

LINDSEY & PLUM BOOK FIVE

THE COVER GIRL

KILLER



RICHARD A. LUPOFF

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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 cousin *Aaron*, who went to Spain to fight
for Democracy, and who lies in Spanish soil;

And for *Milton Wolff*, who went to Spain to fight
for Democracy,

And *Esther Miriam Silverstein Blanc*, who went
to Spain to nurse those who fought for Democ-
racy,

And returned to tell me their stories.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Like all books in the Hobart Lindsey/Marvia Plum series, *The Cover Girl Killer* is a work of fiction and should not be mistaken for one of history or journalism. However, like the earlier volumes in this series, it is based on modern American history and mass culture, and I would like to point out just which elements in this book are real and which are not.

The Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939 was one of the great tragedies of the Twentieth Century. Like any war it caused immense suffering, vast devastation, and many thousands of deaths. The exact number will never be known. The casualties included not only the soldiers and civilian people of Spain, but tens of thousands of “volunteers,” most of them authentic, the rest forced, from nations throughout Europe, North America, and North Africa.

At the end of the war, Spain was left suffering under a military dictatorship that survived for nearly forty years. The dictator, Francisco Franco, outlived his mentors, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, as well as his bitter foe, Josef Stalin. Only with Franco's death in 1975 did Spain become a constitutional monarchy whose people enjoy the benefits of free institutions and civil liberties.

It has been suggested that the outcome of the Spanish Civil War matters little, that the resulting regime would have been a brutal dictatorship in any case. Under a Fascist regime or Communist, the people suffer equally. Not everyone agrees with this analysis; certainly my fictitious veteran of the war, Benjamin Bruninski, does not.

The Abraham Lincoln Brigade was very real. My Cousin Aaron was a member, and died in Spain. I first heard of Aaron from my grandmother, and for half a century I searched for him, until Milton Wolff, the final commander of the Lincolns, told me of his friendship with Aaron. He told me stories of Aaron's life and of his death, and I am eternally grateful to him.

Esther Miriam Silverstein Blanc was a nurse who served in

Spain, and after returning to the United States, in World War II. Despite illness and infirmity, she told me the inspiring story of her wonderful life, and I am equally grateful to her.

Milton Wolff and Esther Blanc provided invaluable material which I used in the creation of Benjamin Bruninski and Esther Carcowitz, but my characters are nonetheless fictitious and should not be taken as literal representations of Milton Wolff or Esther Blanc.

Benjamin Bruninski's statements about the House Committee on UnAmerican Activities, and about the phenomenon of McCarthyism, are of course the fictitious words of a fictitious character. They should not be mistaken for statements by the author. However, I would suggest that interested readers pursue the history of both HUAC and Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, and the youthful involvement of both Richard Nixon and Robert Kennedy with these early players in the drama of the Cold War. It was the now-forgotten Charles Dudley Warner who said, *Politics make strange bedfellows*, as long ago as 1870. He was a better prophet than he knew.

It was on February 20, 1950, that the self-styled Tailgunner Joe McCarthy made his most famous statement: "I have in my hand fifty-seven cases of individuals who would appear to be either card-carrying members or certainly loyal to the Communist Party, but who nevertheless are still helping to shape our foreign policy...." The decent men and women whose careers, and in some cases whose very lives, were destroyed by HUAC and McCarthy, are a reproach to those who remember, and even more so to those who have forgotten.

The development of paperback publishing in the United States and other countries is a fascinating story all its own, and the collectors who track down forty- and fifty-year-old "sleaze digests" and "good girl art" are not only amusing themselves with an obscure and eccentric habit—they are helping to preserve a body of popular culture which might otherwise have been lost to history.

Paige Publications is regrettably a figment of my imagination, as are all of its staff, authors, editors, artists, and the eight (or nine) titles that Paige published in 1952 and '53. With one exception, the excerpts that appear in *The Cover Girl Killer* are all that exist of

those nine (or eight) books. The exception is *Death in the Ditch*, by Del Marston. By some miracle or manifestation of ectoplasmic materialization or automatic writing, that book *has* come into being. I have held a copy in my hands; the citations in *The Cover Girl Killer* do come from Marston's hardboiled saga; and I commend any reader whose diligent efforts lead him or her to a copy of this little literary gem.

—Richard A. Lupoff

INTRODUCTION

by **Bill Pronzini**

Richard Lupoff knows.

He knows the past, its diverse forms of popular culture and the fascination these hold for many of us living in the present. He has the inquisitiveness of the historian, the passionate enthusiasm of the nostalgic, and the zeal of the true collector. His lifelong interest in comic art and the early days of comic-book publishing (a field in which he is an acknowledged expert) was the impetus for his first Hobart Lindsey/Marvia Plum mystery, *The Comic Book Killer* (1988). The second in the series, *The Classic Car Killer* (1992), grew out of his regard for the vintage automobiles and the era in which such finely engineered pieces of machinery as the Duesenberg were the *ne plus ultra* in personal transportation. *The Bessie Blue Killer* (1994) is a celebration of World War II aircraft and of the black fighter pilots known as the Tuskegee Airmen. *The Sepia Siren Killer* (1994) is a look at Hollywood filmmaking in the thirties and forties, in particular those features, barely remembered today, that were made by black producers for black audiences.

