

LINDSEY & PLUM BOOK THREE

THE
BESSIE BLUE
KILLER



RICHARD A. LUPOFF

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BORGOPRESS BOOKS BY RICHARD A. LUPOFF

*The Adventures of Professor Thintwhistle & His Incredible Aether
Flyer (with Steve Stiles)*

Killer's Dozen: Thirteen Mystery Tales

Lisa Kane: A Novel of Werewolves

Sacred Locomotive Flies

Sword of the Demon

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1. *The Comic Book Killer*
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 my Brother with Love

INTRODUCTION

BY JANE LANGTON

A SUSPENSE NOVELIST SOMETIMES CARVES OUT a special niche, a personal space, by sticking to one subject or setting.

Tony Hillerman writes about crimes on Indian reservations in New Mexico, Emma Lathen about shady manipulations on Wall Street, Jonathan Gash about hanky-panky among dealers in antiques.

Richard Lupoff's bailiwick is all his own, the world of the nostalgic collector. His protagonist, Hobart Lindsey, works for International Surety, an insurance company that must shell out when the valuable collectibles it insures are stolen—rare comic books or classic cars or antique airplanes. Lindsey does his best to save the company enormous sums by tracking down the lost articles himself. Along the way, the reader is treated to fascinating lore about Batman and the Human Torch in *The Comic Book Killer*, a parade of glamorous automobiles in *The Classic Car Killer* and a succession of Zeros, Focke-Wulfs and B-17 bombers in *The Bessie Blue Killer*. Of fabulous value and heavily insured, the comic books and the magnificent cars and the heroic war planes vanish or are threatened, and International Surety sends Lindsey on the road to find out what happened. Like any ordinary hard-boiled private investigator, he must work his way past many a dangerous obstacle before tracking down the clever deceiver at last.

Along the way, bobbing up in Lindsey's mind during his pursuit of lost valuables, are remembered fragments of the pop culture of the thirties, forties, fifties and sixties. Walking into villainous bar or sleazy hotel, he is reminded of old films with Victor Mature and Jane Russell, or Jack Webb in "Dragnet," or the music of Miles Davis, or the jingle of Gary Cooper's spurs as he saunters into the Last Chance Saloon.

There was a TV set above the bar. It looked like something out of the Lyndon Johnson era. It was silent and dark. Maybe they'd left it up as a memorial to the Great Society.

Swift images like these enliven the action, evoking layer upon layer of time. The sense of a superimposed present and past is not easily come by in a thriller. Most of the characters in a mystery novel inhabit a flickering now. Lupoff's have histories that sometimes coincide with our own. We too remember Billie Holiday. The intersection of the reading self with the invented one brings the fictional person sharply alive.

Another specialty of Lupoff's, part of the niche he inhabits, is the setting, his home territory, the California cities of Berkeley and Oakland. Hobart Lindsey moves in a landscape that rises vividly around us as we follow him—the sun falls behind the East Bay hills, fifty thousand people roar in the Oakland Coliseum, the morning fog descends on Berkeley, kids mill around on a dangerous street in downtown Richmond, a gray cat strolls down a gangplank to a wooden pier on the Oakland Estuary.

He drove to Oakland...and found the Embarcadero. Roberts' address was in a block of modernistic condos opposite a railroad track and an industrial slum. But the condos themselves looked expensive, and with the estuary on the other side, it seemed a safe bet that the occupants wiped the sight of the factories and warehouses from their minds when they got home at night.

This is more than pleasant description, it's social commentary, evoking a complex image in depth, reminiscent of the way Raymond Chandler writes about Los Angeles.

The landscape isn't merely a background against which events happen. Rather it has an organic relation to the story, which grows out of it like a strangling vine wrapping around the legs of Hobart Lindsey and Morton Kleiner and Aurora Delano and Desmond Richelieu and Lieutenant High.

Something else that sets Richard Lupoff's stories apart is his profound interest in the color of his characters' skins, his close examination of a multiracial metropolis. It's not simply his white protagonist's love for Marvia Plum, an attractive and brilliant black woman. It's his keen depiction of the interaction of black and white at every level.

A poignant example is the moment when Lindsey introduces Marvia to his mother on the last page of *The Comic Book Killer*. Throughout the story as it unfolds we have become familiar with Mother, lost in a dream world of the 1950s, completely out of touch with the present. Through her son's concern and sympathy we too are committed to her welfare. It is all the more shocking when she greets Marvia as if she were the new cleaning woman:

"You must be the new girl," she said. "I try to keep up with the house but it's such a problem with a little one underfoot and my husband away at war. It's hard to get a good colored girl to clean up. I hope you'll work out better than the last one we had."

