

I

The air conditioner sucked in the steamy Washington air, wheezed, faltered, then regurgitated a dank iciness into the interior of the coffee shop. The establishment, as Fiona had observed countless times, had the air of a comfortable old street lady, shabby but serviceable, a touch world-weary but still aiming to please the customer.

"How the hell would you know?" Teddy said, in his cop's rasping croak.

"Osmosis."

It was a game they played; one of many, a professional duet, after nearly six months as homicide partners.

She watched the widening spear of sunlight illuminate the coffee slicks on the formica table. Through the smeared window, the leaves were still, and the trendy rehabilitated townhouses appeared appropriately eighteenth century in the morning light. Capitol Hill itself had the look of a sleepy village.

Sherry's, with its plastic and chrome booths, its Scotch-taped Naugahyde lounge covers, was a good spot for on-duty hiding and always, at this early morning hour, filled with coffee-gurgling police and loners fleeing from their crumbling rooming houses.

"The kids excited?" Fiona asked.

"Yeah," Teddy shrugged. He was always tight-lipped in the morning, which gave his wife Gladys fits, and his children's possessiveness was absolute and draining. They were going to Ocean City for the Fourth. He looked warily at the portable radio on the table, their umbilical cord to headquarters.

"I promised Bruce the whole weekend," Fiona said. "With his kids at camp and the House out . . ." Crazy, she thought, how their lovers' time was dictated by outside forces. She was proud of him, a

member of Congress, although she detested politics. For his part he admired her cop career as an exercise in female pluck, although she suspected that deep down he considered it an aberration.

They had planned to live together experimentally for the summer while his kids were away. She hoped it would be a vacation fantasy, July Fourth to Labor Day, like in a lazy resort holiday. Her bags were packed.

"If we make it through August, we might get married," she said. She and Teddy were intimate the way strangers on a train are intimate. She looked across the table at him, a brooding, hulking man, the genuine Teddy. His bigness gave her security. She wondered if he resented her; her youth, her education, her femaleness.

Being partners wasn't random selection. They were together only because they were Caucasians. The eggplant, the division chief, had "married" them, to keep down the salt-and-pepper tensions in the department. He always took the line of least resistance, hence the vegetable nickname.

"Quiet?" Sherry asked, coming from behind the counter to refill their cups. The spotted apron accentuated her girth.

"We hope," Fiona said, looking at the black box, which gave out static. "We both have weekend plans. But you never know in this business."

Teddy grunted indifferently. His private thoughts seemed always to be on home problems, making ends meet, raising a family of four on twenty-two five.

The radio crackled suddenly. They leaned forward, the adrenalin charging.

"The National Gallery of Art?"

"Shit." Teddy put a buck down and slid out of the booth. He was still cursing as he gunned the motor. The police car moved deftly through the traffic on First Street, past the Library of Congress.

"Goddamn tourists," he mumbled as the car slowed behind a busload of them headed toward the Capitol parking lot. The interior of

American Quartet

the police car had heated up in the morning sun and the air conditioning was still blowing hot air. Fiona felt a moustache of sweat form on her upper lip. Three police cruisers were lined up along the plaza between the National Gallery and the Hirshhorn Museum. A knot of gawking tourists had gathered near the fountain. She was dripping with perspiration as they arrived at the side entrance of the National Gallery.

"It's your scene," Teddy grumped at her. It was police homicide procedure to rotate scene and witness interrogation between partners. Today was her turn.

A glistening black face under an MPD uniform cap waylaid them. Behind him, a purring ambulance, a red light revolving on its roof, partially blocked the entrance.

"He got out this way," the black cop began excitedly, pointing to a narrow path between the bushes. Across Constitution Avenue an audience of hardhats were perched on a steel superstructure, watching the action.

"Faded into thin air," the black cop said. Fiona nodded to the uniformed policemen at the entrance, then raced through the glass doors, relieved by the sudden blast of cold air. At the top of the stairs was a small round balcony where an elevator was stalled, its door open.

"Here." Another uniformed policeman pointed as she turned into one of the gallery rooms. An apple-faced intern in crisp whites kneeled beside the body. Above him stood two paramedics, flanking a stretcher on wheels, poised to move the body.