The fifth Lindsey and Plum adventure is a return to the world of publishing, specifically paperback publishing during the boom years of the early fifties—a boom created by the advent of the softcover original, in which popular novels and nonfiction works were written especially for sale to a mass-market audience in inexpensive pocket-size editions. Three aspects of the softcover original's heyday play important roles in the story. One is how they were published and who published them; a second is the type of books published and who wrote them; and third is their vivid, often gaudy cover art and the artists who created these covers.

Many small publishing companies were founded during those fifties glory years. Some flourished for a time and then floundered, while others floundered from the start—usually (though not always) those exploiters who bought inferior literary works, and used cheap

paper and substandard artwork. Quite a few of the decade's paperback houses had short lives, so brief in some cases that virtually nothing is known about them and they are remembered only by the most ardent collectors. The Hanro Corporation, for instance, published fourteen digest-sized softcover original crime novels in 1951-52, some of which were written by established professionals and more than one of which is a cut above average; Hanro's Phantom Books line, however, was poorly packaged and distributed, and sold so few copies that individual titles are extremely difficult to find today. Another example is Peters Publishing, which brought out five obscure nonfiction titles in 1952-53 and then vanished without a trace.

The Chicago-based paperback line Dick Lupoff has invented here, Paige Publications, might well have existed in the early fifties. Those individuals who authored the nine titles produced during Paige's two-year lifespan could have written for Hanro Corporation or Peters Publishing. (The anecdote Lupoff relates about the purchase of the Del Marston private eye novel is based on a real incident involving a first novelist, a forties Chicago book and magazine publisher, and a well known editor and writer.) The artist who painted the covers for *Buccaneer Blood*, *Cry Ruffian!*, and *Death in the Ditch* might have done similar work for Falcon or Lion or Zenith or any of the other small, independent, and now all-but-forgotten publishers. It is not only possible but probable that the nine Paige books would have such poor distribution and sales that very few copies survive to the present. It is also entirely feasible that Paige would have been forced out of business not only for financial reasons but for the political one which Lupoff postulates.

The paperback original's cover art was reflective (as were the books themselves) of the newfound sophistication of post-World War II society, and was a central selling point. Artists used the "peek-aboo sex" approach to catching the reader's eye: beautiful women depicted either nude, as seen from the side or rear, or with a great deal of cleavage and/or leg showing, in a variety of provocative poses. One such cover on a Paige title, portraying one such beautiful woman in a typically sultry pose, is the springboard for the action in

The Cover Girl Killer. It, too, might well have existed.

Today's paperback collecting market also plays an important role in the narrative. Scotty Anderson could have been modeled on any of a dozen actual collectors, all of whom are as eccentric and benignly monomaniacal as Anderson. (I use the phrase "eccentric and benignly monomaniacal" advisedly, since my own collecting mania approaches a rather altered state. As does Lupoff's, I suspect.) Gary Lovisi, accorded almost mythical status in these pages, is a real person who does in fact publish a collectors' journal called *Paperback Parade*; he also publishes a magazine devoted to hard-boiled crime fiction, and is a noted fiction writer in his own right.

As enjoyable as are the publishing and collecting elements of *The Cover Girl Killer*, this and Lupoff's other mysteries are much more than nostalgia set pieces. He knows the social and political climates of the eras of which he writes, and sprinkles his stories with sometimes wry, sometimes angry, often insightful comments on the prejudices, excesses, misconceptions, and other prevailing attitudes of those bygone days. In his previous two "Killer" mysteries, the achievements of and problems faced by African Americans in the early decades of this century are brought into sharp focus. In *The Cover Girl Killer*, a central plot component and theme is the Spanish Civil War of the mid-thirties, in particular the activities of the Lincoln Brigade—the several thousand Americans who fought on the side of the Loyalists, half of whom were killed in action or died as a result of wounds and disease.

Lupoff's interest in the Spanish Civil War stems from the fact that one of his cousins was a Lincoln Brigadier who gave his life to the struggle against Fascist tyranny in Spain. Thus his description of the hardships faced by these American freedom fighters, both in Spain and on U.S. soil after the survivors' return, is deeply felt and justifiably bitter. As one of the characters, a former Brigadier, says to Hobart Lindsey, "I keep thinking, maybe somebody will care about the Lincolns someday. Dumb, eh? [People] didn't care then, and they don't care now. Soon we'll all be gone and no one will know." Lupoff cares passionately and wants other to care, so that thousands of men and women will not have died in vain.

Readers unfamiliar with the series may have gained an impression from the foregoing that the “Killer” novels are primarily time trips. This is not the case. Lupoff chronicles the present as effectively as he does the past; his mysteries are thoroughly modern in their depiction of the nineties in all of the decade’s chaotic, harsh, farcical, frustrating and fascinating complexity. Lindsey, in his capacity as an insurance claims adjuster, and Marvia Plum, in hers as a Berkeley homicide cop, make expert use of the latest in technology and other contemporary investigative techniques. Their personal relationship is likewise modern, not only in its interracial aspect but in its spiritual and sexual contexts as well.

