

LINDSEY & PLUM BOOK SEVEN

*The
Radio Red*

KILLER



RICHARD A. LUPOFF

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DEDICATION

For Doris Riley,

Myra Ferguson,

& Patricia Bush

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Readers familiar with earlier novels in my “Killer” series will recall that the preceding six books were all narrated from the viewpoint of Hobart Lindsey, a commercial insurance investigator. Having done some of that work myself, I felt reasonably confident in writing about it.

But with *The Radio Red Killer*, the viewpoint shifts to Sergeant Marvia Plum of the Berkeley Police Department. And what the heck do I know about police procedure? True, I put in a little time in the military police (as did Marvia), but that was long ago and far away, and my training in the proper method of guarding prisoners of war or of directing traffic at a crossroads is a far cry from learning how a detective tracks down a killer at large in an American city.

Thanks to the Citizen Police Academy conducted by the Berkeley Police Department, I now know a little bit about the world of police and the way a modern police force works. A thousand questions arose in the course of writing *The Radio Red Killer*, ranging from when and how an officer is required to Mirandize a subject to where the leftover dinner of a poisoning victim is sent for analysis.

My thanks to Sergeant Steve Odom and the faculty of the academy and to the entire BPD for their patience, concern, and all-around helpfulness. I *know* I didn't get everything right, but their assistance helped me reduce the number of errors by a sizable percentage. One point that I got wrong “on purpose” concerns the parking facility at the Hall of Justice in Berkeley. There is no room in the parking lot for officers to leave their personal cars while they're on duty. Thus, they have to park the better part of a mile away and walk to and from the hall. If only in a work of fiction, I spared them this chore.

My special thanks to Officer Jeff Katz, who started as my ride-along host and became my fast friend. He is typical of the intelligent, dedicated patrol officers and detectives I have met, and we are all better off to be served by men and women of his ilk. His contribution to this manuscript is incalculable. To the extent that its portrayal

of police work is accurate and authentic, he deserves full credit. To the extent that any errors remain, chalk them up to my obtuseness, or better yet, to dramatic license.

Yes, dramatic license sounds a lot better than obtuseness.

And to any reader who ever gets mad at a cop—I know I have, and sometimes still do—all I have to suggest is, try walking a mile in their shoes. You have a lot to learn!

Radio station KRED and the Oceana Foundation are totally fictitious, as are all of KRED's staff and on-air personalities. My own first experience in radio came as a news-writer for WIOD in Miami, Florida, in 1955. My boss and mentor was news director Gene Struhl. Less than a year later I was off to the army and never saw the inside of WIOD's studios again. But in the few months I worked in that newsroom, Gene instilled in me a love for the medium that burns brightly to this day. In the years since I left WIOD, listeners' ears in New York, Kansas City, Los Angeles and San Francisco have been assaulted by my silvery voice. From 1977 to 1997 I appeared regularly on KPFA in Berkeley, California.

Any resemblance between KPFA and its parent, the Pacifica Foundation, and KRED and its parent, the Oceana Foundation, is of course purely coincidental.

My thanks for Mr. Richard Brown and Mr. Harvey Jordan of dba Brown Records in Oakland, California, for guidance and information in the field of historic recordings. And my thanks to Mr. William Pfeiffer, the *Old Time Radio Digest* and its members, and to many generous old-time radio collectors for their assistance in developing Lon Dayton's OTR program for KRED.

A final, special word of thanks to Ms. Carolyn Wheat, who proved to me that an old dog can still learn new tricks, and without whose wonderful advice *The Radio Red Killer* would have stalled somewhere around Chapter Six.

—Richard A. Lupoff
1997

INTRODUCTION

by Jim Harmon

Dick Lupoff often been said to have been at the leading edge of various waves of popular culture. He was among the earliest writers of serious ability to be interested in comic books as a fun part of the arts. He produced fan magazines and books on the subject, including his first mystery novel, *The Comic Book Killer*.

Other interests like Edgar Rice Burroughs, boys' books from the start of the century, and the mystery genre in general were reflected in his output.

In this latest entry to his growing mystery list, *The Radio Red Killer*, Richard A. Lupoff offers a story involving a man who is a self-styled authority on Old Time Radio, who is at once hilariously insane and crunchingly poor. For this book, he offered me money to write the introduction, to take a break from writing my latest book concerning radio history, *Boxtop Premiums on Radio and TV*. He knows where to go for what he writes about.

The OTR program host, Lon Dayton, is only one of many remarkable characters, liberals, fascists, jazz musicians, hillbillies, to broadcast from fictional Radio Red—KRED—in the Bay area. One real radio station with an all inclusive philosophy in the Berkeley area, KPFA, carried an old-time radio program hosted by this writer for a time. The show originated at KPFK, North Hollywood, and lasted for several more years than its brief outing on sister station KPFA.

I observed only some of the political in-fighting Lupoff describes while I was there at the similar KPFK, but my biggest battle was over the type of splicing tape I used editing my masters.

It was Dick Lupoff who gave the audience the mixture of wit and personality that kept him on the air on KPFA for a record twenty years covering books and authors, probably some from radio, the medium that depended on the word.

