

A PRIESTLY AFFAIR

By

Carl Schmidt



1

A Delicate Matter

First thing Tuesday morning, the phone rang. “Our Lady of the Seas” appeared on the caller ID, but a man’s voice came over the line.

“Is this Jesse Thorpe?” he asked.

“Yes, it is,” I replied. “What can I do for you?”

“I am Monsignor Francis O'Reilly.”

I expected him to continue talking after introducing his name, but he was either gathering his thoughts, or he expected me to respond to his persona. When the pause became a little too pregnant, I stepped in, “How can I help you?”

“I have a delicate matter I would like to discuss,” he replied cautiously, “but I need your assurance that anything I say will be strictly confidential.”

“At this point, you have my word,” I said firmly. “If you choose to hire me as a private investigator, our contract will include a confidentiality agreement that spells it out for you in detail.”

“I heard about your work solving the murder of our governor, but I have to say that it sounds a little like *good news - bad news*. You tracked down the killers, but the whole story made the gossip columns for weeks.”

“Do you know the name of my client in that case, Monsignor?”

“No, I do not.”

“That should give you some idea about my level of discretion. I went to great lengths to be sure his, *or her*, name stayed out of the press. There was nothing I could do to hush the news about the killers. Crimes and criminals are public matters.”

“Indeed. Well... I would like to meet with you personally. I see on your website that you are based in Augusta, but that you work here in Portland on Mondays and Fridays. Can you come by the parish this Friday?”

“Certainly. I’ll be driving down that morning. I can see you any time after ten o’clock.”

“Let’s make it 10:30,” he said.

While we were chatting, I pulled up the website for Our Lady of the Seas and noted the address.

“Are you located on Old Beach Road?”

“Yes, we have a nice view of the harbor. The rectory is just behind the chapel. I’ll be there when you arrive.”

“See you then, Father O’Reilly.”

• • •

Over the previous six months, the arc of my life had changed dramatically. In June, William Lavolette, the governor of Maine, was shot and killed. The next day, I became embroiled in the case. Then, five months later, I received a \$20,000 reward for helping resolve it.

The money provided a quick fix for the chill of late autumn Down East. I flew off to Kauai with my girlfriend for a week in paradise.

Back home, newspapers and television stations around the state picked up the story of my involvement and ran with it for the next six weeks. When we returned from our vacation, the media circus was in full swing.

It was now December 24th. The holiday season had ushered a welcomed pause to my celebrity. Life was back to normal. Almost.



2

Swimming in the Kama Sutra

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house not a creature was stirring. Inside, that is. Out back, there was definitely some stirring going on. Two creatures were enjoying the crisp night air. The sky was clear, and billions of stars illuminated the snowy landscape. Steam rose from the hot tub.

Just after ten o'clock in the evening, Angele and I dropped our clothes, embraced the frigid outdoor air and immersed our bodies in 103-degree water. We let out simultaneous sighs of ecstasy and relief. The sky was extraordinary.

From our vantage point on the home planet, during the past six months, the Milky Way hadn't changed much at all. Our galaxy still contained somewhere between 100 and 400 billion stars, and despite the dramatic turn of events in our small personal lives, Earth was still hurtling through space at 400 miles per second.

"Angele," I mused, "a year ago to the hour, we sat in this very spot and stared into a night sky virtually identical to this one. All the constellations and galaxies that we are seeing right now are aligned exactly as they were then, except for the slight variations from the wobble in Earth's orbit and the overall expansion of the universe.

"That really bright star near the horizon is Sirius," I said, pointing to the southeast. Looking straight up, I continued, "High above us is the Pleiades star cluster in Taurus, with Gemini just to the east. They are all where they belong, so to speak. Time changes their relative positions so slowly that the shift can be detected only with powerful telescopes and precise calculations. This annual regularity of the heavens leaves its imprint on human speculation. Some early philosophers believed that everything has been placed precisely where it belongs in time and space."

I let that thought dangle in the steamy mist for a minute before offering a further consideration. My beautiful companion allowed it to hang undisturbed in our collective imagination until I spoke again. I floated in the center of the pool, and Angele sat along the edge a couple feet away. The contrast between the warm soothing water and the cold brilliant sky was exhilarating.

"Without electricity and the accompanying gadgetry that commands our attention today, the ancient Greeks and Romans had plenty of time on their hands, especially at night. They looked up at these stars and let their imaginations run free. When they connected the astral dots, constellations sprang to life as legendary creatures, each with its own dramatic fable. Over time, the stories became myths, and the myths became religion."

Angele said nothing. Her silence was not an act of acquiescence, and it didn't imply that she necessarily agreed. It meant only that she was listening and considering.

It's marvelous to be around another human being who is untroubled with your own private observations and conclusions. Love has been described in millions of ways by billions of people. For me, love is the joyful cessation of an argumentative point of view.