Just as change is the lifeblood of healthy human existence, growth and transition are the lifeblood of good series fiction. Few detective series, even when perpetrated by skilled writers, can last long without their principal characters undergoing a natural progression of changes, both positive and negative, in attitude, lifestyle, relationships. Neither Lindsey nor Marvia nor Lindsey’s mother is quite the same person he or she was in *The Comic Book Killer*. More changes take place in this novel; one is major and will probably surprise fans, though it opens up all sorts of interesting possibilities for future entries. This, too is the stuff of good series fiction. *The Cover Girl Killer* ensures that Lindsey’s and Marvia’s readers will come back for more—and that they’ll likely bring a few friends along with them.

No question about it: Richard Lupoff knows.

CHAPTER ONE

One boy's skin was a chocolate brown; the other's, almost black. The lighter-skinned boy held a fishing rod in his left hand, a glittering Lake Tahoe salmon, easily a seven-pounder, in the right. The fish tried to flip out of the boy's control but he held it tightly. "Come on, Jamie!"

The darker-skinned boy pointed a Sony Handycam, his eye pressed to its canted viewfinder. "Hold him still, I can't take your picture if you won't hold him still."

Jamie Wilkerson pressed *record*. The Handycam whirred. The late afternoon sun glinted off the surface of Lake Tahoe. There was no wind; the surface was still. The boat, a 28-foot Bayliner, trolled toward the center of the lake, barely maintaining headway, following its Maxim/Marinetek fishfinder.

Over the purr of the Bayliner's Volvo Penta engine, a distant *whup-whup-whup* became audible. Jamie swung the Handycam away from his friend and the struggling salmon, swept it up the snow-covered slopes on the western shore of the lake. A black speck had appeared against the brilliant blue sky. The speck was approaching the lake.

"Hey!" Hakeem White complained. "You're supposed to be taking my picture. That's just some old heli - "

He stopped in the middle of the word. The helicopter seemed to wobble in mid-air. Its familiar *whup-whup-whup* sound developed a sickening syncopation. Hakeem dropped the lake salmon. It flexed the muscles of its silvery tail and launched itself over the stern of the Bayliner and splashed into the cold lake.

Jamie Wilkerson kept the Handycam focused on the helicopter.

Hobart Lindsey and Marvia Plum, relaxing in the Bayliner's half-open cabin, lowered their coffee cups and clambered onto the afterdeck to stand with Marvia's son and his friend. Even Captain MacKenzie, keeping one hand on the Bayliner's helm, shaded his eyes with the other as he watched the helicopter slow to a hover overhead.

The helicopter shuddered in midair, then rotated slowly on its vertical axis. It dropped toward the Bayliner.

MacKenzie yelled and shoved the tourist boat's throttle forward. Its 350 horsepower engine responded and the boat leaped ahead. Lindsey grabbed Hakeem and Marvia Plum grabbed Jamie to keep the boys from being flung into the lake. If they were, their orange lifejackets would keep them afloat—but even a brief exposure to the frigid water could endanger their lives.

Somehow, through it all, Jamie kept the Handycam focused on the helicopter and the *record* button pressed.

The helicopter splashed down twenty yards behind the Bayliner, at the exact spot the boat had occupied when the 'copter began its plunge. Captain MacKenzie swung the Bayliner in a tight circle and headed back toward the foundering 'copter. He clicked the boat's Cybernet radio into life and called through to Lake Forest, on Tahoe's north shore.

He shoved the Bayliner's gear lever into neutral and the boat slowed as it approached the 'copter. "Bart," he yelled, "get on the blower—Coast Guard should be coming up. Tell 'em what happened—I have to handle this!" He barreled past the paying passengers and grabbed a downrigger. Jamie and Hakeem danced around him, trying to stay out of his path. Marvia Plum pulled the boys away from MacKenzie.

Lindsey had the Coast Guard station on the blower now. "A helicopter just crashed—it's in the middle of the lake. We're right next to it."

A voice from the radio said, "We got a distress call from them. We've got a cutter headed out there now."

"What do you want us to do?"

The voice said, "Don't go under with the chopper."

Beyond MacKenzie, Lindsey could see the helicopter foundering deeper into the lake. It looked like an old glass-bubble Bell 'copter, the kind popular with TV traffic reporters. He thought he could make out two figures inside the bubble. Only one of them was moving.

MacKenzie had swung a heavy cable out on the boat's downrigger. He climbed onto the stern gunwale and jumped toward the 'copter. Chilly water plumed around MacKenzie. Droplets hit Lindsey's face

like icy pellets. Lindsey could see MacKenzie struggling to attach the cable to the 'copter. The aircraft's tail was pointing toward the Bayliner, and MacKenzie managed to clip the cable to the tail rotor mounting.

With a sucking noise the helicopter disappeared into Lake Tahoe. MacKenzie disappeared, then reappeared, gasping for air, clambering hand-over-hand along the downrigger cable.