An ear for correct dialogue is always useful for a writer. You not only have to put in good stuff, but throw out the bad. Hemingway

called it a “shit detector.” Lupoff certainly has one, not only for his own characters in his story, but for the dialogue in the old radio programs he creates for oleo pieces to accompany his play. You will hear echoes of Gabriel Heatter, Jack Armstrong, Bob Crosby, Corliss Archer—echoes from a vanished world.

Dick has said I inspired him to actually go out and do professional things in what had been a hobby. I had a number of science fiction stories in print, and one article on comic books in a fan magazine before he did, but Dick has gone much farther than I have. He spent seven times more years at his radio station than I did. He has written more novels than I have chapters in my books such as *The Great Radio Heroes*. My latest venture is producing and performing in brand new commercial episodes of such radio classics as *Tom Mix* and *I Love a Mystery*. Dick Lupoff’s continuing career concerns creating an entirely new detective character, Marvia Plum, who one day may become featured on the *Internet Drama Hour* or whatever the medium is then. Once again, Dick Lupoff will be ahead of the pack.

LEAD-IN: SCRIPT BREAK I

BOB LOWERY:

WELL, HERE'S THAT LITTLE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS AND THE NEATLY TRIMMED LAWN. LET'S SEE IF MOLLY AND MIKE ARE UP YET.

SFX: FOOTSTEPS ON DRIVEWAY, DOORBELL RINGS, DOOR OPENS.

MOLLY MARTIN:

WHY, HELLO THERE, BOB. LOOK, MIKE, IT'S BOB LOWERY! BOB, YOU'RE JUST IN TIME TO JOIN US FOR BREAKFAST.

MIKE MARTIN:

SAY, BOB, WHY DON'T YOU SEE IF THE NEWS-PAPER'S HERE YET. WE CAN START OUR DAY TOGETHER.

BOB:

RIGHT YOU ARE. (GRUNTS) SAY, THERE'S A PHOTO ON THE FRONT PAGE OF THAT BIG PREMIERE LAST NIGHT, RIGHT HERE IN THE QUEEN CITY OF THE OHIO VALLEY. AND—WHY, MOLLY, ISN'T THAT YOUR HUBBY BUSSING A BLONDE STARLET RIGHT THERE?

MOLLY:

(LAUGHS) THAT'S OUR LITTLE NIECE, BOB. HER NAME IS CATHY TAYLOR AND SHE MAKES HER SCREEN DEBUT IN THAT WONDERFUL NEW MGM MUSICAL, *TOP HITS OF 1941*.

BOB:

PHEW! THAT'S A RELIEF.

SFX: POURING COFFEE, CLICK OF CREAM PITCHER ON CUP, CHINA CLINKING, SPOON ON CHINA.

BOB:

THANKS, MOLLY. MY, THAT SMELLS TEMPTING!

MIKE:

YEP, WE'RE MIGHTY PROUD OF YOUNG CATHY, BOB. I KNOW THE SHUTTER-BUGS WERE THERE TO SNAP THE BIG STARS, BUT YOU MARK MY WORD, CATHY TAYLOR IS GOING PLACES IN HOLLYWOOD! AND SHE'S A CINCINNATI GIRL, YOU KNOW, BORN AND BRED.

SFX: SIZZLING, HISS.

MOLLY:

OH, MY GOODNESS, I GOT SO INTERESTED IN THE NEWSPAPER, I FORGOT ALL ABOUT THE BACON AND EGGS.

SFX: METAL SPATULA ON IRON FRYING PAN.

MOLLY:

MM, JUST IN THE NICK OF TIME. JUST HOLD YOUR PLATES UP, BOB AND MIKE, AND WE'LL HAVE SOME BREAKFAST FOR YOU TWO BEFORE YOU KNOW IT.

BOB:

MY, THAT LOOKS DEE-LICIOUS. I'LL BET YOU FRIED THOSE EGGS IN PURE, NUTRITIOUS ZAM! SHORTENING, THE HIGH-QUALITY, LOW-PRICE HOUSEWIFE'S BEST FRIEND.

MIKE:

YOU BET SHE DID, BOB. WE WOULDN'T HAVE ANY OTHER BRAND HERE IN THE LITTLE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS. AND THAT BEAUTIFUL BACON, OF COURSE, IS FINEST STARS 'N' STRIPES PREMIUM BRAND BACON.

SFX: CRUNCH, CHEWING.

BOB:

WHY, IT'S SCRUMPTIOUS.

MOLLY:

IT SURE IS, BOB!

MIKE:

SAY, OVER HERE ON THIS OTHER PAGE, I SEE WHERE PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT SAYS WE'D BETTER KEEP OUR HANDS OFF THOSE WARS GOING ON IN EUROPE AND ASIA. I'LL GO ALONG WITH THAT, MOLLY AND BOB. WHAT DO YOU THINK?

MOLLY:

IF PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT SAYS SO, IT MAKES GOOD SENSE TO ME.

