

MURDER AT WATERMELON COTTAGE

A threatening darkness wrapped around unlit buildings and drifted through narrow, empty streets. Suddenly, the eerie stillness was broken by the sound of pounding footsteps. Running for their lives, two survivors of unspeakable mayhem were barely visible in a patch of half-light reflecting off a metal roof. Gasping, desperate, the two were close to collapsing. And then, the inevitable happened. Two shots from somewhere in the blackened distance dropped them both. Painful twitches, a couple of agonizing groans and the two were history.

“How come there are no happy endings?” Complained Helen, my neighbor from across the street.

“Young filmmakers don’t believe in happy endings. It’s like tragic opera. People die all over the stage. Dead people make the story *important*. Fun stuff doesn’t, or so these same aspiring Spielberg’s think.”

“Maybe there’s no fun stuff in grad school, which is why I don’t plan to go there,” Helen’s son, Skyler said.

Skyler, very, *very* tall, is playing basketball for Duke. I have my doubts that he’ll make graduate school—not because of his grades, but because professional scouts are already sniffing around him, and he has two years to go before graduation.

“And we’re in this art house watching three awful short films by students because?” Helen asked.

“Because we are deeply concerned about the status of the art of the moving image,” I replied. “Just think—our attendance dollars will help support those who will be the screenwriters and editors and cinematographers of the future.” Helen was unconvinced. Actually, my film school promo was true, at least for me, but that was not the reason we had tortured ourselves through three bad films and three introductory presentations by sincere, as yet inept, young filmmakers. I was there because of my current FBI assignment, and my two neighbors were there to provide, albeit unknowingly, a cover. Three film fans watching student movies would seem innocent enough.

As we stepped into the crowded aisle, a member of the audience shoved into us, brushed against me, and apologized gruffly. The visor of his Go Skins cap was pulled low, hiding the

deep, revealing lines in his face, and putting a lie to the college garb he was wearing. He was the real reason for our presence in this theater at this time.

“Aren’t we going out for pizza?” ever-hungry Skyler complained.

“Not tonight, Sky. We drove separately because I have to go back to the office for a while.”

“Bummer.”

I checked my watch, and felt in my right jacket pocket. It was there. The transfer had occurred. It was working.

My Cruiser was parked two short blocks away and I reached it right on time. Five minutes later I pulled up behind a Bureau car parked on a quiet street near Bradley Boulevard, hopped out of the Cruiser, locked it, and pulled open the front passenger door of the waiting black car. Ken Pershing sat in the driver’s seat, so stiff I wondered if he’d escaped from one of the student films. Except that Ken was breathing, although a bit unevenly. His hands gripped the steering wheel as if he were afraid the car would take off without him.

“Hey, Ken,” I greeted my silent partner. And then I felt it. The cold, unmistakable presence of a gun, the muzzle pressing at the back of my head, just above the collar of my jacket.

“We go now,” a cold voice instructed. “And you, you got present tonight in theater. I will take it.”

My heart stopped, but my brain did not. The gunman didn’t say *a* present in *the* theater. Could be something else, but most likely Russian-speak. I figured he knew about the contact, so to say it hadn’t happened wouldn’t do the trick.

“He got scared,” I lied. “He came close but never touched.”

“Drive, as told you before.” Our backseat passenger was speaking to Ken, but nuzzled the gun against my head. “Do as the man says, Ken.” I reached over and with thumb and forefinger of my left hand, gave my partner a pinch on the hip. “But be careful, the streets are pretty icy.”

Ken pulled away from the curb, and I asked, “Where are we going?” I tried to turn my head but a solid jab in the neck changed my mind for me. Two blocks down, one to the right and we saw two vehicles coming toward us, one a sizeable van. “Down!” Ken yelled and whipped the car into a crazy spin that ended up smack in the side of the van. My head clunked against the steering wheel and I heard the explosion. I felt the sharp pain from the wheel I’d smacked, but I didn’t feel the bullet.

As I was fading, I heard a burst of obscenities coming from behind me. I thought in Russian. It sounded as if the back door were being torn open, and I realized our passenger was gone. I felt Ken's hands as he struggled to get out from under me. He was yelling to someone about something.

A strange odor told me I was somewhere unfamiliar. I sucked in a breath and let myself float, totally at peace. Sometime later, I blinked and entered a world of white.