Marvia Plum shoved Jamie and Hakeem behind her, toward the Bayliner's cabin. Lindsey had dropped the ship-to-shore mike. He scrambled to the stern of the Bayliner. With Marvia at his side he stretched his arms over the gunwale. MacKenzie had reached the Bayliner. Lindsey and Plum grabbed him by the hands, then moved their grasp to his arms. Even after his brief soaking in the icy lake he was turning blue and his skin was frigid. They managed to haul him over the stern of the boat. He crashed to the deck and crawled toward the cabin.

Marvia Plum followed him.

Lindsey stood in the Bayliner's stern, watching the lake surface where the helicopter had disappeared. The downrigger was playing out cable slowly. The 'copter was bulky, and it displaced its volume in water, reducing its own weight by an equivalent amount. Bubbles rose from it, bursting when they reached the surface of the lake.

Then a hand appeared, then another. Lindsey shouted, "Someone's alive!"

Marvia Plum, still in her quilted jacket, and Captain MacKenzie, wrapped in a blanket, a knitted cap pulled over his dripping hair, tumbled back out of the cabin. MacKenzie yelled at the figure who was following his example, clambering hand-over-hand along the downrigger cable. The cable continued to play out, so the 'copter pilot's progress was slower than MacKenzie's had been.

When he was a few feet from the Bayliner, MacKenzie shoved a boat-hook over the gunwale and the bedraggled figure released the downrigger cable and grabbed the boat-hook. Lindsey helped MacKenzie haul the boat-hook back while Marvia Plum grabbed the survivor's arm and pulled him over the gunwale. As he came over the gunwale, Lindsey saw that one of his legs stuck out from its

socket at a crooked angle.

Now Marvia Plum tried to hustle the dripping man into the cabin. He screamed and collapsed. Lindsey realized that his leg wasn't really attached to his body wrong: it was broken, and in more places than one. Lindsey scrambled to help Marvia with the man, dragging him on his back into the cabin and wrapping him in a blanket.

Captain MacKenzie picked up the ship-to-shore microphone and shouted at the Coast Guard. Jamie pointed the Handycam at the Coast Guard cutter approaching from the north.

The injured man shook his head, shoving himself upright on his elbow. He tried to climb to his feet but fell back, screaming in pain. He yelled, "I've got to get him out of there! It's Mr. Vansittart!"

MacKenzie shoved past them. Lindsey could see him peering into the lake. He studied the downrigger. The cable had paid out to its end, revealing a polished metal reel. Lindsey could feel the Bayliner tilting. MacKenzie roared. "We're going to founder!" He pounded his fist on the Bayliner's gunwale, then tugged the heavy downrigger from its mounting.

It whipped into the air, missing MacKenzie by fractions, then arced over the Bayliner's stern and splashed black water higher than the boat, disappearing beneath the surface after the helicopter.

The survivor lay on his back, a picture of despair. "It was Mr. Vansittart," he moaned. "I tried to get him out but I couldn't get him out."

The Coast Guard cutter hove to alongside the Bayliner. A guardsman called, "We're going to throw you a line, Bayliner. We'll tow you to safety."

Captain MacKenzie shook his head. "I don't need a tow. *He* does." He pointed at the lake, where the helicopter and its passenger had disappeared. "But I've got a badly injured man on board. I'm heading for port. He needs to get to the hospital."

* * * * *

Hobart Lindsey, Marvia Plum, Jamie Wilkerson and Hakeem White sat on the edge of the big bed. All had showered and changed

into warm clothes. They were eating Chinese food and watching CNN with the sound muted, waiting for Jamie's fifteen seconds fame.

Hakeem was not very happy. "It was just 'cause I'm a better fisherman than you, Jamie. If you were a better fisherman you would have caught the fish and I would have had the camcorder and I'd be famous."

"I'm going to be a TV newsman when I grow up. I've already got a start. And I've got a check coming, too."

Marvia Plum hushed the two boys. "Look." She hit the mute button a second time and the sound came back on. A talking head in the studio of CNN's Reno affiliate was jabbering at the camera. The image on the screen cut to Jamie's footage, starting with a flash of Hakeem's grinning face, Jamie holding the camera on Hakeem's lake salmon, then panning away to the tiny speck of the 'copter.

The studio announcer said, "These remarkable pictures were taken by a ten-year-old boy, Jamie Wilkerson, of Berkeley, California, vacationing at Lake Tahoe with his mother and best friend. The helicopter ran into trouble as it began to cross the lake *en route* from its passenger's Belmont, California, home to a destination in Reno."

On the TV screen the helicopter hovered, the *whup-whup-whup* of its blades hesitated and the 'copter shook, then began to whirl as it fell toward the lake. Almost miraculously, Jamie had kept the Handycam image steady and clear. Maybe the boy did have a future as a cameraman.

"The pilot, John Frederick O'Farrell of Mountain View, California, is a Viet Nam veteran who operates a private air-taxi service. He was rushed to Doctors' Hospital in Truckee and is in Intensive Care, suffering from a compound fracture of the leg and internal injuries. A hospital spokesperson says that doctors are guardedly optimistic regarding O'Farrell's condition. Coast Guard authorities at Lake Tahoe said that only the quick action of Captain Kevin MacKenzie of the Bayliner *Tahoe Tailflipper* saved O'Farrell's life."