It hurts. There's a real pang. And pangs are few in detective fiction, in spite of the proliferation of murders as we flip the pages.

Lost collectibles, nostalgia, Berkeley and Oakland, race relations—these are all part of Lupoff's special niche. But the principal occupant is Hobart Lindsey himself, a man of stature. As a character, he is both real and good, no mean trick. Lindsey moves through Lupoff's chapters cautiously, making his way thoughtfully from point to point, carrying no gun:

"Well, what about your pistol permit?"

"Don't have a permit. Don't have a pistol. Don't know how to use one. Don't want to learn."

"That's the trouble with you minimalists. Nothing we can threaten to take away from you. How are we supposed to keep you in line?"

Unarmed, his courage is the greater, if more wary. Inevitably, he is attacked. Violence swirls around him, and he goes down. When he gets up, he doesn't reach for the gin and leap into his car. He has

a terrible headache. But his limited strength is balanced by intelligence and a politely ironic view of the world. His likableness grows on us, turning into admiration. Lindsey, we discover with gratitude, is a man of compassion. For instance, after learning that a child has been killed in Richmond:

He gave it up and turned off the TV and climbed into bed and stared at the ceiling some more.

Eventually, God sent morning to make things better.

All the more satisfying in contrast with Lindsey's humanity is the ghastliness of some of the other characters. It's always a pleasure to read about a genuine bastard:

Lindsey got himself an English muffin and a cup of coffee. Mueller ordered bacon and eggs up and a prune Danish, and proceeded to dip the Danish in the egg yolk. ... He hadn't shaved and a yellow blob adhered to the stubble just below his lip. ...

Lindsey wanted to limit the conversation to business. "Look, fill me in on Bessie Blue. ..."

"Bessie Blue? Name of a B-17, I don't know what the name means. Ask a jig and see if he'll tell you."

Lindsey felt his jaw clench. "Please, Elmer."

"...Oh, right. I keep forgetting what a good liberal boy you are, Hobie. Don't ask a jig." Mueller looked at Lindsey with something that might have been an impish grin. "Ask an American Afrocoon."

The opposite of a good hate is a good love. Sex pops up frequently in Lupoff's novels. But just as his violence is tempered with pity, his bedroom scenes are laced with tenderness. They are not slipped in merely to titillate. They advance the story and deepen our commitment to two admirable human beings.

It's trite to say that people read mysteries because the real world is a confusing and chaotic place, and that in these books, at least,

order is restored, justice handed down and evil vanquished. Indeed, in Lupoff's novels the world is plentifully bad, but in the person of Hobart Lindsey simple integrity lends a saving grace, along with a naïveté, a doggedness, a masculine kind of graciousness and even the love of Mother.

In the words of Lindsey's lover, Berkeley Homicide Investigator Marvia Plum, "We can't let the haters win."

More power, then, to the good guys, in fiction as in life. Sometimes, perhaps, they are one and the same. Is Richard Lupoff really Hobart Lindsey? If so, it would support my Nice-ness Theory of Literary Authorship: good books are written by good people, because only they have the gift of empathy, of understanding others, of writing with sympathy. The actual character of writer Richard Lupoff backs up my theory brilliantly, since it is just as superior as that of his creation.

Unfortunately my theory breaks down altogether in considering the entire history of literature in the English language, since so many great works of fiction were written, as everyone knows, by really rotten human beings.

CHAPTER ONE

You only dream in black and white.

You only dream in black and white, but that was okay with Lindsey. The B-17 lumbered through the early morning skies, its four 1,000-horsepower Wright Cyclones droning steadily at 2,300 RPM, the French countryside slipping away, almost five miles below the Flying Fortress's belly.

Somehow he knew he was dreaming but he didn't wake up, he kept dreaming. In black and white.

It was one of the 918th's deadliest missions. The Seventeens were keeping formation, their P-51 Mustang escorts diving and zooming like a bunch of motorcyclists cutting in and out of a highway convoy of heavy trucks. The air was cold and Lindsey's electric flight suit did little to help.

It was easy going as long as their course lay over Allied-held territory, but once they crossed the frontier into German airspace the Messerschmitt 109s came roaring up to meet them and the 51s broke away to knock them back down.

Lindsey crouched over his single .50 caliber machine gun, scanning the sky for attackers. There was no way the 51s could stop all the Messerschmitts, and once the enemy broke through the fighter escort, the Flying Fortresses had to defend themselves. It was strictly fight or die, and Lindsey had seen too many B-17s die, too many of the big bombers lose engines, lose wings or tails, and spiral down to explode in flames, or simply blow up in midair and rain on the French or German soil in a shower of metal and rubber and human flesh and blood.

