes as they're called, although cancer to me has always carried the connotation of an evil thing working in the dark, a malignancy at odds with the good ... I'm sorry,' he said again, 'it's just that I'm trying to see the Muriel I knew, and wondering how she would have reacted to her impending death. I think she did right when she came to you and made that first will. Never mind whatever other pressure she was under, all the riches and luxurious living she had gained for herself had been through Leo Probert. She was not a woman who liked power over others. There was an essential sweetness in her nature. She would have been unhappy with the consequences of that power. Whatever you may think of the characters of her late husband's partners, the first will is a fair one.'

'You're saying it should stand?'

Kemp had laughed. 'I'm in a cleft stick,' he said. 'I mean what I have just said. On the other hand, I'm a lawyer like yourself, and we have been taught, have we not, that a testator's wishes must be paramount? And if we can be certain what those wishes were we have to use all our powers to uphold them. Oh, I appreciate the tricky position your firm would be in if it had to come to court—two trustees of a will in dereliction of their duty towards a client ...'

This time it was Van Gryson who winced. 'Too damned right it wouldn't look good, but we could ride that one out. Sure, if we'd known about that visit of Mrs Probert either Julius or I would have been round there on the hour to see what the hell was going on, was she in her right mind, or was it just a whim ... But there's worse things where we have to operate, Lennox. It's Prester John Madison and his cronies we have to worry about. There's going to be one helluva row from that quarter if they find out there's another will. They've got plenty of shyster lawyers in their pockets, and they're not above using strong-arm methods.'

'Dear me. How different from the home-life of the English judiciary ... Sorry, I can see it wouldn't be a joking matter. Have you managed to stave them off so far?'

'Prester John's too smart an operator to go in with all guns firing at this stage. But don't think there haven't been hints. Julius is dealing with them. The estate will take time to be wound up, blah blah ... legatees have to be traced, etcetera etcetera, and there's always the goddamned taxes to the government to be settled. Oh, we can give them the runaround for a while yet.'

At that point Van Gryson had leant forward and said with the utmost seriousness: 'You see how it is. No one must know about the other will back home in New York. Miss Janvier won't talk, that's for sure. It was her blunder and she doesn't want it advertised. The two witnesses are dumbos—they can hardly remember whose will it was anyway, and they're not being encouraged to try. And we whisked that file copy out of the cabinet before anyone got a peek at it. Believe you me, Lennox, we've been thorough.'

'So it seems. Which only leaves me. You didn't really have to contact me at all, did you, Dale, unless you had found the original of the second will?'

Van Gryson had assumed his honest counsellor's face, candid to the point of piety.

‘Ethics of the profession, Lennox. Straight dealing as between men of the law. Julius Eikenberg and I, we discussed the situation at length and came to the conclusion it was only right that you should be told. No, we didn’t have to tell you. We couldn’t afford even to hint at it in a letter. Instead, I came over specially to put it to you.’

Once you had me summed up, Kemp thought, and found me maverick enough to just possibly do whatever you might find expedient in the future.

To take the American off his soapbox for a moment, he had murmured: ‘You really couldn’t afford not to. You’d have been pretty hard-pressed for an explanation if the second will, all neatly typed up on your firm’s paper and still in its special envelope, was discovered stuck up the chimney after you’d already disposed of the assets in accordance with the terms of the first ...’

‘There aren’t any chimneys,’ said Van Gryson tersely, deciding to ignore the rest of Kemp’s perfectly cogent observation. ‘And there were no loose floorboards in any of the rooms or loose tiles in the bathroom. We inventoried all the furniture, gave us the excuse to rake the whole place over. You couldn’t have hid a matchstick in that apartment.’

‘I still think you should investigate those servants.’

Van Gryson’s eyes were bland. ‘You thinking of coming over and doing it for us?’

Kemp had shrunk back in horror at the suggestion.

‘Not me! It’s only in fiction that the hero hops on a plane and does his stuff in a foreign city. I can’t even read a street map of London, never mind find my way to the subway in New York. No, I’m staying right here where I belong. But it mightn’t be a bad idea if you employed a private eye—that is what they’re still called over there?’