Mother was there, eyes searching my face, a deep frown letting me know she was seriously worried. "Sweetie," she said, "you're awake!"

I figured as much. But why was I in Los Angeles with Mother? I was too tired to ask, so I just waited. She would explain. A crafty, successful attorney, she always had an explanation for everything.

Next, she said, "You're going to be just fine. Absolutely. The hole in your side won't show, unless you wear a really skimpy bikini."

I found my voice. "A hole in my side? A *hole*?"

"Well, actually, no. It's been repaired. But there will be a scar."

She was being deliberately light, and I knew it was faux lightness. By now I realized I was in a hospital bed, somewhere, and something bad had happened to me.

"Begin with how you happen to be here, wherever here happens to be."

She smiled a rather desperate smile. "Logan called me immediately. My friend, my very rich friend who routinely proposes marriage, loaned me his Lear and his pilot and I was here in no time. Logan met me. He's *very* concerned, but quite relieved as I am, and as Uncle Maurice is."

"Uncle Maurice?" My father's very reliable brother who also lives in Los Angeles is here? *Here where?*

"He insisted on coming. Your father wanted to come, but I told him to wait until we knew more. The baby has a bad ear infection and can't fly. They didn't want to leave her at home, and Olga didn't want to make the trip from Provence without her." The baby, of course, is my Russian sister, an orphan adopted a year ago when she was three.

I tried to sit up, but the pain in my right side stopped me with a jolt. "Okay, you're here, which I assume is in Washington, and so is Uncle Maurice, and Louie (my father insists I call

him Louie, rather than Father, Dad, or, worse, Daddy) is worried and wants to come. So, tell me. I have a hole in my side, hopefully one that can be covered by a bikini on the modest side. And what else? This has got to be serious.”

“Honey, that’s all. Except for your head, of course. Oh my, it all could have been so much worse.”

My head? What about my head?

It was difficult to believe the scenario now playing. Not all that long ago Mother was shot in the shoulder during the murder of one of her clients. And *I* rushed out (by American Airlines, not Lear) to be with *her*. Could it be something inherited? Mother’s eyes suddenly shifted to the door, and I swear, they lightened by several watts. It was my boss, my Legend-in-his-own-time boss, the devastatingly handsome FBI Big Shot that all my friends fall for—that guy, trying to step lightly into the room. I was pleased to see he looked pained.

“Awake, is she?”

“She is,” I said. Things were coming back to me, bad things that had happened after the films. I remembered the car crash and the noise and Ken screaming.

“Sorry about all of this. I should have known something was wrong when I approached the car.”

The stream of obscenities was not in Russian, but in very contemporary English. Then, realizing the inappropriateness of his cussing in front of my gorgeous mother, he calmed somewhat. “*You’re* apologizing? About *this*?” He waved in the direction of my bed, then asked, “How do you feel? The bang on the head kept you quiet for more than twenty-four hours. Probably first time since you learned to talk.” He looked at Mother for confirmation, and she batted an inviting eye at him. They toy with each other like that, which worries the heck out of me. Imagine having him in the family.

“I’m not certain how I feel. My head? How bad is it?”

They gave each other a “who’s going to explain” look. I turned my head to the right and understood why. Oh, my, it hurt, which should have been evident to my onlookers. “The nurse said she’d bring in a painkiller when you wakened. I’ll get her,” Mother said. “I’ll also run down to the waiting room and fetch Uncle Maurice.”

“Okay, Logan,” I said. “The ball’s in your court. What’s with me?”

He took off his aviator-style specs, examined them carefully for smudges, replaced them, and began speaking slowly and carefully. “As Ken tells it, the guy had a gun in your neck, but the crash apparently threw him forward and sideways. The top half of you went into the Ken’s lap and the steering wheel. He doesn’t think the guy meant to fire, but in any event he did. He hit your side. You bashed the right side of your head a good one, just below the temple. Some internal seepage, hemorrhaging behind the ear. It turned out your lights. Doctor says it’s going to be damned painful for a while. It could have been waaay worse. About your side, it will just take a bit of time for the wound to heal.” His jaw tightened and he looked around. “So why am I doing all of this? Where’s your mother? Where’s Uncle Maurice?”

“Go on, tell me more.”