A Messerschmitt was coming at the Fortress. Lindsey didn't need a message over his helmet radio. He swung the .50 at the Messerschmitt. He could see the flashes of the 109's wing guns as they spit lead at the Fortress. He pressed the trigger and felt his machine gun buck as it spit back at the Messerschmitt. He followed the path of his tracers as they sizzled at the 109.

A puff of black smoke bellied away from the Messerschmitt. Lindsey felt a surge of adrenalin that made his heart pump and his scalp tingle, but the Fortress's aluminum skin was no match for the Messerschmitt's deadly rounds. Metal projectiles ricocheted inside the fuselage. Lindsey felt an impact, a solid thump against his foot.

* * * *

International Surety had done it right for once. Hobart Lindsey had spent a career working for the company, starting out as a trainee just weeks after he got his degree from Hayward State. And how long was that?

He sat up in bed. Cletus Berry was pounding him on the bottom of one foot. The TV set in the corner was still playing, some cable station rerunning an old series. In black and white. *Twelve O'Clock High*. Not even the Gregory Peck-Dean Jagger movie. The TV spin-off. A second-rate imitation of a first-rate copy of a long-ago reality.

Lindsey rubbed his eyes. Back in the room to dress for dinner, he'd put his head on the pillow and fallen sound asleep. Taking an afternoon nap at his age.

He sat on the edge of the bed and calculated his years of service with International Surety. Not that he needed to work it out. He knew it all too well. Still, he'd got his BA in '75 and here it was seventeen years later. And he was sitting on the edge of a bed in the Brown Palace, the oldest and most prestigious hotel in Denver, Colorado, pulling on his socks and getting ready to attend a graduation dinner at the Broker, one of the finest and most expensive restaurants in the city.

He blinked at Cletus Berry. Berry was black and Lindsey was white. International Surety was not going to run afoul of Civil Rights legislation.

Lindsey hadn't done so badly for a small-town boy. If you could call Walnut Creek, California, a small town. It had been a small town when he was growing up there, caring for his widowed mother, learning in painful increments the true story of his father's death. Lindsey's father had been killed in a MiG attack on the destroyer

Lewiston off the coast of Korea early in 1953. It was just weeks before the end of the war, and just weeks before Hobart Lindsey was born.

He had never known his father, never seen him except in a few snapshots that Mother treated as holy relics. A pudgy young man in a sailor's uniform, grinning happily, his dark curly hair worn a little bit longer than navy regulations called for. But he'd never had to answer for that breach of discipline.

The ship's anti-aircraft batteries had picked off the two incoming MiGs. One of them plunged into the Sea of Japan but the other crashed onto *Lewiston*'s deck sending a wave of flaming jet fuel roaring into the battery.

"Better get a move on."

Lindsey snapped out of his reverie.

"Don't want to keep the Duck waiting, Bart. You know what a stickler he is."

"Right." Lindsey pulled up his socks, pushed himself upright and looked for his shoes. He'd sent them out to be shined, a rare indulgence for him, and he wore his best suit for the occasion. You didn't graduate from a course like this every day. And in fact, a third of the people who'd started it were back at their former jobs—or out of the company—already.

International Surety had splurged, putting up its employees at the Brown Palace during the seminar, but it had also put them two-to-a-room. Class was all very nice, as the corporate brass were forever reminding their underlings, but International Surety had to protect its resources, and one person didn't need a room all to himself. Not when he was attending workshops all day and struggling with study assignments and papers every night.

Come to think of it, it wasn't too different from living in Walnut Creek and attending Hayward State, except for not having a room to himself.

Lindsey and Cletus Berry walked the five blocks to the Broker. A couple of their classmates had been mugged on Seventeenth Street the week before, but they had decided not to let themselves be intimidated, and that was final. But they kept their International Surety

name badges in their pockets until they reached the restaurant. They pinned them on when they entered the marble lobby.

The Broker was in an old bank building, and its decor was calculatedly Wall Street. Clearly, International Surety had chosen the location to make a point.

Happy Hour was subdued. Lindsey and Berry drifted apart as soon as they arrived. You had to mix at this kind of corporate function. You never knew who was going to be your boss someday, in a position to do you good or harm.

And Lindsey had already crossed his boss, Harden at Regional, more than once. He'd done a lot of good for International Surety, saved the company plenty of bucks in earlier cases that he'd handled. A claims adjuster didn't just shuffle papers and authorize checks. It was his job to get the facts, to track down the truth when a claim had a peculiar odor to it. Especially if it was a big claim.

Trouble was, when Lindsey saved the company six-figure amounts on stolen collectibles, he outshone Harden. Ms. Johanssen at National was aware of Lindsey's work, and of the fact that he'd done it despite Harden's obstructionism.