Dale Van Gryson put on a sly look. He pursed his lips rather primly.

‘Mr Eikenberg has that in hand. We’re keeping an eye on anyone who was around at the time of Mrs Probert’s death. The rental on the apartment’s paid for another three months and we’ve retained the servants as caretakers. I admit you’ve got me a bit rattled on Mrs Hermanos. Seemed a nice woman to me ...’

‘I tend to be suspicious of nice women. And it might be a good idea to have another talk with that doctor. Sound him out on Muriel’s state of mind ... And the night nurse too, you haven’t said much about her.’

‘There’s nothing to tell. She came from a highly reputable agency, and had been recommended by the doctor himself. We didn’t get to speak to her as she’s gone upstate to nurse her own mother who is dying, but don’t worry, we’ll get round to her in due course. We do have some very discreet people we use from time to time on the financial side of matrimonial cases, that kind of thing ... No, I don’t think we’d call them private eyes. We have to be careful, you know, we’re a very respectable firm.’

‘Whatever you call them, I’d be obliged, Dale, if you could let me see their reports, if any. After all, I’m an interested party ... even under that first will I get a ruby necklace.’

‘Those damned rubies!’ Van Gryson exclaimed. ‘D’you know what happened? They were safe in her bank up till a few weeks before she died, then on one of her trips to the hospital she goes and gets them out. The bank showed us the receipt. Now they’ve vanished into thin air.’

‘I put my money on the butler,’ Kemp had said, cheerfully before the two men went their separate ways. ‘In English detective fiction it’s always the butler who dunnit.’

CHAPTER 4

The first contributions to what Kemp liked to call his Letters from America arrived at the same time as an area of high pressure also from across the Atlantic which brought hot weather to Newtown in mid-July. The compliments slip from Eikenberg & Lazard seemed to distance itself from the other contents despite being marked by the initials ‘DVG’, the envelope itself was designated Private and Confidential and sent to Kemp’s home address. He felt like the recipient of subversive mail.

There were photostat copies of five reports, two by Alfred Orme and three by Bernard Shulman. Fortunately the package had arrived on a Saturday morning so Kemp was able to spread them out between the butter dish and the marmalade jar and give them his whole attention.

Glancing over the typescript, Kemp guessed that Alfred Orme must be as old as his machine—surely no one had called a child Alfred for some fifty years. Reading confirmed this, the style was pedestrian and the material set out without frills in a manner with which Kemp was familiar as he had perused plenty of police statements which had the same lack of literary merit. Orme was probably a retired officer augmenting his pension by doing routine investigative work for legal firms. He would be thorough and discreet but possibly unimaginative. He was no great typist judging by the pepper-and-salt effect on the paper which hadn't been improved by photocopying.

The first report was dated 7.2.89. which Kemp took a moment to work out; he could never see why Americans, who were supposed to be logical people, should put the month first, then the day, then the year.

Tuesday, July 2—Report by Alfred Orme

Called at Argus Automobiles, a firm known to me as a reputable rental car agency. Spoke with Frank Miner, aged forty-two, clean licence, no police record, employed by Argus five years. No complaints by employers. Wears chauffeur's uniform, peaked cap, a clean, tidy, well-set-up man of honest appearance.

Showed no reluctance to answering questions about Mrs Muriel Probert when I disclosed my interest as an old friend of the deceased who had lost touch and been shocked to hear of her death. As instructed, I produced photograph. Though taken over two years ago Miner recognized it immediately, commenting the subject was thinner and the features more lined when he knew her. During the last six months he had driven Mrs Probert to the Mount Sinai Medical Centre at least once a week.

Engaging him in conversation Miner said she was a nice lady, and talked to him when she was well enough. Because he had been sympathetic to her condition it got that he was the driver she always asked for. (Confirmed by Mr Sherrett, Manager for Argus, who said Miner was in fact the only driver Mrs Probert would have.)

