

LINDSEY & PLUM BOOK SIX

THE
SILVER
CHARIOT

KILLER



RICHARD A. LUPOFF

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BORGOPRESS BOOKS BY RICHARD A. LUPOFF

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2. *The Classic Car Killer*
3. *The Bessie Blue Killer*
4. *The Sepia Siren Killer*
5. *The Cover Girl Killer*
6. *The Silver Chariot Killer*
7. *The Radio Red Killer*
8. *The Emerald Cat Killer*
9. *One Murder at a Time: The Casebook of Lindsey & Plum*

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DEDICATION

For Whitey, Congo, Mr. Jinx, Smokey, Lady, Pepper, Snoopy, Bonzo, Lucy, Magnum, Daisy, Ramona, and Mister Boris Peabody. Faithful friends, none of whom has ever read a word I wrote.

INTRODUCTION

by Steven Saylor

One of the treats of working in publishing is getting to read books before they're actually published—sometimes hot off the word processor, in fact. Last week I read two prepublished books. One was my own latest novel about ancient murder and mayhem, which I reread as typeset galleys (for work); the other was the book you hold in your hands, which I had the rare privilege of reading in manuscript (for pleasure).

At first glance, you might not think that Richard Lupoff's *The Silver Chariot Killer* (which takes place mostly in modern New York) and my own *A Murder on the Appian Way* (set in 52 B.C.) could have much in common, aside from the fact that both revolve around a murder and so come under the increasingly flexible genre classification of "mystery and suspense." Yes, both are whodunits—but they share something more than that, something very significant. Both draw a special energy and inspiration from a certain place, a city that is more than just a city, whose legendary name evokes a whole registry of ideas and emotions spanning hundreds of lifetimes.

Here's a clue: All roads are said to lead there.

And when you're there, you must do as the locals do.

And while you're there, if you throw a coin into a certain fountain, destiny will inevitably bring you boomeranging back.

And the place will definitely still be there when you return, because it's the Eternal City.

The place is so legendary, you see, that our epigrams about it have become clichés.

But clichés can be powerful. Just ask any politician—but especially one with a fascist bent, like Benito Mussolini, who played at being Caesar and updated Roman ideals of order and beauty into twentieth-century jackbooted kitsch. Or consider a modern-day, right-wing politician like Randolph Amoroso in *The Silver Chariot Killer*, who proudly speaks of establishing an American empire to

rival Rome's. Crazy, you say? It could never happen here? Amoroso thinks it could—and believes his movement would become unstoppable if only he could lay his hands on a certain ancient artifact....

Ah, but I'm getting ahead of the story, and that wouldn't be fair to anyone about to plunge into *The Silver Chariot Killer*.

Besides a fascination with Rome, there's something else that Dick Lupoff and I have in common: a passion for obscure, vintage mysteries. It turns out we've both read a whodunit from 1935 called *The Julius Caesar Murder Case*, by Wallace Irwin. Irwin's conceit was to have guys like Caesar and Mark Antony talk (and behave) like gangsters in a Hammett novel. The device works better than you might think, because when you come right down to it, Caesar and company pretty much were gangsters. (To drive home the point, Irwin sardonically dedicated the novel to Mussolini and Hitler.) Ancient Rome hasn't been the only place where you couldn't tell the politicians and the gangsters apart. It's happened before and it'll happen again. That's one of the implicit themes in *The Silver Chariot Killer*: the way things get all twisted and screwy when rich, powerful men become indistinguishable from criminals—are, in fact, criminals, though careful never to be classified as such.

More immediate dangers confront Lupoff's dogged sleuth, Hobart Lindsey—like the threat of getting blown away in some dark, slushy New York alley for snooping into the details of a brutal murder best left unexplained. But when you're a crack insurance claims adjuster, and you work for a boss like the imperious Desmond Richelieu, and the victim was one of your own co-workers, you don't let the threat of getting blown away deter you—not if you're made of the same stuff as Hobart Lindsey.

But what, readers of the five previous books in the series will ask, of Marvia Plum? Marvia, who's taken part in all of Lindsey's past investigations, beginning with *The Comic Book Killer* (1988). Marvia, who made her exit from Lindsey's life last time out, in *The Cover Girl Killer* (1995), when she married someone else. Lindsey misses her sorely, and so do we. Will Marvia come back? Is Lindsey's life possible without her? My lips are sealed.