"Is he dead?" The intern looked up and frowned. He was pale and beads of sweat covered his forehead. Not a moment too soon, she thought. The medics were always damaging physical evidence.

"Is he dead?" she repeated.

"Not yet."

The victim was a bulky man in his late forties, with a trimmed full beard. Kneeling, she quickly chalked an outline around the body, then stood up and watched as the medics lifted the victim's

unconscious body and gently laid it on the stretcher. By then Teddy had arrived.

"I better go with them," he whispered. "Maybe he'll say something on the joyride."

She knew the dilemma. It was too important to trust to an untrained uniformed cop and the homicide backup hadn't arrived yet. The wounded man, if he regained consciousness, would be their best witness.

"Everything sealed off?" she asked, then suddenly shouted at one of the paramedics, "Dammit, don't step on that blood." By the book, she was in charge.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," Teddy growled, following the wheeled stretcher.

"I don't want anyone in this room." A startled MPD policeman reluctantly shooed away the growing crowd.

"Bullshit," a voice boomed.

Turning, she confronted a red, glowering face.

"This is my beat, baby. You can't keep me out of here." He flashed a badge and an ID. "I'm Barrows. Chief of Smithsonian police."

She let herself cool, standing her ground. In the distance the ambulance siren was already screaming.

"Just securing the scene," she said calmly. "I'm FitzGerald, MPD Homicide."

He watched her, unsure, still angry. She knew what his tongue wanted to say: "You little uppity twat." Conditioned to the reaction, she waited for him to regain control.

"The lab team will be here shortly." It's a publicity case, she realized suddenly. They'll all be here, including the eggplant. Inside she groaned.

Barrows watched her helplessly. She opened her shoulder pocket-book and slid out her notebook. Legally, she preempted him.

"What is this place?" she asked firmly. Barrows's tongue probed nervously under his lip. His eyes roamed the room, betraying his

unfamiliarity with it. Others, claiming authority, were sure to follow. The eggplant would be thirsting for notoriety, making pronouncements, playing take-charge. She'd have to finesse that as well.

When the lab team came in with their equipment, she excused herself and filled in the known details.

"From the way he fell, he was shot in the back."

"It's a big room, pretty pictures," Flannagan said. He was the head of the lab team. Between them was the ethnic bond so dear to her father's heart. But that was New York PD, another place, another era, her father's time.

Barrows partially recovered his sense of authority. He brandished a map in his chubby hands, his fingers shaking slightly.

"It's gallery sixty-seven, American Art."

Fiona was sketching the scene in her notepad. Pausing, she stared at John Singer Sargent's "Portrait of Mrs. Chamberlin." It was a powerful painting, reaching out to her, deflecting her concentration. The centerpiece on the side of the room in which the victim had been killed was called "The Bersenglien." A painter she had never heard of—Lukas. It was a colorful street scene bedecked with flags. The man had fallen at the foot of the picture beside it—"Allies Day, 1917," by the impressionist Childe Hassam. The scene was familiar, Fifth Avenue, New York. She recognized St. Patrick's Cathedral. American flags waved in the breeze.

Next to it, near the entrance to the gallery, an enigmatic observer, "Edith Reynolds," painted by Robert Henri, seemed to mock Fiona's gruesome task. At the other end of the wall, a second Henri, "Young Woman in White," stared out with haughty indifference.

Why here? she wondered. She braced herself for the uproar to come, complicated by the onslaught of the press and TV. The Washington tourist scene was sacrosanct. With twenty million tourists a year, it was the capital's major industry. A murder in one of the choice landmarks could send the media wild.

She proceeded with her hasty sketch, carefully recording the paintings. She noted two additional Sargents, making a klotch of mute ladies confined forever in their gorgeous immortality. She also noted "Mother and Mary" by Edward Torbell and one entitled "A Friendly Call" by William Merit Chase.

Then she paced off the measurements of the large room, penciled in the bench in the center of her sketch and estimated the length of walls from floor to ceiling. By the time she had finished, Barrows had fully recovered his sense of command. She had expected it. As a woman, the best she could ever hope for was a stalemate. How else to survive in the steamy pool of police machismo?