'Did Mrs Probert make calls anywhere else on these trips?' I asked Miner.

'Not often. Lately hardly at all except mebbe she'd ask me to stop at her bank—that's Chase up by the hospital. Early on she used to do some shopping and get me to wait at the department stores for her. But not for the last month or so. She got pretty low what with the treatment and all ...'

'I just wondered why she didn't stop off and visit with some of her old friends.'

'I suppose the treatments just tired her out ... I'd help her into the cab when the nurse at the hospital brought her down, and all she'd do was wrap that Scotch rug of hers round her knees and say: "Get me home quick, Frank." She'd probably just about had enough. She weren't in no fit state to go visiting.'

'I brought the conversation round to the weeks immediately prior to Mrs Probert's death. Miner remembered she'd visited her bank. It had been cold and she'd put the rug round her shoulders when she went in because she said she might have to wait, and she had it over her arm when she came out. (I didn't press the questions here as I understand the visit to the bank has been confirmed.) My instructions were not to arouse any suspicion in Mr Miner that this was anything more than the concern of an old friend. He volunteered the information about the rug because he'd told Mrs Probert that his aunt had brought one like it from Scotland, but it did give me the opportunity to ask if Mrs Probert was ever forgetful and left it in his cab. He was indignant at that and said she was never forgetful—and not like some of his passengers.

I then asked him about her last visit to the hospital. Without any prompting from me Miner told me what happened.

'Surprised me no end when she wanted me to make a stop on the way home. I'd taken her to the hospital, usual time of two o'clock. I was to be back same time as always, three-thirty. Nasty day,

it was, there'd been snow and the streets were slushy, so I was a bit late getting back but it didn't matter, she wasn't ready anyhow. When she did come out the nurse had to help her. She looked really done up. Anyways, once in the car she said to take her to these lawyers, Eikenberg and something, and gave me the address. Like I said, it were slow driving so it must have been well after five when we got there. I got her out of the cab and in at the door but she wouldn't let me take her no further. Said I'd just to wait. She weren't in there more'n half an hour. When she came out I helped her into the car and drove her back to her apartment.'

As this was the last time Miner had driven Mrs Probert I was able to press his memory of the occasion.

'I guess she knew it were the last time,' he said, and he shakes his head.

I asked him why he thought that, and at this point he made a series of rambling remarks which I summarize.

Miner had become quite attached to Mrs Probert, said she was a pleasant lady, not like some he had to drive. When the car was not re-ordered he telephoned the apartment to be told by the Concierge that his services would no longer be required as Mrs Probert was now too ill to go out. Miner said he was not surprised. When she left the hospital that afternoon the nurse had said goodbye to her, usually she said see you next time. He thought that meant they had told Mrs Probert they could do no more for her, and that was why she made the visit to the lawyers. Stands to reason, he said, she wanted to make her will. I was able to ask him at that point if she was perhaps carrying anything like that when she came out of the door at Eikenbergs. He said she was carrying nothing except her crocodile-skin handbag, and that was closed. He had jumped out of the car as soon as she appeared in the lobby and taken her arm to help her across the slippery sidewalk.

'Just the weather for that tartan rug,' I said to him, which made him stop and think.

'Funny you should say that ... She never had it with her that day ... I don't remember seeing it since her visit to the bank ... Anyways, once in the car after visiting these lawyers she just lay back on the cushions as if she were exhausted and she never moved at all on the drive home. I made sure all the car windows were up. It was freezing outside and I didn't want her to get a chill on top of her other troubles.'

As my instructions were to ascertain, if possible, the state of Mrs Probert's mind at the time, I endeavoured to draw him out. This was not difficult, for Miner was only too ready to talk about her and the sadness of her situation.