BOB:

IT SURE DOES MAKE SENSE, MOLLY AND MIKE. YOU KNOW, WE'VE PLENTY OF HARD WORK TO DO RIGHT HERE IN THE GOOD OLD U.S. OF A. THE LAST TIME WE GOT INVOLVED IN EUROPE A LOT OF AMERICAN BOYS MADE THE SUPREME SACRIFICE, AND HERE IT IS JUST A FEW YEARS LATER AND THEY'RE AT IT ALL OVER AGAIN. I SAY, LET THOSE FOREIGNERS SETTLE THEIR OWN SQUAB-BLES. I'M AN AMERICAN!

[BREAKFAST WITH MOLLY AND MIKE, WQCY, CINCINNATI (1940)]

CHAPTER ONE

Somebody was dead.

Marvia Plum slapped the handset back into its cradle, bounced out of her chair and sprinted for the exit.

* * * *

It was good to be back. Back in Berkeley, back at her old job, even back in her police sergeant's uniform. As a homicide detective, Marvia Plum worked in plain clothes most of the time, but the option was hers to wear uniform or civvies. And at least for now, at least for her first few days back on the job, she reveled in the feel of neatly pressed blue wool, the weight of her sidearm on her hip, the reflection of her brightly polished badge when she glanced at a mirror or passed a glassed storefront.

It was almost like being a rookie again. She was doing something she believed in. This was a time when society was jaded and the public viewed police officers as either incompetent bunglers or deadly enemies, a time when all too many cops had become burn-outs, cynics, or worse. Still, Marvia Plum felt that she was doing a useful job.

There really were good guys and bad guys, and Marvia was one of the good guys. And she was skilled at her work.

Maybe it was a disastrous marriage, an impulsive resignation from the Berkeley Police Department so she could leave the state and join her new husband in Nevada, the disillusionment and depression that came when she realized how badly she had blundered. Maybe it was all those things that made her understand what she had given up and made her appreciate her old life all the more when she got it back.

She'd spent the first few days moving papers, studying regs and manuals and case files, bringing herself back up to speed on conditions in the town where she had lived for so many years. Now she picked up her telephone and answered a 911 switched from the dispatcher upstairs.

Somebody was dead.

People died every day in a town the size of Berkeley, but most of them died of heart attacks or cancer or pneumonia or automobile crashes. Occasionally someone picked a basket full of beautiful wild mushrooms and cooked them for dinner and died of liver failure. Once in a great while a construction worker fell from a high scaffold or an industrial worker got caught in the jaws of a deadly machine and wound up crushed or mauled or torn to bits.

But this somebody had died in the seemingly safe surroundings of a radio studio, had apparently dropped dead in front of an open mike and an audience of uncounted thousands of listeners. When the cry came in to the emergency dispatcher the caller was hysterical.

The station had received a threat on their community news fax line. The mid-afternoon political show was about to go on the air. If KRED's regular commentator went on the air today he would die, the message warned. It was worded in a weird broken English.

Nobody took the threat very seriously. KRED had a reputation for championing unpopular causes. It had a history of controversy and turmoil. If every threat, demand, or ultimatum that came to the station were for real, KRED would have disappeared from the airwaves long ago.

The commentator laughed off the threat. He'd heard it all before. He settled himself in front the microphone and there he died.

Marvia arrived at KRED three minutes after the message hit her desk. The first people dispatched had been paramedics furnished by the Berkeley Fire Department. Their ambulance stood in front of the KRED building, its roof lights flashing.

The station's building was on Berkeley's recently renamed Barbara Jordan Boulevard, just a few blocks from the Hall of Justice on McKinley Avenue. Police headquarters and city jail were crammed into one outdated building, due to be replaced soon. It had been due to be replaced soon for years.

As she jumped from the cruiser she took in the surroundings of the station's two-story terra cotta structure. To the left, on the corner of Jordan Boulevard and Huntington Way, was the Bara Miyako Japanese restaurant. To the right were a couple of retail shops, Bix's

Wax Cylinder and the Amazon Rain Forest.

A second black-and-white and then a third screeched to the curb beside Marvia's cruiser and uniformed officers piled out. Marvia signaled to them and they scurried to secure the front and rear entrances of the radio station's building.

Marvia glanced up at the building's theater-like marquee as she hurried through the glass doors. *Oceana Network—KRED/FM—One World Radio*. Inside, a terrazzo hallway ran between bulletin boards plastered with handbills and posters for public events. The receptionist's post, shielded by a sliding Plexiglas panel, was unoccupied.

A second set of glass doors opened into a surprisingly bright lobby. Marvia blinked up and saw that the lobby rose into an atrium; the sliding, frosted-glass roof had been rolled back to admit the clear April afternoon's strong sunlight and refreshing air.

Half a dozen people were milling around. Just off the lobby a door had been smashed down, jagged shards of glass and splinters of polished wood lay on the terrazzo floor. A white-suited EMT turned and spotted Marvia. The tech was a young man; he wore his blond hair in an old-fashioned pompadour, a nice trick for adding a couple of inches to his height. Marvia asked him what he had.

"Fresh cadaver, Sergeant. Still warm, no rigor. Really looks odd—I've never seen such a red complexion."

"Red as in Navajo or red as in Irish?"

"No, I mean red as in tomato, red as in danger flag."

"What happened to the door?"