I can tell you that a fascinating new female enters Lindsey's life in

The Silver Chariot Killer, though this relationship is more avuncular than romantic. The reader may well decide that, as with Rome, all roads lead to Anna Maria Berry, the black, Jewish, Italian-American computer whiz kid and history maven. Indeed, with her mixed heritage, her knowledge of the past, and her computer-age outlook, Anna Maria seems the culmination of three thousand years of history, all wrapped up in a single girl. You'll meet her soon.

I feel at home in Lupoff's New York, even if Denverite Hobart Lindsey doesn't. It's a long way from my usual stamping grounds in ancient Rome, but here in *The Silver Chariot Killer* are a pair of brothers named Cletus and Petrus, from a city called Pinopolis; here is the chill season of the midwinter holiday (called Christmas by Hobart Lindsey, but better known as Saturnalia to my sleuth, Gordianus the Finder); here is the stimulating mix of races, nationalities, sexualities, and religions that makes a city truly cosmopolitan, whether it be modern New York or ancient Rome; here are the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, the wise and the superstitious, the greedy and the generous, hunters and hunted, killers and victims.

Of course, Lupoff strikes some notes that are strictly modern—such as the young woman with the pierced tongue, the ins and outs of the Internet, and the deft citations of cultural nostalgia that emerge from watching too much AMC on television. (Those making fleeting cameo appearances in Hobart Lindsey's nostalgia-ridden imagination this time out include Bela Lugosi in *White Zombie* and another shared Lupoff-Saylor taste, Edna May Oliver as the one-and-only Miss Hildegard Withers.)

Best of all, there is the eponymous silver chariot itself, said to have been the plaything of Julius Caesar. Lupoff describes the fabulous provenance of this artifact in fascinating detail—but does such a chariot really exist? Is it the stuff of gauzy myth, or of harsh, murderous reality? A mere MacGuffin, as Hitchcock might say, or a near-mystical “Numinous Object,” as Auden said of Tolkien's ring, resonant with psychological magic? Will Lindsey discover the truth—or will the silver chariot prove to be as elusive as that famous bird of Malta, always just out of reach? You have only to turn the

page to begin to find out....

CHAPTER ONE

Berry was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Richelieu signed it. And Richelieu's name was good upon the 'net for anything he chose to put his hand to.

Old Berry was dead as a door-nail.

Lindsey closed the glossy in-flight magazine and slipped it into the pocket of the seat in front of him. Leave it to the airlines to revive Dickens for the Christmas issue. He leaned his forehead against the Plexiglas window and let his attention wander across the moon-lit clouds beyond the big jetliner's wing.

Of course it wasn't Berry, it was Marley. And it wasn't Richelieu, it was Scrooge. And it wasn't the Internet, it was the London Stock Exchange.

But Cletus Berry was dead, dead if not yet buried, dead as a door-nail. And Hobart Lindsey was flying to New York, probably in time for Berry's funeral and certainly in time to try and find out what had happened to his—to his what?

Berry had been his fellow employee of International Surety. They'd been room-mates during the orientation seminar when both of them were selected for SPUDS, International Surety's Special Projects Unit, and Berry had helped Lindsey research a couple of tricky cases. Probably that made them friends, or as close to friends as their positions allowed them to be in the wonderful world of the modern corporation.

There was still an airline cup of coffee on Lindsey's tray. He picked it up and sipped. The coffee had been weak and stale to start with. Now it was cold as well. He reached under his seat and pulled out the carrying case with his company-issue laptop computer.

He looked around for someone to take the coffee away. The flight attendants were decked out in Santa Clause hats. These made a complement to their quasi-naval uniforms. But at the moment there

were no flight attendants near Lindsey's row. The passenger to his left, a seriously overweight teen-ager wearing a Denver Nuggets cap with the bill pointing backwards, had fallen asleep and was wheezing softly with each breath. He wore a sweat-stained tee shirt with a picture of a giant mistletoe on the chest and the motto, *Kiss me, it's Christmas!* There was no climbing over him, and Lindsey didn't want to shake him awake and ask him to let Lindsey reach the aisle.

Finally Lindsey got rid of the coffee by swallowing it and put the empty cup carefully on the cabin floor. He booted up the computer and opened the file on the murder of his friend.

There wasn't much there. Lindsey had showed up at the Special Projects Unit of International Surety, in Denver, as usual that morning. The air was sparkling and the cold didn't bother him too much. As Mondays went, this one looked pretty good. Lindsey was starting to feel comfortable in his new assignment as Desmond Richelieu's deputy. Well, less uncomfortable, anyway, than he had been when he first agreed to take the job.

For once Mrs. Blomquist had motioned Lindsey straight into the Director's office with no corporate bureaucratic shenanigans to delay him. And for once Richelieu hadn't been seated behind his desk, his pinstriped suit immaculate and his gold-rimmed glasses reflecting the Colorado sunlight.