Harden had managed to squeeze Lindsey out of the district office and had replaced him with the odious Elmer Mueller. Now Lindsey was completing the training seminar for International Surety's corporate troubleshooting team. They gave it a fancy name—Special Projects Unit/Detached Status—and a funny logo, a russet potato with SPUDS lettered across it. Everybody in SPUDS got to wear a little cloisonné potato on his lapel.

Still, Lindsey knew that the team had been the graveyard of careers.

Lindsey found himself standing next to a thin, pale woman from Grants Pass, Oregon. She'd hardly spoken during the course, had sat far from Lindsey. He let his eyes flash to her badge.

Aurora Delano, right. Beneath her name, her home town. Practically a neighbor. Behind her, a white-jacketed bartender was doing slow business.

"So, Hobart, you had enough of this? Eager to get home to California?"

Lindsey grunted. “This is too much like being back in college. And I’m a little worried about Mother. She—”

The bartender caught Lindsey’s attention. Aurora Delano was holding an empty glass, Lindsey noticed. The bartender flashed a question with his eye. Lindsey said, “Aurora, would you like a—”

She turned toward the bartender and held up her glass. “Refill, sure.”

The bartender said, “And you, sir?”

Lindsey said, “The same. I’ll have the same as the lady.”

The bartender made Aurora’s empty glass disappear and placed a clean ones on the bar. He turned both glasses upside down, wet the rims and dipped them in a bowl of salt. He reached under the bar for a jug and ran a blender of greenish liquid and crushed ice before he filled both glasses. Lindsey paid for the drinks. International Surety ran a no-host bar.

Aurora said, “We never got to talk during the course. I don’t mind Denver, but I’ll be happy to get out of here.”

Lindsey said, “And go back to Oregon. How do you feel about working in SPUDS?”

Aurora said, “No way I’m going back to Oregon. I only went there because his work was there. I’m a southern girl.”

Lindsey was surprised. “I would have guessed New York.”

Aurora smiled. Her long, thin face was surrounded by a wash of auburn hair. Definitely the Katherine Hepburn type. “A lot of people think that. I was born and raised in New Orleans. That’s why I took the SPUDS job. Get out of Grant’s Pass. Get out of range of my ex. I talked Ducky into sending me back to Louisiana.”

The way she said it, it sounded like a little girl’s name. Like *Lucy Anna*.

“And your ex is going to stay in Oregon?”

“I hope to hell he does! Besides, SPUDS will be a change. It gets pretty dull, paying body shops to pound out dented fenders and replace broken windows. Not to mention comforting grieving widows and greedy offspring with checks.”

Lindsey smiled. He raised his glass. Aurora did the same and they touched rims. Lindsey took a sip. He could taste the salt from the

rim, then the drink itself. It was bitter and pulpy. Grapefruit juice. “This what you always drink?”

“Around International Surety, you bet it is. On my own time, that’s something different.”

There was music coming over concealed speakers, something totally unidentifiable and equally undistinguished. Lindsey’s musical tastes had been growing in recent months, largely due to the influence of a Berkeley police officer he’d worked with on a couple of his more interesting cases.

Now the music—Lindsey decided it was a Gershwin medley played on a soupy synthesizer—was interrupted by a polite chiming. It was the signal to proceed to the dining room. Lindsey hoped that the meal would be better than the usual corporate mass-feeding.

Inside the private dining room Lindsey found his assigned seat. Happily, Aurora Delano was to be his dinner partner. He spotted Cletus Berry at another table, recognized the others in the room from the classes and work groups of the past weeks. The music had resumed. Either Lindsey had been mistaken or the tape had segued from Gershwin into Jerome Kern.

The food was not as bad as Lindsey had feared, if not quite up to what he’d hoped. Aurora Delano was an interesting conversationalist, going on about her ex-husband and how they had climbed the Himalayas, rafted down the Snoqualmie, explored the Great Barrier Reef. It took her a while to get around to the reason for their split.

Lindsey didn’t have to say much. As quiet as Aurora had been during lectures on coordination with local probate courts and investigation of motor vehicle registration records and IRS involvement in insurance claims, she had plenty to say across the lamb chops and watercress.

There was even wine on the table, and the SPUDS in their dark suits, male and female, seemed to be allowed that much leeway. It had become a survival tactic in the corporate world. No more drunken revels. Now you stayed as sober as a judge, because if you didn’t you might let your guard down for a moment and that could be fatal.

“Well, he was a great guy, my ex.” Aurora sipped her wine. “He was a great guy. He designed nuclear triggers for a living, and he

was good at it. Made a nice living, too. Then the bottom fell out of the market for nuclear triggers. Blooey. No more Evil Empire. No more money. All of a sudden, instead of the headhunters sniffing after him, he had to start sending out résumés.”