"It was locked from the inside. They saw him through the big window. There's a control room." He pointed. "There's a big glass window onto the studio where he was. The engineer looked into the studio and saw—well. When we got here nobody could unlock the studio door so we knocked it down. Just in case he was still alive, see, but he wasn't."

Marvia said, "Okay," and stepped past the tech. She read his nameplate as she passed him. *J. MacPherson*. The man lying across the table in front of a battery of microphones looked plenty dead, and *J. MacPherson* had been accurate about the color of his skin.

She turned back. “MacPherson, you have any more work to do here?”

He shook his head. “Just some paperwork. The scene is yours now, Sergeant.”

Marvia grunted. If Dispatch was on the ball, the evidence wagon should be arriving in a few minutes. The coroner’s people would follow later on. They didn’t react with the same urgency as the EMT’s or Homicide. If one of their subjects ever got up and left before they arrived, they didn’t belong there in the first place.

Summoning a uniform, Marvia had him secure the studio, including the cadaver and all its other contents, and the smashed door. Then she snagged the nearest civilian, a very young, heavysset woman with pale skin and intense crimson lipstick, wearing a perky yellow beret. At Marvia’s question the woman identified herself. “Jessie Loman. I’m a producer. Well, I’m working as receptionist today, but I’m going to be a producer.”

Marvia asked who was in charge. Jessie Loman pointed to a cluster of people swirling around a tall African woman in dreadlocks.

“She’s in charge of everything,” the heavysset woman managed. “Sun Mbolo. With the—” She made a gesture, indicating the heavy, curled hairdo. “She’s the station manager.”

Marvia pulled elbows aside and confronted the taller woman. Marvia had always thought of herself as dark-skinned, but she had never seen a person as black as Sun Mbolo actually looking pale. But Ms. Mbolo’s skin had the whitish, pasty look that meant she was close to going into shock.

Marvia identified herself. Even in uniform, it couldn’t hurt to establish her authority. That one word spoken aloud, *police*, could change the atmosphere in a room in a fraction of a second. Marvia hustled Ms. Mbolo to the nearest chair. She turned and ordered the nearest individual to bring a glass of water.

Marvia squatted in front of Sun Mbolo’s chair and put her hand on Mbolo’s wrist, in part to offer support to the station manager and in part to check her pulse and the feel of her skin. The pulse was strong and the skin didn’t have the moist, clammy feeling that

Marvia had feared. Sun Mbolo was past the worst moments of her reaction.

“Ms. Mbolo, are you able to help me now?”

The woman rested her elbows on the chair arms, her forehead in her hands. Marvia asked if she knew the dead man. Mbolo said, “He’s Bob Bjorner. He’s our chief political analyst. He’s dead?” she asked, “You’re sure he’s dead?”

“EMTs are sure of that. The coroner is on the way.” Mbolo nodded. Marvia resumed, “This must be quite a blow to you. To lose a friend and colleague this way.” Marvia looked up into the taller woman’s face. Mbolo had a long skull and thin, finely sculptured features. She must have Ethiopian genes to have that kind of face and those long, slim bones.

Clearly Mbolo was shocked but she did not look grief-stricken. “He was not a friend of mine and he was not going to be a colleague for long. We were struggling to get rid of Bjorner and he would not go quietly. We were having a hell of a fight. I am sorry that he is dead but I will not deny that I am relieved, also. But what a way to go. Right in the studio. About to go on the air. He must have had a heart attack.”

“I doubt that,” Marvia said. “His skin is bright red. I never heard of a heart attack causing that.”

“Well, a stroke then. Whatever it was, we shall make the proper gesture, perhaps put on a memorial service for him, perhaps broadcast it live. He was with the station for a thousand years, he had a following of old leftists he could rally to his defense when we tried to get him off the air. Let them rally to his defense now.”

Someone stood behind Marvia. “Sergeant.” She stood up and turned around. It was one of the police department’s evidence techs. The van had arrived and they were ready to go to work.

Marvia addressed the tech. “Felsner, you people all have booties and gloves, yes?”

“Masks too. Sometimes there’s funny stuff in the air. That’s a sealed room. We don’t know what might come from the cadaver.”

To a uniform she said, “Look, we can’t have all these people milling around. I want the building cleared except—Ms. Mbolo,

I want your cooperation—anybody who was in that studio this afternoon or had any contact with the victim. Anybody else, let's get names and contact info and send them home. What about your broadcasting, did KRED go off the air when Bjorner fell over?"

"We switched to live news."

Marvia inhaled suddenly. "Oh, no."

"Yes." Mbolo was regaining her composure. She actually smiled. "We have our contingency plan. When something breaks we go to all-news. The earthquake in eighty-nine, the fire in ninety-one, Desert Storm, we drop everything and just do news."

"For how long?"

"We will probably cut back to regular programming at four o'clock. We take a satellite feed from Oceana and run it in real time so we can get back to normal quite easily. Then our local news at five. The news department has its own studio and control upstairs." She raised her eyes and her fine eyebrows, indicating the direction as clearly as if she'd pointed a finger. "And we can do the evening shows from A."

"What's that?"