Richelieu had been pacing, and his salt-and-pepper hair had been in disarray.

He shoved a paper at Lindsey, a print of the morning report from International Surety's New York regional headquarters, designated in the corporate plan as Manhattan East.

Special Projects Unit—SPUDS—acted like a private empire within International Surety, but every “detached” SPUDS operative kept up liaison with the local offices of the company. International Surety was as procedure-bound and as paper-heavy as any multinational, but SPUDS agents were freed from the usual corporate structure. They reported directly to Richelieu. The Director ran SPUDS the way his onetime mentor, J. Edgar Hoover, had run the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The FBI was Hoover's private empire inside

the Department of Justice, and SPUDS was Desmond “Ducky” Richelieu’s private empire inside International Surety.

The toughest cases came to SPUDS, the weirdest cases, and the biggest cases. Hobart Lindsey had handled some of the best—or worst—of them, but now he was on his way to New York to take care of a matter that had rattled his boss’s empire to its foundation.

Cletus Berry had been found in an alley in Hell’s Kitchen, the old New York slum to the west of the theater district and Times Square. The word had come via KlameNet/Plus from Morris A. Zissler, assistant to the International Surety branch manager, Manhattan East.

Lindsey took the computer printout and hurried from Richelieu’s imposing suite to his own modest office. He picked up a telephone and called Zissler. From Zissler he got a few details.

It had been a freezing December morning in New York. A sanitation worker—they used to be garbage men, Lindsey thought—had entered the alley to pick up a load of trash. He found Berry. He called the cops. By the time they arrived at the scene, the body had lain in the freezing sleet long enough that the coroner’s technicians had to chip it out of the ice.

Not that Berry was alone. With him was one Frankie Fulton, familiarly known as “FF,” in part because those were his initials, but mainly because he was a longtime petty criminal, unsuccessful gambler, and perennial gangster wannabe.

Early in his career, Frankie had tried to bluff his way to the biggest pot in the biggest poker game he’d ever been in. He was deep in the hole, betting on credit—itself a rarity in Frankie’s circles—and put his all on one five-card hand. When it came time to show, Frankie triumphantly produced a king, nine and eight and three of diamonds, with one corner of a red ten peeping out between the king and the nine.

Frankie reached for the pot with one hand and for his hat with the other, happily crowing, “Diamond flush.”

Unfortunately for Frankie, another player had two pairs, one of which was the tens of clubs and diamonds.

Frankie escaped from that incident with his life, a very badly

broken leg that eventually healed but left him walking with a marked limp, and the permanent nickname, “FF.” Frankie “Four Flusher” Fulton, too, had needed to be chipped out of the frozen slush.

The two men were equally dead.

“How did they buy it?” Lindsey demanded.

“Shot.”

“How?”

Zissler hummed into the phone. “That’s a little bit odd. Fulton was shot a lot.” He paused and hummed.

“Come on,” Lindsey urged, “you’ve got to help me.”

“Well, knee-capped—shot in both knees—that must have hurt like hell. And he was shot in both hands, and in both arms, and finally through the heart.”

“And no one noticed?”

“It was sleeting hard last night. And this is New York. People don’t get involved.”

“You mean nobody heard the shots?”

“Eleventh Avenue isn’t a great neighborhood, Mr. Lindsey. I don’t guess you know New York, do you?”

Lindsey could never get used to being called Mister. “No, I don’t.”

“Well, even in good neighborhoods, people don’t like to get involved. In Hell’s Kitchen—well...” He stopped speaking. He hummed softly.

Lindsey wondered how much of Zissler’s humming it would take to get on his nerves. “You’re telling me all about this Fulton person. What’s our interest in him? Did he have a policy with I.S.?”

“No, Mr. Lindsey, but when two bodies are found together, both of them shot—you see? And the cops knew Frankie Fulton. When they found the bodies and found Cletus Berry’s ID, they called International Surety. I talked to a detective. She knew all about Frankie Fulton. She didn’t know anything about Mr. Berry. She wanted to know about him. I couldn’t tell her much. I knew the guy. I met him a couple of times. That was all.”

There was a lengthy silence.

Lindsey said, “You met him? Tell me about that.”

“Mr. Berry had his own office, he didn’t like to work out of

Manhattan East, he just wanted us to pay his bills, get him office supplies. Typical SPUDS big shot. He rented this little place and put a computer and a futon and a microwave in it and made himself a little home-away-from-home. I was up there a couple of times to deliver documents. Arrogant, too good to hang out with us peons. Whoops—”

Zissler paused.