Lindsey didn’t have to ask a question. He popped a forkful of Lyonnais potatoes into his mouth and followed it with a sip of ice water.

“He was hot stuff as long as the money kept rolling in. Those guys make a lot of money, you know. Nuclear trigger designers. Get treated like royalty. President of the United States comes around to the shop. Puts on a white lab coat. Gives the boys a little pep talk. Serving the cause of freedom. Making the world safe for our children and our grandchildren. Holding the forces of tyranny and oppression at bay.”

“I’ve seen the clips,” Lindsey said.

“They start to believe it themselves. You know that? Those Stepford Husbands with their sports cars and their big houses and their pert little wives with the big station wagons.”

“You drive a station wagon?”

“The Red Octopus dies and Uncle Sam doesn’t need all those weapons factories anymore and they have to start looking for an honest job.”

Lindsey didn’t pursue the station wagon.

“You know what?” Aurora put down her glass, picked up her fork, speared a piece of lamb chop and chomped down on it. Lindsey couldn’t tell whether she was nodding in agreement with some thought she’d had or if the motion of her head had to do with chewing the piece of lamb chop. “All of a sudden, nobody wants nuclear trigger designers. And there’s not much positive transfer of the skills.”

“What did he do?”

“He had a couple of offers from universities. For about a quarter what he was making.”

“What did he do?”

“He called some of his old buddies. You know, they network, those nuclear trigger designers. I don’t know what went wrong. Maybe he

wasn't as popular as he thought with his old buddies. Maybe they didn't like him. Maybe there's just no work out there."

"So what did he do?"

"He took it as long as he could."

"Yes."

"Then he couldn't take it any more."

"Yes."

She picked up her glass again and looked at Lindsey. The roll baskets were empty. The waiters were clearing away the dinner plates. At the head table a major corporate big shot, Ms. Johanssen from National, was looking around. Clearly, she was getting ready to make a speech.

Lindsey asked Aurora, "What did he do?"

The spotless white linen tablecloths were still spotless. International Surety people ate carefully at corporate banquets.

Desmond "Ducky" Richelieu, the director of International Surety's Special Projects Unit/Detached Status, was on his feet, waiting for the room to quiet so he could introduce their distinguished guest, Ms. Johanssen from National.

The murmured conversation dropped to a dead silence. Huh, maybe it was Cole Porter, not Gershwin and not Jerome Kern either.

Aurora Delano said, "He came home from a job interview. I knew it had gone badly and the poor lamb was so upset, he had to do something. So he broke my arm."

CHAPTER TWO

The International Surety suite was upstairs in a glittering office tower just off Speer Boulevard. The receptionist had a sign on her desk. *Mrs. Blomquist*. She wore her hair on top of her head like a Gibson Girl. Lindsey could not remember ever seeing a woman with skin that looked so pale and powdery. He wondered what she had to do to make it look like that, and why she did it.

The thin air made for a snappy morning even in May, but Lindsey had packed his topcoat and taken a cab wearing a medium-weight gray suit. He usually dressed a little more casually than this, but he was on his way to visit his new boss and he didn't want to look like a California swinger.

Mrs. Blomquist made Lindsey wait while she buzzed Mr. Richelieu, then made him wait some more. Lindsey browsed through the *Rocky Mountain News*, looking for stories with California date-lines. He could care less about scandals in the Colorado state legislature, shakeups in the Denver Police Department, new real estate developments in Arapahoe and Elbert Counties, or the draft strategy of the embryonic National League baseball team that seemed to have the local papers in a complete tizzy. He was eager to get home.

Richelieu stood up when Lindsey walked in. The sign on the inner door said simply, *Desmond Richelieu*. Nobody called him Ducky to his face. He wore a neatly-trimmed moustache and rimless bifocals that glinted in the sunlight pouring through his office window. He looked like a steel-engraving of the French Cardinal Lindsey had once seen in a high school library edition of *The Three Musketeers*. There was even a shadowy suggestion of the Cardinal's dark, pointed goatee. He gestured Lindsey to a seat.

"I always like to have a chat with each of our graduates before they head out on their first assignment. I imagine you'd heard that."

Lindsey nodded. He'd carried his attaché case with him and he placed it carefully on the carpet beside his chair.

"The way the Chief used to do it when I worked for the Bureau."

Richelieu made a barely perceptible motion with his head. His hair was very black with just a tuft of pure white above each ear. Richelieu had combed his hair with some sort of pomade that made it look like glossy corduroy.

Lindsey followed Richelieu's gesture with his eyes. A tastefully-framed, diploma-like document stood out against the elegant paneling. Beside it hung a blown-up glossy of a boyish Richelieu shaking hands with a dumpy, bulldog-faced man in a double-breasted pinstriped suit. The picture was cropped so you couldn't see either man's feet.