He said her condition was much worse that day than it had been even the previous week. Miner put this down to the harshness of the treatment—he thinks chemotherapy does nothing except make people's hair fall out—but he did say that on the drive to the hospital she seemed to be angry. He'd never known her like that before. She'd never been bitter about the disease which had come upon her but she'd said to him that day that ingratitude was the hardest thing to bear, and that to find your trust in someone has been betrayed was worse than any illness. Miner had not taken much notice at the time, he was concentrating on the road conditions and anyway he was used to his passengers talking to themselves in his hearing but as I talked to him these words of Mrs Probert's came back. He is a slow-thinking man but in my opinion, honest. I do not think he could have made them up.

When he drove her from the hospital to the lawyers and on the way home Miner says Mrs Probert spoke little, but he scoffed at any idea that she might have been seriously disturbed in her mind. In the way she gave him his instructions to stop at Eikenbergs she was matter of fact and precise.

I terminated the interview at this point as I was afraid he would become suspicious of further questions. I believe he has told us all he can.

Wednesday, July 3—Report by Alfred Orme

Mr Orme's second report was short and businesslike. He had interviewed the superintendent, the doormen, porters and concierge staff at the building where Mrs Probert had her apartment. This time he had no need to pose as other than Eikenberg & Lazard's representative checking up on the

safety arrangements for the premises in the absence of an actual owner. The lease still had three months to run, the rent was paid up, and the servants were occupying as caretakers until such time as the furniture could be cleared.

The doormen knew the late Mrs Probert by sight, and confirmed seeing her coming and going to the hospital. They were also well-acquainted with Frank Miner and often passed the time of day with him when he waited for her. The concierge staff produced notes of the times the car was ordered by telephone, and the messages relayed to Argus Automobiles. Sometimes the instructions had come direct from Mrs Probert herself, latterly from Dr Seifel and occasionally from the housekeeper, Mrs Hermanos.

Mr Orme reported that he could detect no slackness either in the record-keeping or the security. The rents of these apartments were high and the occupants expected value for money, twenty-four-hour vigilance and the door never left unattended. Therefore, Mr Orme concluded, if the staff in the downstairs lobby said that the late Mrs Probert had had no visitors during her last two weeks except for her doctor and the night nurse he had recommended, then there could be no doubt.

Mr Orme's interview with Dr Seifel could not have been easy, and Kemp grinned as he relished the sparsity of the report. Doctors are notoriously suspicious of any inquiries pertaining to their patients—particularly dead ones—and Dr Seifel was no exception. He pointed out to Mr Orme that the late Mrs Probert's lawyers had had full access to all her medical records since he had taken her on as his patient when she came first to New York—indeed it had been Julius Eikenberg himself who had sought out Dr Seifel as a specialist in those cases where malignancy had been diagnosed and might already have advanced. Nothing had been concealed either from her lawyers as trustees or Mrs Probert herself, that was how she had wanted it. Details of the unsuccessful operations and treatment could be obtained from the hospital. Yes, there had been short periods of remission under the chemotherapy but in a case like hers the prognosis had never been other than negative, and she had known it to be so.

Things must have eased off a little—at least for the doctor—when Mr Orme raised the question of Mrs Probert's state of mind immediately prior to her death. This would be a perfectly normal inquiry from a representative of her trustees—though it might have come better from one of them personally. Kemp saw both Eikenberg and Van Gryson keeping it at arm's length.

Dr Seifel had given a robust denial to any suggestion that his patient's mental faculties were impaired. Despite her physical weakness there was nothing wrong with her mind; it had operated normally right to the end. In his interviews with her, on a daily basis during her last two weeks, she was coherent, knowledgeable about her condition and no longer distressed by it. The doctor seemed to have indulged in a small homily, saying that if all his dying patients displayed the same attitude as the late Mrs Probert his own task would be a lot easier.

No, to his knowledge, she had had no visitors. He would not have prevented visits had she asked but she had told him there was no one she wished to see. The doctor understood—at least in part. Any woman who had been beautiful might want to hide herself even from old friends now that the ravages of the disease itself and the treatments to contain it had become so apparent.