"Mr. Bjorner was broadcasting from Studio B when he passed out. Studio A is a mirror image at the far end of the control booth. We will just do everything from A until we are cleared to get back into B." She craned her long neck and shook her head at the smashed door. "We'll have to get that fixed. Those medics, whoever they were, they broke it down. It's ruined. Who's going to pay for it?"

"Those were the emergency medical technicians, Ms. Mbolo. MacPherson told me nobody had a key. Isn't that odd?"

"Bjorner was—well, let us say, slightly paranoid. No, he was more than slightly paranoid. He always locked the studio from the inside. He had a little locking device. You could only open it from his side. He used to lock himself in, then unlock the device when he was ready to leave."

Marvia tilted her head. "You can file a claim with the city, Ms. Mbolo. Can you run the station without that room for a while?"

Mbolo looked into the distance. "We can do everything from A until we get back B. Everything that is not from Oceana or from

news.”

Marvia turned away. She surveyed the lobby. The crowd had thinned. How many people did it take to run a radio station, anyway? She’d never been inside one before. To her, radio was voices or music coming out of her car speakers or her bedside mini-stereo.

She crooked a finger at another uniform. “Rosetti, I want a quick canvass of the establishments in this block. Talk to the people at that restaurant and the record store and the, whatever the heck it is, the fern place. Divide the job with Officer Ng if you need help. Move.”

Rosetti disappeared and Marvia returned her attention to Sun Mbolo. The woman’s English was flawless but lightly accented and formal.

“Is there someplace where people can go, Ms. Mbolo? The ones who might have some information for us? So they won’t just wander around.”

Sun Mbolo nodded. So tall. Even seated, sitting up straighter now, collecting herself and coming out of her crouch. She might have been a—Marvia felt a flash of inadequacy. She didn’t know the African peoples. How could she do her job at home if—

“There is a conference room. Directly at the head of the stairs.” Sun Mbolo’s words cut off Marvia’s train of thought. She had a rich voice. No wonder she’d succeeded in radio, with that voice and with her clear diction and intriguing accent.

Marvia took control of herself.

“Okay. Listen, you’re being very helpful. See if you can herd your people up there. We’ll want to talk to them soon and then they can leave, too.”

“What of the news staff?”

“Right. You said you were going to switch to a network program at four?”

“Oceana. We are part of the Oceana One World Network. We take network shows from four to six, then back here for the news and our own evening shows.”

“Okay. Send in the news people at four. We’ll try and get them out first, so they can do their work.” She studied Mbolo’s face. “You all right now? You need to lie down or anything?”

Mbolo pushed herself upright, stood at her full height. She wore an African robe and head cloth. All those wonderful dreadlocks were covered up now by the modern executive woman. “I am all right, thank you. I will carry out your instructions, Sergeant.”

Back at Studio B, the evidence technicians were dodging around each other, snapping photos, drawing diagrams, cataloging every item of furniture, every piece of paper and kipple in the room. The fingerprint crew would follow, and the vacuums that would pick up every hair, pebble, and loose fiber.

Marvia surveyed the scene. Bob Bjorner had not moved.

A uniformed officer named Holloway was keeping a harried-looking man in T-shirt and jeans out of the studio. Marvia took charge. “Who are you?”

“I’m Jem Waller.”

“And?”

“I’m chief engineer around here. I have to get in there and see what’s what. We’re running a radio station here, you know?”

Marvia looked into the man’s face. “We’re running a potential crime scene here. There’s a dead man still in that room. You’ll get in when we finish, Mr. Waller.”

The engineer’s eyes popped. He raised a hand and pushed a mop of light brown hair off his forehead. He nodded angrily and strode away.

Even as the technicians went about their work, Marvia studied the victim and the room. Sun Mbolu might think that Bob Bjorner had died of natural causes. It might even be convenient for her to think that, or to pretend that she did so. The coroner would make his determination, but Marvia Plum had seen homicides in her life, and she’d seen natural deaths. And she didn’t believe there was anything natural about Bjorner’s death.

The glasses the fat man had been wearing at the time of death piqued Marvia’s curiosity. She’d spotted them the time she’d peered through the doorway, over the shattered door. Now she could get a closer look. The lenses were extremely thick, and one was cracked. The frames looked like something out of an old file photo. Bjorner wore a white dress shirt and a hand-painted tie that had somehow

flopped out from under his body. Like the glasses, it was decades out of style. He wore a pair of brown suit trousers, badly frayed and dirty, and a pair of scuffed wing-tips.

His white hair did not look as clean now as it had from a distance, but his complexion was still a marked, angry red. Marvia looked more closely at his features. It was hard to be sure, especially with the lurid discoloration of his skin, but she thought he might be African American. With a light complexion to start with, and with the peculiar flush, he might look just this way.

The corners of several sheets of paper protruded from beneath his torso. Marvia made a mental note to be sure the pages were collected as evidence. She looked at them more carefully. She'd expected to see a typewritten script, or at least a set of handwritten notes. The white paper was marked with a pattern of raised dots. Was Bjorner's eyesight so bad that he used a Braille script?

But the Braille started one-third of the way down each sheet. At the top of each page, written in what looked like dark crayon, was a day and number. *MON 1*, *MON 2*, *MON 3*. Even a person with very poor eyesight would probably be able to assemble the pages in correct order, then read their contents with his trained fingertips.