"It's a funny thing," Richelieu said. "The FBI is like the Mafia. Once you're in it, you're never really out." He shook his head sadly. "But once John Edgar was gone, the Bureau was never the same. Mixed up in Watergate, White House interference. They never got away with that when the Chief was alive. He took on everybody. The Kennedys, everybody. But once he was gone, why, it was never the same."

Lindsey had heard that J. Edgar Hoover had been sensitive about his height, had stood on a box for photo-ops with his underlings. Bureau photogs knew that they had to keep the focus up and not show the box. Agents knew that they had to keep their eyes up and not see it, either. Failure to comply could cost a man his career. He might not get tossed out of the Bureau, but he'd reach age sixty-five counting pencils in the Fargo, North Dakota, branch office.

Richelieu leaned his forearms on the glass top of his desk. The glass was polished to a perfect sheen. There was nothing beneath the glass but polished mahogany and nothing on top of it except for Richelieu's spotless sleeves. "When Harden at Regional recommended you for SPUDS, he said you were reluctant to take the job, Hobart. Is that right?"

Lindsey hated his first name. He preferred Bart, didn't mind Lindsey, hated Hobart. He said, "Yes, sir."

"That's all right, a lot of my people join up reluctantly. What happened to your job in Walnut Creek?"

Richelieu didn't have Lindsey's personnel folder on his desk. He must have studied it before Lindsey was admitted to the inner

sanctum. Lindsey said, “I was hospitalized.”

“Yes. Shot in the shoulder, wasn’t it?”

“Mr. Harden brought someone else in to run the office. I thought Ms. Wilbur could handle it until I got back, but Mr. Harden brought in Elmer Mueller instead. When I reported back, Mueller had my job and I wound up in SPUDS.”

Richelieu leaned back. Lindsey half expected to see a flunky run in and polish the desk-glass. Richelieu said, “You’ve doubtless heard that we have a high rate of attrition in SPUDS.”

Lindsey nodded.

Richelieu kept on going. He had not waited for the nod. “It’s true. You’ll get tough cases. Some people think SPUDS is International Surety’s own little Gestapo, its own little Gulag. Neither of those is true, Hobart. We’re not police. We don’t torture anybody. We’re very law-abiding. We are a little bit like detectives, but then I understand that you like to play Sherlock. Is that true?”

“No, sir. I just try to do my job, sir. I’m a claims adjuster, that’s all. Somebody’s store is burgled, we pay for the loss. Somebody’s car gets stolen, we pay fair value.”

“Yes, yes. But if you can recover the stolen goods you can save International Surety a lot of money. You’ve done that, haven’t you?”

Lindsey nodded. The man was playing cat and mouse with him. He had to know that Lindsey had saved the company a fortune in rare 1940s comic books and an even bigger fortune on a stolen 1928 Duesenberg. Each case had involved a murder, as well, but the company paid him to save money, not to catch killers. He did that on his own time, and Harden had used it against him more than once.

“I’m not going to spend a lot of time reviewing material that you learned in your seminars,” Richelieu said. “If you do a good job for me, you can make a good thing out of SPUDS. You’ll have lots of freedom. I understand you have a penchant for breaking rules, Hobart. You should be happy working for me.”

Richelieu swung around in his heavily padded leather chair. He seemed to be gazing out the window. Lindsey followed Richelieu’s glance. The sunlight glinted off Cherry Creek. Lindsey wondered if he would see Perry Mason pacing regally beside the waterway, a

black Burberry concealing his girth, a polished walking stick in his hand. TV shows and motion pictures, magazine covers and record sleeves. Mother had kept him tied to her for so many years, where other kids grew up riding bikes and playing ball he'd lived a life of media images and his perception of the world was permanently formed. Sometimes it was useful, sometimes frustrating, but there it was.

"I think I'm ready for my first assignment," Lindsey said.

Richelieu whirled back. The eyes behind those rimless bifocals flashed. Clearly, he did not like having anyone else take the lead in a conversation. Last night at the Broker he'd deferred to Ms. Johanssen, but as Lindsey knew, she represented the Corporate structure. Richelieu had saluted not the man—or woman—but the rank. And Richelieu outranked Lindsey, and expected Lindsey to acknowledge that relationship.

Once upon a time Lindsey would have quivered and apologized for his *faux pas*.

Now he stood up and said, "I have to catch a flight for Oakland. If there's nothing else..."

A smile flashed across Richelieu's lips so fast that Lindsey would have missed it if he hadn't been watching for a reaction. "Sit down, Lindsey." That was an improvement! "Mrs. Blomquist can phone Stapleton and take care of that. Harden is still running Regional and Mueller is running Walnut Creek but you're working for me now. For me. You get that?"