"There were two shots," Barrows said gruffly. She took notes as if to validate the importance of his information. He made a sour face at her shorthand but went on with his account. "My boys heard both. He ducked out through gallery seventy-one. A passel of high school kids were coming up the stairs. He threaded through them and out the door."

"Past the guards," she interrupted. They were merely bodies and this was not one of their textbook possibilities.

"They didn't want to endanger the kids," he said, biting his lip.

Low-paid, inefficient flunkies, she wanted to tell him but checked herself. She hoped the man would live. Then it wouldn't be her case. Only if death occurred . . .

She dreaded interviewing the teenagers, looking for reliable witnesses. Older kids were notoriously unreliable. As for the guards, boredom had dulled their powers of observation. But Barrows was not to be deterred.

"Nevertheless," Barrows said, as if he was about to impart a bombshell, "the guard at the east door thinks he saw a white man with a moustache and long hair. Youngish. Medium height, wearing dark jeans and dark shirt . . ."

She half-listened, searching the crowded gallery entrance for Teddy, who suddenly lumbered toward them.

American Quartet

"It's ours, Fiona. He was DOA." He read from his notebook. "Joseph Damato. Age forty-eight. He was a high school teacher from Hagerstown, Maryland. Taught art. No record."

Crime of passion perhaps, she thought, already concocting theories. A search for theory began early in an investigation.

"We're knee-deep in eyewitnesses," Teddy said.

"We got a pretty good description from our door guard." Teddy nodded at Barrows without interest and left her to finish the sketch. The mobile lab team had laid out their equipment and camera flashes popped in the room like tiny match fires.

Nearly an hour later, the eggplant himself, Homicide Captain Luther Greene, arrived, resplendent in a tan summer suit and Yves St. Laurent tie, a perfect accompaniment to his dark chocolate complexion. Tiny splashes of gray on the tie went well with his distinguished temples. He was decked out for the press.

"What have we got, Fitz?" he asked in a pleasant, purring voice.

She told him in accurate homicide language. She could almost sense him composing the press statement. In the role of spokesman, he was perfect casting.

"No theories?" It was the eggplant's usual opener.

"Too early." Fiona looked down at the rough chalk line she had drawn. A flash popped, blinding her for a second, giving her just enough time to throw him raw meat. She was not above a special kind of pandering. Besides, he needed a good script for the media.

"The way he fell, he might have been looking at the Hassam."

"The what?"

"Childe Hassam. The American impressionist." She remembered the name from an art appreciation course at Brooklyn College. He squinted at the brass plate that identified the picture.

"Some kind of a celebration somewhere," he mumbled.

"New York City. During World War One."

"Does it connect?" he asked.

She shrugged.

Teddy joined them. Despite his size, he had a knack of making himself appear neutral. He was also good at anticipating questions.

"He was tall and short. White and black. Blond and dark. There were two shots. Three shots. One guy heard four. The only consistency was facial hair. He had a moustache." He paused. "And male." He grinned at her. It was another banter bit in their duet. Murder was a man's game. A woman killed only in passion.

"Next of kin?" The eggplant always asked the right questions for a performance. What he meant was, should he reveal the man's name to the media? It always added a little suspense to keep it hidden. The line went: "We can't reveal it until the next of kin is notified," in response to: "Was the victim important?"

The eggplant seemed pleased. Not that she and Teddy were experts who performed under his care and feeding. He defied experts. All his brains were in his ego and all his energies were directed at making himself look good to his superiors. The next step for him was inspector. Beyond that, chief. They all knew where he was heading. He swaggered across the gallery to the nearest exit, already posturing to face the press.

"A lineup might light a spark," Teddy said. "We're making arrangements. I've also asked the guard to come downtown. Maybe with an artist, we might get lucky."

"An Italian high school teacher from Hagerstown is shot in the back while viewing a work of art. Why here?" She knew it was a rhetorical question. Teddy watched her, his eyes gloomy with disappointment. The son of a bitch had ruined his July Fourth weekend.

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