Reading this part of the report Kemp was brought up sharply by the intrusion of feelings of his own. Van Gryson had said that Muriel's close friends would have been in Las Vegas, and her circumstances since coming to New York hardly conducive to the making of new ones. When Kemp had inquired if either Van Gryson or Julius had called at the apartment he was told they had not. All instructions to them regarding financial matters, payment of servants' wages, rent and outgoings of her home, medical attendance there or at the hospital were received by letter or telephone at their offices and made directly by Mrs Probert herself. There had been no such communication from her during the last month of her illness, and they had seen no reason why there should have been; the bills from the doctor and the hospital were paid on a regular basis and there had been no other expenditure.

Eikenberg & Lazard had been content to keep scrupulous accounts thereby releasing their client from day-to-day worries, but it did seem there had been a closer relationship between themselves and her bankers than with herself.

In the light of the circumstances, Kemp had noted an element of shamefacedness in Van Gryson when this point had been talked over. Yet Kemp could well understand the situation. The trustees of Mrs Probert were only part of a firm of some magnitude. She had put her affairs in their hands but they must have many such clients as rich as she—and some of them with a great deal more potential. She was not the wife of an influential senator, nor the mother of an up-and-coming politician, she was merely the widow of a man who might well have been a gangster, at any rate one who had made his fortune out of the gambling proclivities of others. Muriel had had neither connections nor status in New York, whatever her position might have been back in Las Vegas.

Lonely, Kemp thought ... She must have been so lonely ... Was that why she had turned back the years, and remembered him?

He continued reading.

No, Dr Seifel had never discussed personal affairs with Mrs Probert, although he commented—and it sounded testily—that the body is as personal a matter as you can get and it was only her body and its freedom from pain that concerned him.

Asked if she had ever mentioned her will, Dr Seifel said he made it his business never to talk about wills with his patients—that was strictly the province of another profession and he understood Mrs Probert was well supplied with lawyers.

Kemp felt himself warming to Dr Seifel.

Yes, the patient had been upset that evening when she returned from her last visit to the hospital but more at his suggestion of hospitalization than anything else. She had been firm that she would not go into a hospital, on that point she had been resolute. Dr Seifel felt there had been a new force in her which he put down to the fact that she had been told the worst. He had hurried round to the apartment that afternoon to await her return because the hospital had already notified him of the results of their last tests. He had been rather worried because she was late but she explained that the car had been delayed by the snow.

He put it to her that if she was to remain at home then she must have nurses, day and night. He was surprised that she immediately agreed, hitherto she had been against it, saying that Florence Hermanos could take care of her.

Once his patient was in her bedroom the doctor had had a word with Mrs Hermanos, and found her surly; she had looked after her mistress throughout her illness and would do so till the end.

‘I wasn’t going to have any nonsense from a servant,’ Dr Seifel had said at that point, ‘but I had to recognize her devotion. I agreed to her continuing her daytime duties so long as it was under my supervision but I must engage a properly trained night nurse. I told her to get a room ready—there were plenty of empty ones in the apartment.’

Dr Seifel had telephoned the Nursing Agency he always used in these cases, requesting the services of a suitable nurse as soon as one was available. As Mrs Probert began to go downhill more rapidly than he had anticipated he had had to get in touch with the woman in charge again, stressing the urgency, and telling her that in his opinion the nurse would be required for no longer than a week. He did not add, as he might well have done, that subsequent events bore out that opinion.

He was well pleased with the person sent from the Agency. Dr Seifel had found Miss Smith to be a quiet, dependable and competent trained nurse.

‘She was not a chatterer,’ he said, ‘and they’re the worst kind in a sickroom. Nor of any great personal appearance but that’s of no matter. Miss Smith was experienced in the care of the dying, in fact her presence seemed to soothe my patient. Miss Smith went about her duties without fuss, and she carried out my instructions to the letter. When she knew Mrs Probert was sinking she called me, and we were both present when she died in her sleep with peace and dignity.’

The records of attendances and the medication given during those last days had already been handed over to Eikenberg & Lazard, and Dr Seifel was satisfied that, so far as he and Nurse Smith were concerned, they had each carried out their respective duties with the proper professional skill. He hoped he would hear no more of the matter.