The screen showed O'Farrell climbing out of the lake, Marvia Plum hauling him by one dripping sleeve while O'Farrell clung to the boat-hook that MacKenzie and Lindsey had passed to him.

On the video tape, the injuries to O'Farrell's leg were horrifyingly obvious.

Then the image cut to a still picture of a white-haired, business-suited man. The surroundings were unquestionably an office. Letters running across the bottom of the screen read, *File Photo*. The announcer furnished a voice-over. "Albert Crocker Vansittart was the last scion of a pioneer California family. A lifelong bachelor, Vansittart inherited a fortune estimated at fifty million dollars and ran its worth up to ten times that amount. A lifelong resident of Belmont, Vansittart was traveling to Reno on holiday."

The scene cut back to Lake Tahoe. The news network must have hired a helicopter of its own and had it hover over the crash site. Now it was nighttime; the footage must have been shot within the past hour. A Coast Guard cutter had returned and its crew were working by floodlight, dropping lines into the black water. They hauled them back without results.

The announcer introduced a professor of marine geology from the University of Nevada at Reno. "Lake Tahoe is more than a quarter of a mile deep," the professor intoned. "Once you get past the surface layers, the temperature is a uniform 40 degrees Fahrenheit, year round. We don't really know what lies at the bottom of the lake—or who." The professor allowed himself a little laugh. "But you can be sure, if anybody rode that helicopter to the bottom of the lake, he isn't alive now."

"Haven't you tried this technique before, Professor, looking for Tahoe Tessie?"

"A lot of people laugh at Tessie, call her our own version of the Loch Ness Monster. But we've found some amazing species in recent decades. Why, no one believed that a live coelacanth could possibly be swimming around today, until..."

Lindsey jumped when the telephone rang at his elbow. As he picked up the handset he glanced at his watch. It was 11:30 at night; it had been a long day and evening but everyone including the ten-year-olds was too energized to sleep. "Stand by for Mr. Richelieu." Lindsey grimaced and mouthed his boss's name. Marvia mimed back in alarm.

Richelieu said, “Lindsey, I’m surprised you’re still awake.” He sounded like Jack Nicholson on valium, Lindsey thought. “You’re not watching CNN by any chance, are you, Lindsey?”

Amazing. Did the man have bugs everywhere? “As a matter of fact, I am.”

“Do you know who died this afternoon?”

“You mean Albert Crocker Vansittart?”

“Go to the head of the class. That was you and your girlfriend in the, what was its name—”

“*Tahoe Tailflipper.*”

“God, you California people are so cute I want to throw up. Yes, I thought that was you. Well, Hobart Lindsey, International Surety’s hero *du jour*. I don’t know how you always manage to land in hot water, but you’re in it again.”

Lindsey shook his head. Obviously, Richelieu had never dipped his toes into Lake Tahoe. Lindsey had carried the telephone as far away from the TV as he could, closed himself in the bathroom with the cord snaked under the door. Too bad the lodge didn’t have cordless phones, but then guests would surely carry them away like souvenir towels.

“I don’t understand, Mr. Richelieu. Why am I in this? What does this have to do with International Surety? What does it have to do with SPUDS?” And why, Lindsey wondered, had the director of the Special Projects Unit/Detached Service, tracked him down to a lakeside lodge in Tahoe City long after business hours?

“Good thing Mrs. Blomquist and I were working late tonight and happened to turn on the set here in the office.”

Lindsey didn’t rise to that one.

“Vansittart has one of our flag policies. Had, I should say. I assume the coroner out there is going to certify that he’s dead.”

“Without a body, Mr. Richelieu?”

“Come on, Lindsey. Enough witnesses saw that ’copter crash. Including you of all people. And it’s on tape. And the pilot—what’s his name—”

“O’Farrell.”

“—says it was Vansittart.”

“Okay. Vansittart had an International Surety policy?”

“Four million dollars worth.”

“Four—four *million*?”

“That’s right. Been paying in on it since 1951. Biggest life policy I.S. ever wrote.”

“Well...well...I guess we’ll just have to pay off, then. If they can recover the body. Or, ah, once the coroner certifies that he’s dead. I don’t suppose we can wait seven years? And no double indemnity?”

Richelieu’s chuckle was oilier than Jack Nicholson’s. “No seven years. And no double indemnity, either. I looked. Give thanks for small blessings.”

Lindsey rubbed his eyes and looked at his watch again. It was quarter-to-twelve. Quarter-to-one in Denver. Sure, Mr. Richelieu and Mrs. Blomquist were working late. On a Friday night. Just like Nelson Rockefeller and his editor were when the Rock bought the farm.

“I don’t see why you called me, Mr. Richelieu. I’m on vacation. Well, a weekend getaway, anyhow. That’s a huge policy, and the death of the insured will have to be certified, but it still sounds like a job for the nearest branch office. Why don’t they just enter the event through KlameNet and—”

“You aren’t listening, Lindsey. This is a flag policy, understand? And there’s something peculiar about it, aside from the circumstances of Vansittart’s death.”

He paused, waiting for Lindsey to ask what was peculiar about Vansittart’s \$4,000,000 policy.

Lindsey liked his job.

“What’s peculiar about Vansittart’s policy?”