Lindsey waited.

“I didn’t mean that you were, uh—”

Lindsey said, “Never mind. What about Berry?”

“Uh, just twice. I mean, he was just shot twice. Small caliber rounds, the detective said. Did I tell you that? Police don’t have a lab report yet but the detective told me the holes were small and there wasn’t much bleeding, almost certainly .22’s. That wouldn’t be too noisy, either, not like a .45 or a nine millimeter or even a Police Special.”

Lindsey held the phone in his right hand and held his left hand in front of his face. It was shaking. “Where was Berry hit?”

“Not nice,” Zissler said. “One gut-shot. That’s really nasty. You shoot somebody like that when you want him to take a long time dying and to suffer a lot. The detective told me that, see? And the other was through the head. Made a hole in his forehead, must have stayed in his brain, no exit wound. The detective said that the bullet must have bounced around inside his skull, chopped his brain to pieces. Probably still in there. Probably the coroner will get it out. The detective told me that.”

Lindsey told Zissler he was coming to New York. Mrs. Blomquist would set up the trip from Denver, and would Zissler please make arrangements for him in New York. He took Zissler’s extension, got the name and number of the detective in charge of the case, and hung up. Lindsey had jotted notes on a yellow pad as Zissler spoke. He transferred the key information to his pocket organizer and slipped it into his jacket. He trotted back to Richelieu’s office.

Richelieu had run a comb through his hair and was seated behind his desk; he was back to his usual imperial style. “You’re going.”

“Of course.”

“It’s I.S. business.”

“It’s SPUDS business.”

Richelieu looked up at Lindsey. “You’re after my job, aren’t you?”

Lindsey said, “No way.”

He went back to his own office and logged onto KlameNet/Plus. He used his SPUDS override code to get into Cletus Berry’s personnel file. How well had he really known Berry? After that first training course in Denver they’d only met a couple more times, always at SPUDS refresher meetings and seminars.

Were they friends? Maybe. Colleagues, surely. Partners of a sort. But Lindsey had a feeling that if he left Cletus Berry’s murder in the hands of the NYPD odds were it would never be solved, and if he relied on Morris Zissler to handle the matter, the odds would be even worse.

He heard a humming sound. He shook his head and it went away. He wasn’t going to let Morris Zissler haunt him. The man seemed earnest enough, just not too bright, and slightly on the smug side. Not a promising combination.

* * * *

Lindsey shut down the laptop and slid it into its case.

The teenager in the Denver Nuggets cap and the Kiss Me shirt had sagged against Lindsey. Trying to get out from under the teenager’s weight, Lindsey squirmed. The kid twitched in his sleep, jumped, then climbed out of his seat and waddled up the aisle, toward the toilet. Halfway there he glanced back over his shoulder and gave Lindsey a dirty look.

Lindsey pulled the in-flight magazine out of the pocket in front of him again and flipped through the pages. The reprint of *A Christmas Carol* was illustrated in colorful scenes that made Dickens’ London look a lot like the set of a Tim Burton movie. The publisher noted in tiny type that the story was abridged for the convenience of busy air travelers. The magazine was full of ads for tropical resorts, business suites in big city hotels, and offers of free sample watches, computer software, and carry-on luggage. Everybody was running a

Christmas special, even on free offers.

Lindsey sighed and gave up on the magazine. There was always the folder illustrating evacuation routes to study. It was a marvel of graphic communication, hardly a word in it. Perfect for getting a message to a multilingual audience.

Outside the 777's windows the December moon shone so brightly that it seemed to blaze. A cloud layer beneath the jet reflected the moonlight. Above the plane the black sky was dotted with stars. However, there was no sign of either Santa's sleigh or the Star of Bethlehem.

The captain's voice broke Lindsey's reverie. They would be landing at JFK in half an hour. The temperature was well below freezing and sleet was falling in New York.

Lindsey slipped his International Surety credit card into the slot in front of him and made an air-to-ground telephone call.

Morris Zissler had agreed to pick him up at the airport. At least the man was good for that. Lindsey wondered what Zissler looked like. Based on the man's voice he expected a heavysset, middle-aged man in a brown suit. Zissler would be wearing a rumpled white button-down shirt and a worn, striped tie.

Coming out of the jetway, Lindsey was engulfed in a maelstrom of travelers and the families and friends who turned out to greet them. Half the greeters and half the travelers had brightly-wrapped gifts in their hands. He spotted his seatmate, the massive teenager, waddling from the gate, a flight-bag in his hand.