On that brusque note—introduced, Kemp decided, by the doctor—the interview had ended.

From the attendance notes, complete with dates and times, it was clear that the registered nurse from the agency had been in constant attendance, and had not herself left the apartment, her daytime needs being met by the other staff while at night she had remained by the patient's bedside.

The reports of Bernard Shulman were much racier documents than Orme's. Told in the first person and the present tense like an ongoing tale of city folk, the individual voices split through the narrative. The typescript showed that Shulman was no mean typist and used more than two fingers. Kemp figured he would call himself Bernie.

Report by Bernard Shulman. July 7–15

Got me a stand-in doorman's job at the ----- Hotel on the same block as the apartment building and keep a watch on the entrance. Leonie Rojas comes in mornings at seven-thirty and shows again about eleven when she buys groceries round the corner. Give her the eye a few times as she passes and get a smile from her. So I wait a coupla days, then I'm in the shop when she comes in and I help her load her basket. Buy her some bagels and we go into the Park to eat them.

She's no great talker, kinda slow in the head, I guess, nor's she much of a looker as she's got a yellow skin and bad teeth—not much of a start, that, for a girl still under twenty. She says to me she has the job almost a year and wishes it'd go on for ever as the place is clean enough to eat off the floor and all she's got to do is keep it that way. She tells me the layout and when she's not vacuuming the carpets and dusting the furniture she helps the housekeeper in the kitchen.

'Ain't there no one else there?' I asks.

'Not since the lady went and died. I liked her. She gave me things, clothes and stuff ... Not that I could wear them.'

She hardly could, with her figure. She's sort of squat with thick legs but mebbe its only puppy-fat and she'll grow outa it. No, she never got no jewellery, Mrs Hermanos saw to that. Leonie had to show anything she got to Mrs Hermanos before going home.

'Those Hermanos,' I says, 'they're OK to work for now the lady's gone?'

'She's all right, I guess. Never did see much of him. Calls himself a butler ...' She giggles at that. 'I ain't never seen a butler 'cept in the movies and he sure don't act like them.' She's quiet for a bit, then she says: 'They fight, the Hermanos ... and when they don't fight they hardly speak.'

I pretend surprise. 'Hey, I heard they were a nice middle-aged couple that cared for the lady 'fore she died.'

'She cared all right, Mrs Hermanos. I'll give her that ... Why, only the other day I see her crying her eyes out in the lady's bedroom while she was sortin' out the clothes that's to go to some big cancer charity. Crying her eyes out, she was, all over that nice rug Mrs Probert used to take in the cab when she went to the hospital. I guess the death just got to her ...'

I said Leonie's a slow talker and it's heavy going getting anything from her but I'd made sure we'd walked a fair ways so's we'd have to take a bit of time getting back. So, the girl likes the attention. Probably not much had happened to her before she got the job at Mrs Probert's apartment and, though she's no fast thinker, she's kept her ears and eyes open.

'They was all lovey-dovey at first, the Hermanos ... They'd not been married long. Guess she thought herself lucky to get a man at all. She's forty if she's a day, and he's a handsome spic if you like that kinda thing.'

I'd put Leonie down as Spanish-American herself but didn't like to say so. Anyways, what she's getting at is José Hermanos is part-Mexican which in Leonie's book is spic.

‘Love’s young dream can start at any age, Leonie,’ I says, ‘Mebbe the dream didn’t last. When did the quarrels start?’

She had a long think, and finished the bagels. ‘When the lady was near to dying. Mrs Hermanos was with her a lot in the bedroom. I wasn’t never let in there ’cept to carry trays and clean up, and get the bedsheets for washing. Nothin’ went to the laundry. Mrs Hermanos said all the bedlinen had to be done by us, laundries make it too stiff for sick folk ... Anyways, one day I’m in cleaning the bathroom and I could hear Mrs Probert got angry.’

‘So, she was sick. Sick people get irritable.’