Lindsey hesitated for a moment before slipping back into his chair. This wasn't the FBI, despite what Desmond Richelieu might think. And it wasn't the army and it wasn't the Mafia. It was a corporation, for heaven's sake, and if Lindsey just decided to walk out of here, there was nothing that International Surety could do to stop him.

Richelieu smiled. "This is your first assignment for SPUDS, and I'm going to make it a nice easy one for you. Just to help you get your feet wet. You understand?"

Lindsey nodded. If he answered verbally, even grunted, Richelieu could turn away and still continue the conversation. But if Lindsey spoke only in body language, Richelieu would have to stay focused

on him. It was a subtle tug-of-war. Maybe it was something in the Rocky Mountain air that was changing Lindsey. Maybe it was his encounter the night before with Aurora Delano.

What kind of man would break his wife's arm because he'd lost a job? A common enough type, if the TV feature stories about battered women were to be believed. Was that the kind of man who ran the governments and corporations and families of the world? What kind of man was Hobart Lindsey? What kind of man had he been since Hayward State, and what kind of man was he becoming?

"Make it a good one," he said.

The ghost-smile flickered across Richelieu's lips again. He reached under the edge of his desk. Lindsey assumed he was pushing a button to summon Mrs. Blomquist. Lindsey wondered whether Richelieu had a telephone in his office, or a computer, or any of the other tools of the modern corporation. Maybe he let Mrs. Blomquist deal with machinery.

The door opened behind Lindsey and he swung around to see Mrs. Blomquist carry in a folder. Lindsey chewed the inside of his lips. He'd lost a point to Richelieu. He followed Mrs. Blomquist's progress as she carried the folder to Richelieu and laid it on his desk. Lindsey didn't follow her as she retreated to the outer office. He figured that he'd got back maybe a quarter of the point he'd lost. It was really getting complicated when you had to calculate fractions of points.

"This is practically in your backyard," Richelieu said. He hadn't opened the folder, just left it lying on his desk. "Elmer Mueller has written a special policy for a film company that's going to shoot some footage at the Oakland airport. You can stop and check this out on your way home today, Lindsey."

"How much is involved?"

"Ah, this is a big policy. Cost of the aircraft, indemnity to the Port of Oakland, personal liability, life coverage of people involved in the film."

"Why didn't the movie company set up their own coverage?"

Richelieu tapped the folder with one fingertip. The folder was of tobacco-brown cardboard. Richelieu's fingernails were perfectly

manicured and coated with clear polish that caught the sunlight coming off Cherry Creek. “It’s an odd situation. Not a commercial studio. Somebody got a line on a bucket of foundation money, put together an *ad hoc* organization to make a film.”

He ran a polished fingernail over his neatly-trimmed moustache.

Lindsey said, “I don’t understand. Is there a claim on the policy?”

Richelieu shook his head. “If there were it would be Mueller’s problem, not mine. This is a risky operation. We’re getting a nice premium out of it, but if we have to pay off, we’ll be in a deep hole. We’re covering their aircraft, the flight crews, ground crews, passengers, the film crews, bystanders, physical plant—the works.”

He pulled his rimless glasses down his nose and peered at Lindsey over their tops. “What if a plane crashes and takes out a schoolyard full of kids? Or an office building? You had a light plane crack up in a shopping mall out there, didn’t you?”

“I remember it,” Lindsey said.

“Well, what if—say, what if one of these people pancakes into the ballpark out there during a baseball game? Can you imagine the claims? It could cost us millions. It could put us out of business!”

“And you want me to go out there and baby-sit these people? Make sure they run a nice safe operation? Is that it?”

“That’s it,” Richelieu said.

Lindsey said, “I’ll need to study the file.”

“Take it.” He shoved the tobacco-brown folder across his desk. Lindsey peered at him questioningly. Richelieu said, “It’s all photocopies.”

Lindsey locked the folder in his attaché case and stood up. This time Richelieu didn’t try to stop him.

Mrs. Blomquist hadn’t changed his reservations, but he caught a United 737 as he’d planned and he was in Oakland in time to face the afternoon rush hour on his way home to Walnut Creek.

Marvia Plum had offered to pick him up at the terminal if she could clear her schedule with the Berkeley Police Department, but Lindsey had promised Mother that she could come out to the airport. She’d been staying in the present most of the time, a slow, steady improvement over her condition in recent years, and he wanted to

reward her for staying connected.

He didn't think it was really her fault, the way she strayed through time. He hadn't understood when he was little, and she had managed somehow to cope with everyday realities. But as he'd grown up, Mother had got more and more disconnected from the calendar.