A spectacular blonde, as tall as the kid in the baseball cap but easily 200 pounds lighter, flew into his arms, hugging him and planting kisses on his face. Lindsey blinked. Maybe the fat kid had something that Lindsey didn't know about. Maybe the spectacular blonde just liked them fat.

By the time the crowd had thinned Lindsey spotted the man he guessed was Morris Zissler. His expectation was not disappointed. He approached the man, said, "Zissler?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Lindsey? Oh, I see you've got one of those little potato badges in your button hole, just like Mr. Berry. SPUDS, I get it. That's clever. Just call me Moe, Mr. Lindsey. Welcome to New

York.”

He helped Lindsey collect his baggage. Lindsey liked to travel light, but for once he had checked his flight bag and for once the bag had made its way from Denver to JFK without disappearing, getting bashed beyond recognition, or taking a side trip to York, England.

Zissler insisted on carrying the heavy flight bag from the claim area to the parking lot. The sleet was falling and Lindsey turned up the collar of his seldom-used overcoat. He didn’t have a hat, and he could feel his hair starting to crust over with sleet. Maybe the kid in the Nuggets hat had more on the ball than met the eye.

With a grunt that interrupted his humming, Zissler hefted Lindsey’s flight bag into the trunk of a new sedan. Lindsey was too tired and sore to notice what kind of sedan it was. He held onto the laptop. He thought he might get used to this VIP treatment in time. It wasn’t really so bad.

“You picked a rough night to fly, Mr. Lindsey.” Zissler actually held the door open for him.

“Cletus Berry picked a rough night to get murdered.”

Zissler started the engine and put the sedan into gear. Lindsey noticed that the car was full of peppermint fumes. He leaned his elbow against the door and squeezed his eyes between forefinger and thumb.

Even at this hour of the morning, and even in miserable, freezing, wet December weather, the freeway leading into Manhattan was jammed.

No, Lindsey told himself, they don’t call them freeways here.

CHAPTER TWO

Lindsey scrunched down inside the futon, alternately cursing himself for not calling ahead for a hotel reservation and either Mrs. Blomquist or Corporate Travel for not thinking to ask if he needed one. No, it was his own fault for relying on Morris Zissler's judgment.

It was *cold*. Of course—this was an office building, why would the landlord provide heat late at night? Fortunately, Berry had brought in a space heater. It helped a little. Only a little.

In his years with International Surety, Lindsey had done plenty of traveling, and he'd always stayed in comfortable accommodations. But when Moe Zissler asked Lindsey where to drop him off, Lindsey had no answer.

Zissler had suggested his using Cletus Berry's *pied à terre*, and after a moment's hesitation, Lindsey had agreed. Zissler rattled a key to the place, and when he drove through the Queens Midtown Tunnel and through Manhattan's slushy streets, Lindsey got his first real look at New York.

He'd have to learn the city fast if he was going to do anything with this puzzle. It was the first time he'd taken a case for International Surety where the company had no financial stake. Normally, Desmond Richelieu would have squelched any effort like this one, but for all the Director's faults, he was loyal to his troops and he wasn't going to let Cletus Berry's murder stand as just one more statistic in the most murderous country in the world.

Zissler drove uptown for a few blocks, then pulled to a stop in front of a nondescript commercial building on West 58th Street. "This is it."

He raced around the car and opened the door for Lindsey.

The heater had been on, and the flow of warm, stuffy air had lulled Lindsey into a half-doze. He climbed out of the car and drew cold air into his lungs. That woke him up.

Torrington Tower. That was the name of the building, engraved

into the granite lintel above the thick glass and tarnished cast-iron doors. Lindsey craned his neck. The Torrington Tower might have been considered a tower when it was erected; now, it was dwarfed by its neighbors.

“How are we going to get in?” Lindsey asked.

Zissler separated a pair of keys from a massive batch. “I had an extra set made when I heard you were coming to town, Mr. Lindsey. There’s a guard in the lobby, but we’ve got keys to the lobby door and to Mr. Berry’s office, both.”

He hauled Lindsey’s flight bag out of the sedan’s trunk. Lindsey clung to his laptop computer in its carrying case. Zissler opened the lobby door and stood aside while Lindsey entered. The door locked itself behind them with a click.

The guard was behind the desk, as Zissler had promised. He stood up when Zissler and Lindsey entered. He’d been reading; now he laid his book down on his desk, spine upward. Lindsey read the title. *Principles of Modern Accounting for the Medium-Sized Business.*

The guard was a tall Hispanic with rich wavy hair and a small mustache. He wore a name tag. It said, *R. Bermúdez.*

R. Bermúdez said, “Hello, Mr. Zissler. This gentleman with you?”

Zissler said, “This is Mr. Lindsey. Rodrigo Bermúdez.”