“The beneficiary. Cripes, I’d never write a policy like this one, I don’t care who the insured was, I don’t care how much he was paying in premiums.”

Lindsey did not ask who the beneficiary was. He didn’t like his job that much.

Richelieu cleared his throat. “The beneficiary is the girl on the cover of *Death in the Ditch*.”

“What?”

“The girl on the cover of *Death in the Ditch*.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Lindsey, you know me. I hand-picked you out of that crummy little office you were in. I gave you your big break in this company. You know I don’t kid.”

“Right. Okay. Who’s the girl on the cover of *Death in the Ditch*?”

“I have not the foggiest. That’s what International Surety is paying you to find out.”

“Sounds like a book. I mean—the girl on the cover. Kind of like that porn star who posed for the baby food label or the soap flakes package or whatever it was. But *Death in the Ditch* wouldn’t be baby food or soap. It sounds like a book.”

“Find out, Lindsey. And find the girl. We owe her three million dollars.”

“Whoa. I thought you said four million.”

“Right. I told you this was a flag policy. If we find the girl and pay the benefits, International Surety gets a twenty-five percent finder’s fee. That’s a cool million smackers.”

“And if we don’t find her? I mean, this sounds like a long shot. When did you say the policy was written?”

“1951.”

“After more than forty years, well, she may not even be alive. What happens if we can’t find her? Or if she’s deceased?”

“Then, Hobart, then.... I told you this was a flag policy. If we can’t find her, or if she’s deceased, the money goes to something called the World Fund for Indigent Artists. Sounds like Vansittart was hung up on artists and models. Wouldn’t be the first.”

“And you want me to find the girl.”

“Find the girl, right. *Cherchez la femme*.”

“How long do we have to find her?”

“Policy doesn’t specify. But we have to notify the artists’ fund, and once they smell four million bucks, they’re going to start pressing us hard.”

“And there’s no finder’s fee.”

“That’s right, Lindsey. I swear, young feller, you keep on showing your smarts like you been, you’ve got a bright future with this

company.”

“I’ll get on it first thing Monday morning, Mr. Richelieu.”

A moment later Lindsey could have sworn that he felt a blast of heat come through the telephone line. Of course that was impossible, but.... “You’ll get on it first thing *tomorrow*, bucko. In fact suppose you get on it tonight. You’ve got your palmtop with you?”

“I have it.”

“It’s got a modem in it, right? Standard SPUDS issue, right? You do work for me, Lindsey, don’t you?”

“Right.”

“To work, then. You’re not on an hourly wage, Lindsey. To work.”

Lindsey opened the bathroom door. He could see Jamie and Hakeem silhouetted against the TV screen. They’d lost interest in CNN and switched channels to a Japanese monster movie. Something with two heads and lots of scales was breathing fire and flailing at a squadron of Korean War era jet fighters.

After a couple of jets crashed into a mountainside sending up plumes of black, oily smoke Lindsey quietly placed the telephone handset on its base. The boys did not budge. He pulled on his goose-down jacket and motioned to Marvia. She slipped into her own jacket and followed him onto the wooden walkway outside their room.

The lodge was separated from the lake by a broad lawn, covered now with drifted snow. The January moon reflected off the lake’s smooth surface. The Coast Guard cutter had apparently returned to its pier and the news helicopter to its base. Across the lake, a torch-light ski-party was visible as a cluster of tiny moving sparks.

Lindsey took Marvia’s hands in his own.

She said, “We have to go back, don’t we?”

He nodded.

“It was going so well. Like a real family.”

“I know. But Richelieu—”

She looked angry. “How did he know where we were?”

Lindsey laughed without humor. “I guess he was watching CNN.” He told Marvia about Richelieu and Mrs. Blomquist working late and just happening to turn on a TV in the office. “He must have had her calling every hotel and lodge at the lake, ’til she found us.”

Marvia grinned bitterly. “We should have registered as the Smith family.”

Lindsey looked down at Marvia’s face. The moon reflected from her dark eyes like two bright disks. Her dark face and short hair were silhouetted against the snow-field that stretched from the lodge to the lake shore.

“Let’s chase the boys into their own room. I can log onto the twenty-four-hour interlibrary net from my palmtop. Give me an hour or so, then we’ll can turn in.”

Plum pressed the palm of her hand to his face. Cold as the night air was, her hand felt warm on his cheek.

“You going to work until you fall asleep?”

Lindsey shook his head. She could always make him smile. He shook his head again to make sure she could see it in the moonlight.

CHAPTER TWO

Lindsey and Marvia Plum took Jamie and Hakeem to an old Tahoe restaurant for breakfast. It wasn't glitzy and it wasn't full of yuppies in the latest L.L. Bean and Eddie Bauer ski-wear but the food was good and the portions were generous.

The boys were not pleased at missing their weekend in the snow, but Lindsey and Plum promised them another shot at it as soon as they could get away. Normally Lindsey was the one who worked Monday through Friday. Since he'd moved from International Surety's Walnut Creek office to SPUDS, he pretty well set his own days and hours.