Angele can be fiery. She can stir the cauldron and conjure spirits to do her bidding. I'm

attracted to her fire like a moth to a flame. But she has features that are more endearing. She can rest totally at ease in the moment, in no hurry to change a thing or correct an assertion. This was one of those moments.

“The Greeks and the Romans took religion very seriously,” she said finally. “Take Socrates, for example. He was sentenced to drink hemlock because he refused to pay homage to Athenian gods. His free-spirited ideas offended a few vengeful individuals with misappropriated authority. If an enlightened age ever visits our earth, Jesse, ideas will be regarded as poetry, and love will be the only authority.”

“Angele, I love it when you talk dirty.”

Suddenly she was upon me. She clasped both her arms around my shoulders, lunged her gorgeous body onto my own and dunked me backwards under the water with a single surprising thrust. For a brief moment, I thought I might drown. Before I resurfaced, it occurred to me, *Socrates never had it this good.*

The instant I came up for a breath of air, Angele took it away again with a passionate and prolonged kiss.

She whispered, “Jesse Thorpe, you are one sexy private eye.”

Then, allowing me no time to recover, she surrounded me in the exact position pictured in the aquatic section of the *Kama Sutra*. Angele Boucher knows how to straighten me out and put things in motion.

Half the water had spilled from the tub by the time we finished making love.

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We slept like babes through the night. Saint Nick came and went without waking us up.



3

Men Need Not Apply

Three presents sat expectantly under my miniature Tannenbaum.

Angele and I had made a pact; one gift each would be our holiday limit. Temporary financial success wasn't going to turn us into reckless consumers. As the festive day approached, however, I reneged slightly and bought a gift to supplement the surprise item I had been preparing privately on my word processor. I'd gotten cold feet from worry that my narrative might not cut the Christmas mustard.

"I thought we agreed on one gift each, Jesse. Why are there two presents under the tree with my name on them?"

"The second one is not so much a gift as it is an offering."

She opened the smaller item first. It was a cream-colored Pashmina shawl, hand spun and woven in Nepal, made of fine cashmere wool. She loved it immediately and wrapped it around her neck. This sent a flush of endorphins through my system.

"It's soft and beautiful, Jesse," she murmured.

In a moment, my face was in her hands, and she gave me the first of her two holiday gifts, a slow wet kiss all over my mouth.

I sighed happily and picked up the thin 12x12 item she had wrapped and tagged for me. I knew what it was before the bow, ribbon and paper had come off. The only question was, *Where will we be vacationing next year?* But I kept that thought to myself.

The calendar was entitled "*Italie*." I flipped slowly through the first few pages and realized I would not only be enjoying the Italian landscapes all year, but I'd also be learning the French word for each of the twelve months. I stopped at March, which read, "*Mars*," the month of my birth. The photograph displayed a rolling green countryside embracing a small Tuscan village.

She was looking over my shoulder when I said, "Let's go here when I turn 40."

"Wait a minute, Jesse," she blurted out. "You're 34, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"If it's all the same to you, we'll go there when you turn 35."

I had to admit, that was an enticing prospect.

"OK. Deal...provided we can afford it, and we're not in the middle of an important case."

Angele eyed me suspiciously.

"Let's get that notarized," she said and waved her left hand in the air imitating her signature.

"Ah...hah. As I recall, *you* are a notary."

"It's a verbal contract, signed in the ethers," she said definitively.

I raised my right hand and added my signature at the bottom of the page.

Angele smiled and said, "OK. Now let's see what this second gift is all about."

The paper flew off in a trice, and she held up the first draft of my novel, swaddled in a white, three-ring binder. After staring at the title for a few moments, she issued a slightly forlorn

look and said, “*The Sunshine Cabin?*”

The decibel level of her voice peaked on “sunshine” and then trailed noticeably downward, as though she were sliding into an abyss, on “cabin.” I sensed immediately that slogging through the edits of my first mystery novel was going to be an exercise in tolerance.

“It’s just a working title,” I suggested. “I’m not enamored with it.”

“I hope not. Copies of *Pollyanna* are not exactly flying off the shelves at Barnes and Noble.”

“You’re right,” I offered in a humble, yet reflective, tone. “What was I thinking?”

Angele eyed me carefully and remarked, “I hope this thing is not a collection of rhetorical questions and male anecdotes.”

“No way,” I said with conviction. I then retreated in silence and rued the inclusion of numerous quips that almost certainly would prove her last comment prophetic. I felt a sudden urge to change the topic of conversation.

“Angele, I’ve got to see a man about a dog.”

“We’ll chat when you return from your canine junket. I’ll be here unraveling your yarn.” She then added, “As I recall, there are no red pens in your desk. Pick up a ten-pack at Cosco on your way home.”

“It’s Christmas day, Peaches. I think Cosco is closed.”

“That store never closes, Jesse.”

“Maybe I should just forget the dog and make breakfast. Are you hungry?”

“Ravenous. Our swim last night put the spark back into my appetite.”