“District uniforms and the wagons were on the scene in fairly short order. Ken had a few bruises and was released from the hospital after a couple of hours. He’s been in touch every hour on the hour asking about you. Maybe tomorrow, when you’re up to it, you could give him a call. I’m leaving a note here with his cell number in case it slipped out of your head during the crash.”

“The package,” I asked. “It was in my jacket pocket.”

“Not any more. It’s with us good guys. And thanks.”

The pain in my side wasn’t bad, but in my head it suddenly was about a number twelve on a ten-point scale. An angel in navy blue brought a tiny cup with two pills in it.

“Take this. It’ll help big time.”

Big-time help was exactly what I needed.

“Your car is back in your driveway at home,” Logan said. “A panicky guy from next door attacked me when I dropped it off. Some kinda nutcase. He asked about you and sent love from the three C’s, whoever they are.”

I hurt too much to laugh. “The three” I explained, “no doubt referred to himself—meaning the critic—with the other two being my cat and my Christmas cactus. Zig’s the literary critic at the *Washington Post*. He’s adorable.”

“The cat and the cactus?”

“Zig takes care of both when I’m gone.”

“Thank God for that,” Logan smirked. “Now, back to less important issues. The driver of the van Ken crashed into was furious. He told the cops he figured the guy at the wheel deliberately ran into him and wrecked his new vehicle. He was going to by-God sue the pants off

him. Very funny. I've had a nice chat with the fellow and told him he saved the lives of two undercover agents and he'd be getting a commendation from the Director. He's thrilled."

Whoopee, somebody's thrilled.

Mother returned with Uncle Maurice, who would be my favorite uncle even if I had more males in this category. He cooed and petted and said all the right things.

"I've talked to Louie and promised I'd let him know if I thought he should come. The truth is, I'll tell him to come only if you decide you want him to. Even though he's my brother, I have to admit he can be a pain in the rear end sometimes."

I managed a grin. "Only when he's not the center of attention."

"Let's be nice," Mother prompted. "Louie has many good qualities. He's just a bit spoiled."

Logan groaned. "I think I'll leave this happy family gathering and get back to my work of keeping America safe. Agent Sachet, I won't expect you back in the office tomorrow morning. Take a few days off."

"Logan!" mother screeched.

He laughed, which is an occasion one rarely witnesses. "Dear Charlotte, I was joking." He put an arm around her and gave her a hug.

She did not pull away.

I must say I was relieved and ready to sink back into my pillow when Mother and Uncle Maurice left for the evening. Morphine became my sleep genie, my comforter. I woke a couple of times during the night, totally confused and uncertain where I was. In the morning, I had to re-orient myself. I was Maggie Sachet, I was hurt, I was in the in the GW Hospital in D.C. I knew all this because the nurse who arrived at the crack of dawn to "take my vitals" told me so.

While the big deal drug kept me at a low pain level, I still was uncomfortable. Fortunately, my head and side wounds were both on the right so that I had one good side on which to rest my body.

I was in a single room, actually quite large and nicely furnished—if you call a hospital bed, a large bed-side tray/cart on wheels, a couple of over-stuffed fake leather chairs, plus a card table and four matching chairs nice. Looking around me I took stock of my new nest. I'm not particularly good in hospitals. I don't enjoy visiting people thusly confined and usually skip out of a visit as soon as decently possible. Partly, it's that antiseptic odor, partly it's the everything in

white. Of course, when Mother was hospitalized, all I could think of was her being hurt and my being unable to make her well.

Omigosh, I thought. That's how she's feeling right now.

"Ready for breakfast?" I turned. She was in white with a white tray and a smile of probably professionally whitened teeth.

"Lobster omelet with black truffles on top?" I inquired.

"Broccoli and kale pancakes with blackstrap molasses. You'll love them."

"You win," I laughed.

A 12-year-old person in a white lab coat with a stethoscope around his neck arrived just as I'd finished my oatmeal.

"I'm Doctor Chao," he said. "Sorry we're out of black truffles." He pulled back the covers. "I'm going to check your dressing."

"Aren't you a little young to be checking women's wounds?" I asked.

"I'm thirty, married, and the father of a remarkable pair of two-year-old twins."

I groaned. I am really, really, getting old.

My dressing passed muster, and my head, gingerly touched, looked "okay for now. From what I understand went on last night, (tsk, tsk, scowl) you're a very lucky young woman."