Marvia Plum was the one who had to fight for the shifts she wanted. A homicide sergeant on the Berkeley Police Department had to be available when the department needed her. Murderers didn't knock off after six o'clock in the evening. In fact, they got busy after the sun went down, and peaked just about when most citizens were watching the evening news or crawling into their beds.

But this time it was Lindsey who had got the call, and this time it was Lindsey who clicked his heels, saluted smartly and did as he was commanded: *Find the girl on the cover of Death in the Ditch.*

He dropped Marvia and both youngsters at her house. She would take care of them, get Hakeem White back to his parents and take her own son to her parents' house. They would spend the evening there. Marvia spent more time with her mother since her father's death. Not that Gloria Plum needed it. She had always been an island unto herself. But somehow, it seemed to Lindsey, Marvia drew strength from being in the house where she was raised, and where her father had lived almost until the end.

Lindsey left them at Oxford Street in Berkeley. Marvia would drive Jamie and Hakeem to Bonita Street in her classic Mustang. Once the boys talked things over on the ride back from Tahoe, they decided that their adventure would make better telling than an ordinary weekend excursion would have. They'd seen the helicopter

crash—it almost crashed on them. They’d helped rescue the pilot, Hakeem had been on the national news and Jamie Wilkerson was a real network cameraman.

Lindsey’s computer search had turned up hundreds of books with “Death” in their titles, from *Death About Face* by Frank Kane, 1948, to *Death-Wish Green* by Frances Crane, 1960. Lots of *Death in*’s too. There was *Death in the Devil’s Acre* by Anne Perry, 1985, and there was *Death in the Diving Pool* by Carol Carnac, 1940. That was where *Death in the Ditch* belonged, right between *Death in the Devil’s Acre* and *Death in the Diving Pool*. But it wasn’t there.

Maybe it wasn’t a book at all. Maybe it was—what? What would have a cover with a girl on it, with a title like *Death in the Ditch*, other than a book? A magazine? A record album? A pack of trading cards? They were making some pretty weird trading cards these days, everything from famous gangsters to friendly dictators. They weren’t restricted to the athletes and movie stars that Lindsey remembered collecting in grammar school, but Vansittart’s life policy had been issued in 1951. If the designated beneficiary hadn’t been changed in later years, that would narrow the field.

He’d have to check on that, but first, after dropping Marvia and the youngsters, he headed for Walnut Creek. He pulled his rebuilt Volvo 544 into the driveway and parked beside the silver-gray Oldsmobile that had been parked there increasingly often these past few months.

Inside the house he found Mother’s new friend, Gordon Sloane, sitting in the living room with his shoes off and his feet on the ottoman. A CD was playing ii it sounded like Mozart—and Sloane held a nearly full martini glass by its stem. He looked up, clearly surprised, when Lindsey came in.

“I thought you were up in Tahoe. Your mother said—”

“That was the plan. Had to come back.”

“I hope nothing’s wrong.”

Before Lindsey could answer, Mother came into the room. She wore an apron over a pair of jeans and a warm blouse. Her hair had gone to gray—every time Lindsey noticed a change in her it was a shock to him—and she carried a wooden salad bowl and a pair of hinged tongs. She looked like everybody’s perfect mom—by

Norman Rockwell out of June Cleaver. Lindsey embraced her and planted a kiss on her cheek. She smelled like flowers and cooking.

Lindsey said, “I guess you two were planning an evening at home. I can make myself scarce.”

Mother smiled. “We wouldn’t throw you out of your own home. There’s plenty of food.”

Lindsey looked past her, at Sloane. Sloane nodded. Lindsey said, “Okay. I’d better go wash up. I’m feeling kind of stale.”

At dinner he told them about the events at Tahoe, about Jamie Wilkerson’s debut as a network cameraman, and about Desmond Richelieu’s telephone call.

Sloane said, “We caught part of the report on TV. It was in this morning’s papers, too. They’re going nuts over Vansittart. I didn’t realize you were involved.”

Lindsey reached for a slab of pot roast. “Only by accident. Of course Jamie’s beside himself.”

“He’s going to be Hobart’s son,” Mother offered. “When he marries Marvia. You know Marvia, Gordon. Such a lovely girl. No, woman, we don’t say girl any more.”

Lindsey couldn’t suppress his grin. “That’s all right, Mother. It’s a small enough matter.”

“Well, I try to do what’s right. Don’t I, Gordon?”

Sloane agreed. Mother tried to do what was right. And she did amazingly well. After decades in a twilight world, not knowing whether Ike was President or Ronald Reagan, forgetting half the time that her husband had died in the Korean War and forgetting half the time that that war had been over for decades and that her son was a grown man approaching middle age, Mother had come around.

Something had penetrated the fog. Something like a miracle.

After dinner was over and the dishes cleaned and put away—six hands made quick work—Mother turned on the TV. It was getting late, they had lingered over coffee, and the evening news was just coming on.

There was a follow-up to the Vansittart story. The Coast Guard had dropped a plumb line, trying to find the helicopter. Nothing

came up. The lake was too deep at that point, the line couldn't even reach the bottom.

There was a canned biography of Vansittart. The news people had turned up his high school and college yearbook photos, old newspaper shots and black-and-white footage of the millionaire. Toasting the mayor of San Francisco at some civic dinner, shaking hands with the governor of California at another.