A tech would inventory the dead man's pockets and collect his wallet, keys, whatever.

A metal wastebasket beside the desk held several empty food containers of the folded cardboard sort with thin wire handles. One container held a spork, one of those ugly plastic spoon-and-fork mutants, and a crumpled paper napkin.

There was an ashtray near Bob Bjorner's elbow, and in it several matches, a partially-empty matchbook, and the roach of what appeared to be a marijuana cigarette. The matchbook had a logo on the cover and peculiar, psychedelic lettering in the shape of swirling naked bodies. It said, *Club San Remo*.

That was intriguing. Marvia had been in the Club San Remo, she knew something of its history, and she wouldn't expect Bob Bjorner to frequent it. Marvia turned away, bent over the shattered door and found the portable lock that Sun Mbolo had told her Bjorner always used. She signaled an evidence tech and warned the tech to make

sure that the lock was collected. Then she walked thoughtfully back to the station's lobby.

For a moment she was the only person there. She thought about Bob Bjorner, the dead man with the red face and the old-fashioned apparel. He'd been a fat man, a very, very fat man. It might be possible after all that he had died of natural causes. Congestive heart failure, something like that, the kind of disastrous events that grossly overweight people were prone to.

But the red face haunted her. What had MacPherson said? *Red as in tomato, red as in danger flag*. Something moved and she looked up and saw a leaf floating down through the skylight atop the atrium.

CHAPTER TWO

The yellow crime-scene tapes would stay up outside Studio B until evidence technicians had completed their tasks and the coroner had removed the late Robert Bjorner. Certainly the food containers and the marijuana roach would be tested, possibly at the same time Edgar Bisonte, the Alameda County Coroner, ran his autopsy on Bjorner.

In fact there was no official crime scene—not yet. That would depend on the determination made by the Alameda County Coroner, Edgar Bisonte, M.D. Dr. Bisonte and company could get pretty territorial about making determinations, and it was still possible that the coroner would find that Bjorner had died of natural causes. But Marvia was ready to bet a week's pay that Bjorner had been poisoned.

She sprinted up gray-carpeted steps to the conference room where KRED staff were assembled. A couple of uniforms followed in her wake, and she instructed them to get the statements of everyone in the room. She felt her heart racing and knew that it was not the exertion of climbing a flight of stairs that made the adrenaline flow. It was the thrill of the hunt, the excitement of her job.

She loved being a cop.

She'd given it up just months before, run off like a hormone-crazed schoolgirl to marry Willie Fergus. Willie had been her mentor years before when Marvia was a military police corporal, halfway around the world and totally at a loss as to what life was about. She and her friends had set out to bed the biggest prizes they could, and Marvia had won the contest, bagging handsome young Lieutenant James Wilkerson.

Bagged him, against all regulations bedded him, and then discovered that she was pregnant.

When Lieutenant Wilkerson heard the news he'd frozen. This could be the end of his army career. His family had money. If Marvia would have a quiet abortion and say nothing about the matter, she

would be taken care of.

She'd appealed to Sergeant First Class Fergus, a man twenty years her senior. He'd guided her through the army's peculiar bureaucratic maze, helped her stand up to the considerable pressure that Lieutenant Wilkerson brought to bear against Corporal Plum. She'd had her baby, and he had his daddy's name on his birth certificate, and Lieutenant Wilkerson had been married to the baby's mama when that baby was born, even if Marvia and James had been divorced as soon after that as Wilkerson's lawyers could move the paperwork.

And then, a dozen years later, Marvia had run into Willie Fergus again. By now, Fergus was retired from the army and a sergeant with the Washoe County, Nevada, Sheriff's Department. Marvia had been deeply involved with a sweet man named Hobart Lindsey but the relationship was floundering—as much Marvia's fault as Lindsey's—and here was Willie Fergus to the rescue, all over again.

In a trance, Marvia had married Fergus, resigned from the Berkeley Police Department and moved to Reno. When she emerged from her bridal daze she realized that she had made a dreadful mistake.

Sun Mbolo sat at the head of a polished conference table, looking as if she were about to call a meeting to order. Marvia caught her eye and signaled to her. Mbolo rose and glided across the room in what seemed like two giant strides. Marvia asked if Mbolo had an office where they could talk. Mbolo nodded, and they walked down a carpeted corridor; Mbolo bowed Marvia into the room, majordomo fashion. She walked around her desk and slid into an executive chair. Marvia closed the office door and seated herself in a cloth-upholstered chair facing the desk. She opened a snap on her equipment belt. Sometimes she felt like Batgirl, she carried so much paraphernalia, but things came in handy.

She set a micro-recorder on the desk between them. "All right if I record our conversation?"

Mbolo said, "Of course," Then she lapsed into silence, waiting for Marvia to speak.

"You say you had a warning that Mr. Bjorner would be killed if he went on the air?"

“That he would die.”

“Are we mincing words?”

“Sergeant Plum, *I* am not mincing words.” Mbolo turned her head slowly to one side, then to the other, then faced Marvia again. Was she giving Marvia a hard time on purpose, or was she just that reserved and precise?