Lindsey extended his hand.

The guard smiled and shook it. “Rigo. Please just call me Rigo.”

Zissler led the way to a small elevator that creaked and wobbled its way up six stories. On the way up, Zissler said, “Rodrigo’s twin brother works here, too. Can’t tell ’em apart except by their school-books. Rodrigo’s studying accounting. Benjamino’s out to be a lawyer.”

Once they reached Cletus Berry’s erstwhile home-away-from-home Zissler put Lindsey’s flight bag on the carpet, then handed him the keys.

“Didn’t the coroner put a seal on this place?” Lindsey asked. “Or the police?”

Zissler shook his head. “This is New York, Mr. Lindsey.” Apparently he regarded that as a full explanation.

Maybe it was.

Lindsey reached for his pocket organizer. He opened it and said to Zissler, “I want to make sure I’ve got this right. The detective on the case is named Marcie Sokolov. You’ve met her?”

Zissler shook his head. “I spoke with her. By telephone.”

Lindsey chewed his lower lip. This guy wasn’t going to be much help, that was obvious. He was like a big, good-natured, not-very-bright dog. He wanted desperately to please, but unless you kept the instructions simple, really simple, he was more likely to mess up than to help out.

“What was your impression of this, ah, Detective Sokolov?”

“She was okay.”

Lindsey looked around the office for a chair. The furnishings weren’t quite as sparse as Zissler had indicated. There was a nondescript gray rug on the floor and a couple of cheap prints of Rome on the walls. In addition to the computer, the microwave, and the futon, there were a desk with a telephone on it, a couple of chairs, and a filing cabinet. One window offered a view that surprised Lindsey. Some quirk of architecture had left a narrow line of sight to the north. He recognized Central Park from a hundred movies and a thousand postcards. He imagined he could see Dick Haymes and Deanna Durbin riding through the park pursued by the dastardly Boss Tweed, played by Vincent Price, in an AMC revival of *Up in Central Park*.

There were three doors in the room. One, Lindsey and Zissler had come through. Lindsey opened the others. A bathroom complete with shower stall. Okay. And a closet. A rack of clothes, a lightweight, mini-, what the heck did they call it, dresserette maybe. A shelf with a few pairs of shoes and a little TV set. The TV was one of those compact models with a built-in VCR.

Huh.

Lindsey dropped to his hands and knees and scoped out the electrical connections under the desk. There was a power line for the computer, a fax/modem connection, and a TV cable outlet.

“She, um, Detective Sokolov asked me some questions,” Zissler added to his statement.

Lindsey stood up and looked out the window. There were still a

few lights on, farther uptown, but it was the park that held his attention. “What questions?”

“Well, like, Did Mr. Berry have any enemies? Did he use drugs? Did he go to Atlantic City often? Bet with bookies? Was he in debt? Did he run around with women?”

“And what did you tell her?”

“I told her no.”

“But you told me you hardly knew Berry. How did you know he didn’t have gambling debts? Or a dozen girlfriends?”

“Well, that’s right, I guess I didn’t know him very well. But he didn’t seem to have any enemies. Or—or the rest of it. Gambling, I mean. Or drugs.”

“Women?”

“I never saw Mr. Berry with any women. I wouldn’t know anything about that.”

Lindsey knew that Berry was married and had a child. Berry had mentioned his wife once or twice, but Lindsey could not remember his saying anything about a child. Lindsey had learned about the child—a daughter—from Berry’s personnel file.

Cletus Berry was a sweet guy. Had been a sweet guy. Had been a top worker, Lindsey could testify to that. He had a pleasant personality, he made good dinner-table conversation and he had been an easy-going, unobtrusive room-mate. But he seldom spoke about his private life. Lindsey should have known that was a danger sign, but somehow he’d failed to pick up on it with Berry. *Put the dunce cap on me*, Lindsey thought. *There’s more here than meets the eye.*

“Did Sokolov say what the police were planning to do about the killings?”

“About Mr. Berry and that other fellow? Well, Detective Sokolov said they were going to investigate fully.”

Lindsey held his head in his hands. Then he lowered his hands and looked at his watch. He’d readjusted his watch as the jet approached JFK so the watch was running on Eastern Time even though Lindsey’s body still thought it was two hours earlier.

Zissler said, “I’d like to help out, Mr. Lindsey, but it’s awfully late. I have to drive back out to Queens. And my wife always worries

when I'm late."