‘Mrs Probert weren’t like that. She weren’t the complaining type. I’d never heard her raise her voice like she did then. I heard her say, *Is it true, Florence?* That’s what she called Mrs Hermanos. *Is it true about José?* That’s what I heard her say. I never did get to hear what Mrs Hermanos said because she roused me out that bathroom quick like she didn’t want me hearing no more.’

I says it must have been embarrassing for a nice girl like her to hear the Hermanos quarrelling in front of her.

‘It was Mrs Hermanos that got embarrassed, he just carried on like I wasn’t there.’

Leonie’s turning things over in that slow mind of hers, and it’s coming out like a dripping tap.

‘He says to her once to forget the damn jools, that wasn’t the job they were there for. He started to throw plates about. I could hear him from upstairs. Then the nurse went down, and that stopped him.’

So I says: ‘Did Mrs Probert have a nurse?’

‘Only for the nights that week she died. Mrs Hermanos didn’t like it but the doctor insisted. He always passed the time of day with me when he came, never ignored me like some. Polite, he was ...’

‘And the nurse, was she polite?’

‘So-so. Never had much to say to anyone. Anyways, she were on nights when I’d gone home. I’d clean her room in the mornings when she was with the lady but she always left it tidy, nothing lyin’ about.’

Leonie sighs. ‘Spose that’s how nurses get to be. Tidy. They don’t leave no mess around for other folk to clean up. When I goes to clean her room it’s like nobody’s ever been in it. If I’d the education, I’d sure like to be a nurse ...’

So I tells her she’s meant for better things than cleaning up after people. I’m trying to get around to whether she’s seen any papers being burnt, but I’m careful, so I says, ‘like emptying out their dirty ashtrays and such ...’

‘You gotta be joking. There ain’t nobody allowed to smoke in that apartment. Mrs Probert, she never smoked even when she was well and sat in the living-room reading or watching TV. When she got real sick she kept to the bedroom. That chemical stuff they did to her at the hospital, you shoulda seen the hair that come out on her brushes, the poor thing! There’d be nothin’ but hair in the trash can when I’d empty it.’

‘Guess cancer treatment’s worse’n the disease,’ I says, going along with her notion. ‘Pretty nasty for you, tho’, clearing up after a sick person.’

‘Wasn’t what you’d think ’cept for the washing. Kept that bedroom neat’s a pin, Mrs Hermanos did. She was in and outa there all day ’specially the last two weeks, hardly left the lady save when she were asleep.’

‘Guardian angel, huh? But Mrs Probert must have known she was near her end. Most folks be preparing for it ... Making their wills and so on ...’

‘Weren’t anything like that to do. Was all settled with the lawyers, Mrs Hermanos told me once. That’s why the lady didn’t have to worry her head about such things when she got so ill. There weren’t no papers like that I ever saw, and anyways all the writing stuff’s in the desk in the living-room and Madam hadn’t been in there in weeks. All that furniture just lay around gatherin’ dust.’

So we're walking down our block by now and I'm not getting any more from Leonie Rojas so I stop at the Hotel door and say, 'See you around, babe,' at which she looks hopeful, poor kid. As instructed, I let two-three days go by before I takes her for another stroll in Central Park. She tells me she's got another job, waitressing in a glitzy restaurant over on Broadway. I know who's arranged that for her but I just say I'm glad, and mebbe I'll be in touch. Unlikely; she's too young, and she's not my type but I'm not closing the door in case I get the word to call on her again. I get the message: my way's been cleared to approach the next two subjects, Mr and Mrs Hermanos.

Report by Bernard Shulman. July 16

I'd shaved off my moustache which was temporary as my doorman's job and I call at the late Mrs Probert's apartment with a card from the rental agency. I'm wearing my best suit, custom-tailored slubbed silk with the pale green stripe, and black tasselled loafers that cost me a fortune. I guess I look the part OK, young businessman on the up-and-up seeking property to rent for my Momma and Poppa about to arrive in the Big Apple to share my good fortune.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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