Her point of reference was always that dreadful day in 1953, the day she had received word of her husband's death in the China Sea. Sometimes she knew what year it was and what day, and connected with people around her perfectly. Other times, she thought Jack Kennedy was in the White House, or Harry Truman, or Ike. Most often, Ike.

But as Lindsey had grown away from her, as his relationship with Marvia Plum had ripened from a partnership to a friendship to a troubled and intermittent romance, Mother had somehow regained her grasp on the reality of time. She was still young enough to build a life for herself, and Lindsey wanted to do all that he could to help her.

Now he made his way down the *faux* terrazzo corridor. He carried his attaché and flight bag. No dealing with luggage carousels! He spotted Mother, a thinner, older, female version of himself. But not really very much older. She'd been a young bride, just a teenager, when her husband had died and her son was born.

With her was Joanie Schorr, their neighbor. Joanie had babysat with Mother when Lindsey had to go out at night. Mrs. Hernández came during the day. Lindsey stayed with Mother most nights and weekends. But Joanie had been the real lifesaver. Even today, she had driven the Hyundai from Walnut Creek. With a start, Lindsey realized that little Joanie was as old as Mother had been when she'd given birth to him.

Both women waved.

Attaché case in one hand and flight bag in the other, Lindsey couldn't wave back. He hoped they could see his smile. He wanted to get in the Hyundai and get home.

CHAPTER THREE

The telephone's burbling woke Lindsey from a strange sleep. It was wonderful being in his own home, in his own bed. Mother was asleep in her room, and he'd spoken with Marvia the night before and made a dinner date with her.

But in his dreams images of Aurora Delano became confused with Mrs. Blomquist's white powdery face. B-17s tumbled through the wartime sky, spiraling downward to crash into German munitions factories. A bomber's smashed wing became Aurora's shattered arm. The bomber, its stressed metal wings replaced by human limbs, circled over the Oakland Coliseum, threatening thousands of baseball fans.

The voice on the phone was female and remotely familiar. Lindsey hadn't identified it as that of Mrs. Blomquist before she said, "Stand by for a call from Mr. Richelieu."

Lindsey blinked at the clock. It was an hour later in Denver, but still, he couldn't expect Richelieu and Mrs. Blomquist to be at work this early. What—

"Lindsey, get yourself together and start earning your paycheck. They beat you to the punch."

Lindsey said, "Mr. Richelieu? I've just—"

"Never mind what you've just. I should have sent you back there early, or put someone else on this thing."

"You mean—"

"*Bessie Blue*."

Lindsey said, "Who?"

"Haven't you read the case folder yet?"

Lindsey could only stammer.

"Good grief, feed 'em red meat and send 'em to the best of schools and they still don't know a damn thing. That's the name of the star airplane. And of the movie. *Bessie Blue*. They've already got their film crew in Oakland and they're at work at the airport. Look for North Field. Find out what's going on. Elmer Mueller's already there,

talk to him and take charge of the case. But don't step on Elmer's toes, Lindsey."

"Yes, sir. But what happened?"

"Somebody got himself killed on the set. You just came through that airport, you must barely have missed the party. It's still going on. Get your tail out there and see what's happening. You're off to some great start in SPUDS, Lindsey. Well, what are you waiting for?"

"You're talking to me, Mr. Richelieu."

"I don't care. You should be on your way to Oakland by now. Try to get there before everybody else leaves. What do you think—"

Lindsey took him at his word, cradled the handset and headed for a quick shower. Minutes later he was *en route* to Oakland. The *Bessie Blue* folder, still unread, lay in his attaché case on the seat beside him. It was still dark out, the first rays of dawn raising a mist off the hills beside the freeway.

The Hyundai's dashboard clock said it was four-thirty AM. Lindsey had turned on an all-news station and heard all about a threatened strike by supermarket clerks and a People's Park protest in Berkeley. There was a piece about the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* sailing from Alameda with its battle group for maneuvers in the Pacific. Made sense. America had to be defended against aggressive Easter Islanders, or maybe swarms of penguins attacking from the South Pole.

He switched to a jazz station. That was one thing Marvia Plum had done for him. She'd introduced him to something besides the discordant screeing that he'd thought synonymous with the word.

It was easy to find the *Bessie Blue* set. There were half a dozen police cars with their roof-lights flashing red and blue. Lindsey parked the Hyundai behind them. A TV news-van was pulling out of the lot as Lindsey pulled in. There was another vehicle there, a coroner's wagon. The body might still be in place. Lindsey had never seen a fresh murder victim. He shuddered at the thought, but something else was going on inside him.

He felt his heart pounding and his blood pumping through his body. This had to be an adrenalin rush. He'd been involved with