Vansittart must have been quite a fellow. Apparently he'd been ambassador to several postage-stamp nations in the 1960s and 70s, obviously the reward for generous campaign donations to the Presidents of that era.

And newsreel footage of Vansittart escorting movie stars to premieres and rolling dice at the gaming tables in Reno and Las Vegas. Yes, quite a fellow. The reporter in Reno mentioned that Vansittart had been traveling by chartered helicopter to a planned seventy-fifth birthday party—his own—when the 'copter crashed and sank into Lake Tahoe, taking Vansittart with it.

In the morning the Oldsmobile was still in the driveway. Lindsey got into his blue round-back Volvo and headed downtown to the International Surety office. Now that he was assigned to SPUDS he could have moved out, rented space for himself, hired a secretary. But he preferred to work out of the office where he'd worked for so many years.

Not that the atmosphere was perfect. Elmer Mueller, Lindsey's successor as area manager, was a loathsome bigot, and Mueller's hand-picked office manager, Kari Fielding, was as vicious as her boss. But in a strange way Lindsey enjoyed seeing them once in a while. It was the way you enjoy having a really miserable day once in a while, he told himself: it makes you appreciate the rest of your life.

But it was Saturday and he was alone in the office. Agent claims would be filed directly through KlameNet. Anything else could wait until Monday morning.

Lindsey used the office computer to log onto the mainframe at National. He printed out the text of Vansittart's policy, checked the history file, verified that the peculiar description of the beneficiary

had been there from the outset. The only changes over the years had come about when the alternate bennie had changed its name. Originally the Chicago Artists and Models Mutual Aid Society, it had become the National Welfare League for Graphic Creators, then the World Fund for Indigent Artists.

Each time the organization changed its name there was a new address and a new set of officers. Well, in forty-plus years, that wasn't especially surprising. The current address was 101 California Street, San Francisco. Lindsey knew the building well, a gleaming, modern high-rise full of high-profile law firms and corporate offices. A disgruntled ex-client of one of the law firms had burst in with an arsenal of assault weapons one day and reduced the California Bar Association membership sizably. Since then there was better security in the building.

The current President of WFIA was one Roger St. John Cooke. Vice President was Cynthia Cooke. The file showed that the Cookes had been running the fund for a decade. It sounded like a nice little mom 'n' pop non-profit foundation. The world was full of do-gooders, including those who did well by doing good.

Lindsey made a note to expect some input from the Cookes. (Brother and sister? Husband and wife? Mother and son?) There would be a polite phone call, then a lawyer letter. How handy, they probably wouldn't even get wet if they had to visit their attorneys on a rainy San Francisco day. But Lindsey wasn't going to worry too much about the contingent bennies today.

His job was.... He must have been listening to too much music lately. His mind was setting his task to music. A silent orchestra played inside his head as he sang along.

Was the tune *Happy Birthday to You*...?

Find the girl on the book, Find the girl on the book, It's Death in the Di-itch....

Or maybe it was Beethoven's *Fifth*....

Locate the girl! Locate the girl! Locatethegirllocatethe-girllocatethegirl....

He found himself giggling into the monitor screen. Maybe this job was making him crazy. He shut down the computer, left the

office, grabbed a snack downstairs and walked to his car. Traffic in the Caldecott Tunnel was light.

It was a gray day in Berkeley. Lindsey was dressed casually, a heavy sweater over a woolen shirt. He parked in a city garage just off Telegraph Avenue and headed for Cody's, the town's premiere bookstore. A clerk at the center desk offered to help him. She had short hair and a spectacularly beautiful face. She wore a Dan Quayle for President tee shirt. Lindsey didn't know what to make of that, so he didn't comment.

He asked if she knew of a book called *Death in the Ditch*. No author, no publisher, but it was probably first issued in 1951 or so. The clerk smiled. "I doubt that it's still in print. Unless it was a classic of some kind."

"I don't know what kind of book it was, except there was a girl on the cover."

The clerk raised her eyebrows. "A little girl, you mean?"

"I don't know. I've never seen it."

"Or a woman. A grown-up woman."

"I don't know. I've never seen it."

The clerk turned away. Over her shoulder she said, "I'll look in *Books in Print*. On the CD-ROM." She punched some keys on a computer. Mysterious boxes and symbols raced across the monitor screen. Finally it settled down. The clerk turned back to Lindsey. "Sorry. Doesn't show anything like that. *Death in Venice*? *Death in the Bathroom*? *Death in a Warm, Dark Place*?"

Lindsey shook his head.

The clerk nodded. "I didn't think so. Tell you what." Lindsey had one hand on the counter, and the clerk put hers on top of his. "Maybe you could try Moe's next door. First floor, they have a lot of used paperbacks. That might be your best bet."

Lindsey thanked her and walked next door. It wasn't raining so he didn't get wet, even though he wasn't at 101 California Street.

The clerk was right, Moe's had thousand upon thousands of used paperbacks. Trouble was, they were arranged by author, not title. Finding *Death in the Ditch*—if Moe's had it at all—was about as likely as dropping a pebble from the Goodyear blimp and hoping to