“Do you have the warning?”

“I have the fax.” Mbolo reached for a piece of paper on her desk. Marvia gestured her not to touch it. “I have already handled it, Sergeant.” Yes, a smart one.

“Just the same.” Marvia picked up the fax with latex-gloved hands. She spread it on the desk in front of her and leaned over it. The fax was date-and-time stamped by the machine. It had come in at 14:58, two minutes before three o’clock in the afternoon. Time enough for someone to run to Studio B and warn Bob Bjorner. It was scrawled in childish letters. It said, *three hours murderer stay quite no speke brethe speke no brethe*.

There was no signature.

Marvia looked at Mbolo. “Three hours means three o’clock, do you think?”

Mbolo raised thin, elegant shoulders in her African costume. “One would so infer.”

“And the rest? ‘Stay quite no speke brethe speke no brethe.’ What did you think that means?”

“Am I asked to interpret?”

“Ms. Mbolo, I’m asking for your cooperation.”

“In the name of sisterhood?”

“In the name of the law.” Marvia clenched her jaw and inhaled deeply. “A man is dead, and the circumstances are highly suspicious. Your people told us that a death threat had been received, and I assume that this is it. But I’m not supposed to assume anything, so I ask you again, Is this the threat, and if it is, what do you think it means?”

“Aside from the poor spelling and lack of punctuation?” Mbolo’s accent was not the musical sound of a native Swahili speaker or the almost Caribbean lilt of Africa’s West Coast; it sounded Middle

Eastern, nearly Arabic.

“I think it means, ‘Stay quiet. Do not speak and you will breathe. Speak and you will not breathe.’ That is what I think it means, Sergeant.”

Marvia exhaled. She studied the white sheet and its scrawled message. She looked at Mbolo’s face, looked into her dark eyes. “This fax doesn’t have a source code on it. Do you have any idea where it could have been sent from?”

“None.”

That was bad news. PacTel sometimes cooperated voluntarily, sometimes under threat of subpoena, but they were only good at tracing outgoing calls. Incoming calls were a much harder nut to crack.

“It could even have come from within the building. There are several fax machines. In the mail room, in the newsroom, in the business office.”

Marvia made a note to have the techs check all the wastebaskets in the building, especially the ones near fax machines. Just in case the sender had crumpled up his original when he finished transmitting it and tossed it in the nearest receptacle. A very long shot.

Certainly the fax itself was worth keeping. It might be possible to get a handwriting match, although that seemed unlikely, too. The scrawl had the looping, uncontrolled look of a right-handed person writing left-handed to disguise his or her usual penmanship. Or of a lefty writing right-handed.

The odd usage and spelling suggested a person with little or no education. Or one who was seriously challenged. Or didn’t have much English.

Or someone trying to simulate one of those categories.

This was a damned mess.

But the case was barely under way. There was a body, there were physical clues, there were plenty of possible perps. Not so bad for starters.

“You told me downstairs that you were not a friend of Mr. Bjorner’s, and that you weren’t sorry to see him dead.” Marvia waited for Mbolo to comment on that, but she didn’t, so Marvia

prompted. “Would you like to elaborate on your statement?”

“Am I being interrogated?”

“I’m just looking for information.”

“Do you not have to read me my rights?”

“Do you want me to?”

Mbolo was silent again. Marvia knew the use of silence in question-and-answer sessions. With a lot of people it was a good tool. You just wait, and they get uncomfortable, and they decide to fill in the silence with words. Sometimes with important words.

But Sun Mbolu just sat in her executive chair.

Marvia waited.

Mbolo waited.

Finally Mbolu said, “I was interrogated by the Dirgue. I am not afraid of questioning, believe me.”

Marvia waited.

“The Dirgue were the Communist secret police in my country. Ethiopia. Mengistu’s people. When you have been questioned by them, nothing else is frightening.” Mbolu smiled thinly. Marvia could see the shape of the bones inside her flesh, the thin muscles that moved her jaw and her features.

“Ms. Mbolu, I’m not trying to frighten you. And I’ll read you your rights if you want me to. At this point you are not a suspect and I don’t think you need your rights. I just want to find out how Robert Bjorner died, and why, and who was responsible for his death. And since you told me you weren’t sorry he was dead, I think you’ll be able to tell me some other things that might be helpful.”

Sun Mbolu laid two fingers against her cheek, closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again. “How much do you know about KRED, Sergeant Plum?”

“Not much. I’ll confess, it isn’t my favorite station. You used to have a nice jazz show on Sundays but that seems to be gone now.”

“You do not know the history of this radio station?”

“Not the foggiest.”

“I could give you a brochure.” When Marvia nodded, she swung around in her chair and reached up to a wooden shelf and extracted a pamphlet. She held it across the desk to Marvia. “In brief, the station

was founded in nineteen forty-seven by four Berkeley liberal intellectuals. They actually went on the air the following year. A couple of professors from the University of California, both were war veterans. World War Two was only over a couple of years. Another was a fledgling playwright. The fourth was a woman. A feminist activist.” Mbolo smiled faintly. “She was far ahead of her time.”

Marvia let her continue.