Lindsey said, "Sure. I'll call you at Manhattan East if I need you."

As Zissler headed for the elevator, Lindsey could hear him humming. He thought, *If only he'd hum something with a melody.* But with a Moe Zissler, you took what you could get.

Now Lindsey scrunched down inside the futon.

This was the same Japanese bed that Cletus Berry had used. There were almost certainly a few of Berry's hairs in the bed, and microscopic sheddings of dead skin.

Why had Berry kept this place? He was entitled to office space at Manhattan East, but as a SPUDS agent he was authorized to set up a separate facility if he chose. Lindsey had been offered the same choice, and had come close to moving out of the Northern California office where he'd worked before his move to Denver. It wasn't strange that Berry had preferred the privacy and independence of a separate office.

But why a bed and a microwave oven? Why a TV? Why a closet full of clothing? Had Berry been leading a double life?

Lindsey had unpacked his flight bag and hung his suits in the closet along with Berry's. If there were any clues in the office, Lindsey would have to find them. If the police hadn't bothered to seal it off, there was no way they were going to send a forensics squad in to look for evidence.

What was Cletus Berry doing on Eleventh Avenue in the middle of the night, in the company of a petty mobster?

It didn't make sense.

Lindsey closed his eyes and tried to get a feeling for the case. It was early on, he didn't have much to work with, but sometimes you walked into a puzzle like this and you got a feeling for it.

Not this time.

* * * *

He had half a dream just as he was waking up. He was swimming in cold water. It was dirty and gray and he didn't like it and it kept getting deeper the more he struggled. Then something was holding

his arms and legs so he couldn't swim and he started to get cold water in his nose and mouth.

Then he woke up fully and discovered that it wasn't the water but the sunlight that was cold and gray. He climbed out of the futon and pulled on a sweater and a pair of pants. He padded across the carpeted floor and looked outside. The thoroughfares were filled with traffic. The accumulated sleet had already been shoved to the sides of the street, making shin-high gray-black berms along the curbs.

He looked at his watch. It was seven o'clock. He'd had less than three hours sleep. He cleaned up, using Cletus Berry's little shower stall. Berry had left behind a plastic bottle of shampoo, and a razor on the sink. The only thing Lindsey had to provide for himself was a toothbrush.

He dressed in a gray woolen suit and overcoat and left the office. He rode down in the elevator and passed a couple of business-people in the lobby and nodded. They ignored him.

A different guard sat at the battered wooden desk in the front lobby. He looked up at Lindsey and frowned, clearly disturbed to see a stranger coming out of the elevator and leaving the building so early in the morning.

Lindsey told the guard his name, told him he worked for International Surety and would be using the rented office for an indefinite time.

The guard looked more puzzled than ever. Like Rigo Bermúdez, he wore a gray uniform with a Sam Browne belt. There was even a holster bucked to the belt; Lindsey wondered whether there was really a weapon in it, or if it was just for show. The guard was easily thirty years Bermúdez' senior and his uniform sleeve showed blue sergeant's chevrons. The plastic name tag attached to his uniform jacket said, *Halter*. He wore half-glasses on the end of his nose and he'd been reading the *Daily News*. He had reddish, mottled skin and a bushy white mustache and white hair that stuck out from under his uniform cap. He looked a lot like Wilfred Brimley.

The guard frowned. "Linsley, is it?"

"Lindsey."

"I know. That's what Mike Quill called the mayor. Linsley. Name

was Lindsey. Did it just to irk him. Great man, he was.”

“Mayor Lindsey? I’ve heard of him. I don’t think we’re related.”

“Not Linsley. Mike Quill was the great man. Ran the transit union. Great man.” He laid down the newspaper and said, “International Surety, hey? Who’s that? Sounds like some kind of insurance outfit.”

Lindsey said, “It is. Cletus Berry worked for us.”

“Oh.” Daylight broke across the old man’s face. “Sure, Mr. Berry. Nice man. Pity, what happened. Pity.”

Lindsey said, “How did you find out about it? Has anybody been here investigating?”

The guard laid his *Daily News* flat on his desk, turned it so Lindsey could see the front page. A huge headline announced, *BLOOD AND ICE!* Beneath it, in smaller type, *Santa Rubs Out Duo in West Side Alley.*

A stark black-and-white photograph filled most of the lower half of the page. It showed two bodies lying on an icy sidewalk, a couple of corrugated metal garbage cans and some cardboard boxes behind them. The face of one corpse was thin, middle-aged, unshaven. The man wore what looked like a badly frayed, too-thin coat, and the blotches on it had to be blood.