Young! As for the rest, I didn't feel lucky at the moment.

The big question: "How long will I be here?"

"Too soon to tell. I want to watch the battered head for a couple of days. Your side looks good, but it's too soon to let you escape. You'll be taking some tests tomorrow to see if there are any new neurological problems stemming from the beating your head took. Also, some entertaining psych tests. You'll love them." He grinned.

"I can hardly wait. Sure you can't get me in today?" His brow furrowed and I hastened with, "Wait! I'm kidding. I don't feel up to being entertained today!" I really didn't. To be honest, I felt light-headed and as weak as my cat when he realizes it's the vet's office we've just entered. I thought I was tougher than this. I said something to that affect. My cat! Weak as my cat?

"Listen, you've had shock—physically and mentally. It will take some time to recover. Trust me. Don't try to hurry."

After real life Boy Doctor left, I unintentionally slipped into a cozy white cloud and had a nap. I had planned to do some serious thinking, but my mind was not cooperating. I needed to talk to Logan and find out about the package given to me at the theater. I needed to find out about the gorilla who shot me. How could I sleep?

An aide brought in a lovely bouquet of flowers, the kind you send to the funeral of someone Very Important or the newly crowned Miss Long beach. “It’s rather, ah, impressive for a hospital room,” the young woman in stripes said. “Shall I put it there, in front of the window?”

I nodded as much as I could without hurting and gestured for the card. “Love you, Darling. And don’t worry about Clueless. When you’re mom leaves, I’ll take over. I’m going to teach him to call me Daddy.” It was signed by Zigfeld, my loyal next-door neighbor, the lit critic for the *Washington Post* and a dear friend. He babysits my cat and my Christmas cactus when I am out of town. I have only one houseplant. More would be too much responsibility. Zig proposes marriage on the average of once a week. He’s adorable and charming and I’m not in love with him.

At some point in the afternoon, after a lunch of poached salmon (perfectly done) it occurred to me that I could call Ken. Someone had confiscated my cell phone, but there on my handy mobilized tray/cart were Logan’s note with Ken’s number and a regular phone! White, of course. I squirmed around to grab both and felt a sharp pain in my side and the return of a throbbing pain in my head. Here was living proof that I’m not invincible. I winced and dialed Ken’s cell.

“Maggie! I was told not to go to the hospital and bother you, and not to call, because you didn’t have your cell, and anyway you needed rest! How are you?”

“Super fine,” I said, trying to be jolly about it all. “And how are you, after having me crash on you in such an unladylike fashion?”

“I’m okay. A few bruises here and there—nothing serious. But, seriously, how the hell are you?”

“*Seriously*, I’m not quite my normal self, but I’m on my way to recovery. I have a child doctor who’s keeping an eye on me, so not to worry. But Ken, my mind is struggling to put things into place and I’m not making much progress.”

“Are you rushing things? Wait. Of course you are.”

“As noted, I’m okay. Listen, how in the pluperfect hell did that guy get into your car?”

“Damn good question. I was sitting waiting for you when another Bureau car pulled up and parked in front of me. This nut got out and tapped on the passenger window. I figured he had to be Bureau, so I hit the unlock and he climbed in, pulled the gun, took my shoulder weapon, then climbed into the back seat.”

“Wait! You said the car that dropped him off was a Bureau car? How could that be? Surely you made a mistake!”

“No, Maggie, I did not. I recognized the plate because I drove that car a couple of days ago. I backed it into a power pole and made a very distinctive dent. Nope, it was the right make and model, right plate, and it had the right damage in the right place.”

I was stunned because it made sense. Nobody in Ken’s position would have willingly let someone into the car unless he felt certain that particular someone was one of us.

“What did Logan say?”

“Not much that I can repeat to someone who’s lying hurt in the hospital. But the gist of it was that someone among us is a traitor and got the car. But the damned vehicle was logged out to Bill Jessup, who happened to be in Williamsburg that night. At the moment, the car is our best witness. Except that it’s gone. It left the minute Bad Ass got out of it and headed for me. By now, I’d bet it’s been drawn and quartered, surely crushed, maybe burned. Whatever.”

I suddenly felt very, very tired and not at all like a detective-type. I apologized to Ken, thanked him, and said we’d talk later.

A traitor in our nest. What could be worse?