“The founders did not like what was happening to radio. There was no television on the air, that was yet to come. But they felt that there was too much commercialism, the music was vulgar, the educational potential of the great electronic medium was being wasted on greedy exploitation and—their term—fascistic authoritarianism.”

She waited for Marvia to comment. Marvia turned the brochure over in her gloved hands. “Very Berkeley. Who were these founders?”

Again a thin smile flittered across Mbolo’s so-thin face. “There are pictures in the brochure, but I can tell you their names, I have them committed to memory. Peter D’Alessandro, Ruth Rosemere, Isaac Eisenberg, and Jared Kingston. They used their last initials and petitioned the FCC for one of the first FM broadcast licenses on the Pacific Coast.”

Marvia found the page with photos of the four founders. Reorder them and you got Kingston, Rosemere, Eisenberg, D’Alessandro. KRED.

“But they did not want to glorify themselves,” Mbolo resumed. “The official motto of the station was *Keep Radio Educational and Democratic*. In fact, that is still our credo.”

Marvia looked up. “I thought it was Kay-Red. As in left-wing.”

“It was that as well.”

Mbolo was interrupted by a knock at the door. Marvia Plum swung around in her chair. Officer Gutierrez had his knuckle to the glass pane. Marvia signaled him to enter.

“We’ve got everybody’s statement, Sergeant, and the IDs are all kosher. They’re kind of restless. They want to get out of that room.”

“Okay, let ’em go.”

Gutierrez pulled the door shut behind him.

“You were saying, Ms. Mbolo—”

“No, you were saying you thought Kay-Red was a left-wing appellation. It was that too. I was not born at the time. Neither were you, I would think. But the old-timers—they say that when the Cold War broke out, the founders were shocked. They believed in the worldwide struggle against Fascism and imperialism, the United Nations, and so forth. They were appalled by the Berlin airlift, and outraged by the Korean War.”

Marvia wondered what to do with this. It was all history. It could hardly have any connection with the Bjorner murder—or could it? Sometimes if you let them talk they came around to the point and told you wonderful things. She decided to let Mbolo continue.

“For the next forty years, KRED opposed the Cold War. It supported the Guzman regime in Guatemala and the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, denounced the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Vietnam War, US intervention in Nicaragua.”

“But nothing about the Hungarian Revolution, Prague Spring, Poland?” Marvia’s years in Germany flashed past. She hadn’t been a political soldier. She’d joined the military police, won corporal’s stripes, got pregnant, got married, got her discharge, had her baby and divorced her husband. In that order.

But she’d seen the Berlin Wall, she knew something about conditions in Europe toward the end of the Cold War.

“They clucked their tongues,” Mbolo said, “and regretted the necessity. But it was Western aggression that forced Stalin and Khrushchev and Brezhnev to do the things they did.”

“And you were questioned by the Dirqe in Ethiopia?” Marvia prompted.

“My people were Falasha. *Beta Esrael*.”

“Jews?”

“Most of us are in Israel now, but my family—the Dirqe didn’t like us. We were coffee merchants. In Gonder. The local Party boss decided we were rich Jews, hiding gold in our house. We were arrested, my whole family. I was the only one who survived. I walked all the way from Gonder to Djibouti. I was able to get political asylum and come to America. I studied at the university and—It is strange, is it not? Here I am.”

“What about KRED?”

“I took the job because I love radio. I used to listen to it all the time in Gonder. I volunteered here, then I was hired, and now I am station manager. I had to hide how much I hated the Communists, is that not strange? But the Cold War is over now, and I am trying to return KRED to its roots. Three of the founders are dead. The last survivor—we like to have him back for a special observance once a year, but he is nearly ninety now, and probably will be unable to handle it much longer. But if they were alive I would want them to be proud of KRED.”

“And that’s why you didn’t like Bob Bjorner.”

For the first time, Sun Mbolo’s face showed anger. “He was the ultimate apologist. For the most vicious of crimes. For everything. For Stalin, for Ceausescu, even Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. Yes, and Mengistu. He tried to justify the Dergue. He knew I was from Ethiopia but he did not know I am *Beta Esrael*.”

Marvia said, “Do you have any idea who would want to kill him?”

Mbolo shook her head slowly, left and right. “There was disagreement here in the station. Those who wanted to keep the old political line. Keep fighting the Cold War—in the name of Fraternal Socialist solidarity. And those who wanted to return to the founders’ ideal. *Keep Radio Educational and Democratic*. Those others have no concept of democracy. They think democracy means agreeing with them. Bjorner was one of the worst. Sincere enough, I think, in his own way. But totally convinced that he was objectively and incontrovertibly correct. Ergo, anyone who disagreed with him was wrong. He made many people very angry with him here at KRED but I do not think any of them would kill him.”

“Someone killed him, Ms. Mbolo.”

“You are sure of that?”

Marvia ignored the question. “Where were you when he died?”

“When did he die?”

Marvia couldn’t help smiling. She’d been to a strip show in Weisbaden with a gang of her pals. They’d seen a pair of German comics doing classic American burlesque routines complete with baggy pants and heavy accents. *Heinrich Schmidt und Otto Umlaut*,