The second corpse was better dressed, but the angle of the photo showed little of its face. That shortcoming was offset by a smaller photo, framed in an oval and inset in what would have been the right-hand third of the larger photo. It was the face of a black man. He wore a white shirt and a dark necktie. You could see the edge of his suit inside his overcoat. His eyes were open and staring; they had the filmed-over look of the grisly post-mortem photos taken to celebrate nineteenth century hangings.

There was a perfect black dot above and between the eyes. On a Hindu, it might have been a caste mark. But on Cletus Berry’s dark, African American face, Lindsey knew that the dot was a bullet hole. He knew that inside the cranium behind that small, neat hole, Cletus Berry’s brain had been scrambled like a pan of eggs.

“So you’re from the insurance company,” the guard said. “You come to pay off on a policy?”

Lindsey said, “No. I’m here to find out who killed Cletus Berry.”

The guard opened his newspaper again. He grinned up at Lindsey. Come to think of it, he looked more like Edmund Gwenn than Wilfred Brimley. He'd need to grow a beard, of course. Then he could play Santa Claus in the next remake of *Miracle on 34th Street*.

"So, you going to be using Mr. Berry's office now?" Halter asked. Lindsey nodded. "For a while."

The guard said, "I hope you can do some good. Cops sure won't. Too busy with politics and graft. Same as ever."

Lindsey said, "Sergeant Halter—" He reached for his wallet. He had a discretionary fund, and this looked like a good time to be discreet. He extracted a couple of medium-large bills from his wallet. "Mr. Halter—"

"Just call me Lou." The bills disappeared. David Copperfield would have been proud. "Anything I can do to help."

"Isn't a little bit unusual for a tenant to have his office furnished the way Cletus Berry's was?"

Halter frowned. "How's that?"

"Well, it looks as if he might have lived there sometimes."

"Never in there. I wouldn't know."

"But is it even legal?" Lindsey persisted.

Halter frowned, concentrating. "Building's zoned commercial, not residential. But I guess anybody can put a couch in his office, don't you think? And maybe a little kitchenette, and nuke a cup of soup if he feels like it? And if he's working late and he decides he wants to catch forty winks.... I don't think it's nobody's business. Nobody's. Do you?"

"No."

The lobby behind Lindsey was getting busy. People were arriving, the elevator was humming. Clearly, there were more tenants than the elevator could handle, and the ones who had to wait shuffled their feet and watched the indicator as the car creaked up and back down.

It was Christmas, though, so at least the small talk was friendly. "I was wondering, Sergeant—ah, Lou."

Halter looked at Lindsey over the tops of his glasses.

"What goes on in this building? It isn't exactly, well, the latest in posh surroundings, is it?"

Halter grinned crookedly. “Sure ain’t. Probably get pulled down one of these days. But for now, it’s a great address and it don’t cost no arm and a leg to rent a little office. So you got a lot of little guys trying to look big in this building. Couple of music publishers and theatrical agents, half a dozen loan companies and lawyers. Shylocks and Sherlocks, I call ’em. Got a few outfits call themselves consultants, I wouldn’t know who consults ’em or for what.”

Lindsey grunted a vague thank-you. It seemed unlikely that the killer was a fellow Torrington Towers renter, but you could never tell. Somebody who had it in for Berry might want to do his dirty work away from the building to keep the spotlight off himself.

Lou Halter had gone back to his newspaper.

Lindsey crossed the lobby. In seconds he was part of the crowd passing on the sidewalk. Yep, it was Christmas. Christmas, and NFL playoff time.

Lindsey walked along 58th Street. The morning was still gray, but the sun was starting to fight its way through the clouds. Lindsey wasn’t used to sidewalks this crowded, to people moving with the speed and seeming urgency that New Yorkers did.

Well, he’d adjust. He’d managed to speed up for Chicago, to slow down for New Orleans, he’d find the right pace for New York.

He stopped in a counter-joint, slid onto a stool and reached for a menu. Before he could look at the menu a waitress poured a cup of coffee and shoved it at him and asked, “What’ll you have?”

Lindsey took a breath.

The waitress didn’t wait. “How ’bout the special? I’m busy. Scrambled eggs and a muffin.”

Lindsey said, “No. No eggs.” An image of Cletus Berry’s scrambled brain presented itself and Lindsey blinked, hard. “Bring me a couple of pancakes.”

“You got it.” And she was gone.

Lindsey had never seen the likes of this place. Most of the men and women at the counter held newspapers or magazines in one hand and read while they shoveled food into their mouths with the other. A few of them talked to each other. More of them talked to themselves.