I smiled broadly until it occurred to me that there might not be enough sex in my opus to satisfy Angele’s hyperactive libido. *Well, it’s just a first draft*, I told myself. “Zucchini-potato pancakes coming up,” I said audibly.

Angele skimmed through my book as I rustled up some vegan grub. I was nervous, to say the least, but I was hoping that would pass as soon as she got into the nitty-gritty of the storyline. There were, I figured, at least a few places where she would laugh out loud—icebreakers, so to speak.

When the cakes were almost done, I went to the fridge and extracted Angele’s special pancake syrup. It’s not sweet, so it probably shouldn’t be called “syrup.” It’s creamy and pale green in color, and I have no idea what’s in it; I prefer it that way. Besides, it really is delicious.

Just then, I heard a loud chortle coming from the living room.

“Jesse,” she called out, “I love what you’ve done with the Dennis Jackson character. But you know,” she said as she entered the kitchen, “it’s not a novel if it all actually happened.”

“It’s embroidered.”

“If it’s embroidered, it’s an op-ed.”

“Well, that’s true, but if I embellish it enough, I should end up with something that is more or less fiction.”

“More or less fiction?” she pondered out loud. “I guess the library will have to build a new shelf for an emerging category.”

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It was Christmas breakfast, but I wanted to talk shop. In all likelihood, crimes and misdemeanors would persist through the holiday season, and in its own unique way, Jesse Thorpe and Company was now officially a crime-fighting team. It said so on our business card.

As we ate, Angele and I reviewed recent changes to our PI status.

Eric Cochrane was still playing lead guitar in our rock band, *Ocean Noises*, but now he was also working full time for me in our Augusta office, which doubles as my home—a farmhouse four miles from the center of town. Billy Mosher, our keyboard player, was working for me as well, but only part time, on Fridays and Mondays when I was out of town.

I had opened a second office, in Portland, for two reasons: primarily because Angele resides there, and secondarily because that's where a lot of Maine's illegal activity takes place. Usually, I'd drive down on Friday and stay with Angele through Monday or sometimes Tuesday. Angele worked Mondays with me, but she kept her regular, more solid day-job with the law firm, Schroeder, Wilson & Fines.

Randall Bradford, J.D. was my attorney on call in Augusta. He and I had worked together on the Lavolette murder case, and he now engaged me on a regular basis to do investigative work for him. When I needed a lawyer in Portland, Angele would line up a junior partner from her office. On rare occasions, Schroeder, Wilson & Fines hired me to do legwork.

I should also note that occasionally I invited a psychic to assist me in stubborn cases that had no significant physical leads. Allison "Misty" Starbird filled that bill nicely, except that her notoriety had skyrocketed across the state and lower New England. The media dubbed her the "Tie-Dye Darling" after they discovered that she had played a "pivotal" role in the Lavolette murder case. To say that her role was "pivotal" was a bit of a stretch, but I wasn't about to tamp down her supernatural prowess with a factual assessment.

Word of Misty's "gift" spread quickly in telepathic circles. Celebrities soon began flying in from California for personal readings, but Misty has been kind enough to lend me a clairaudient ear whenever I need some insight.

If Misty happens to be too busy to get away, she'll send over Nancy Clearlight in her stead. Misty hired her to help keep up with the metaphysical demand. Nancy is trained in Tarot, palm reading and telepathy, and applies one or more of those techniques as she sees fit.

Misty has been grateful for the publicity, and she insists on working for me at no charge. Billy set up and maintains her Internet site, "The Starbird Web: Circle of Psychic Detection." Misty, by the way, never touches a computer; she says it distorts her readings for weeks. Nancy handles their email and web inquiries.

After I finished my coffee, I said, "Angele, we've come to a fork in the PI road. We need to either hire extra help or begin referring some of our clients to other investigators. My work is getting a little slipshod. I know what needs to be done in most of our cases, but there aren't enough hours in the week to do it all without cutting corners."

"You're right, Jesse. When we billed Andrew Farnsworth last week, I felt that he had been shortchanged. It's been a week and a half, and we haven't located his sister yet. There are several leads begging for attention, but we have too many lesser causes dividing our time."

"Let's try a two-pronged approach. Tomorrow, we'll place an ad in the help wanted section of the *Portland Times*. On Monday, you can interview the applicants personally. We'll see who turns up. If you find a winner, we'll hire *her*. We'll be looking for a *woman* who is intuitive and smart."

"Should the ad read, 'Men need not apply'?"

"I guess so. There just aren't many men who qualify in both those departments."

"Nary a one," Angele suggested, "present company excepted."

"I appreciate the exceptional notice, honey."

"You've got a spot of green syrup on your chin, dear."

"That's why you're doing the interviews; you notice *everything*."

"How about calling Misty to ask if she can sit in with me during the interviews? Two heads are better than one, and she can spot hot prospects fifteen minutes before they walk through the door."

"Good idea. Hopefully she'll have a little extra time on her hands over the holidays. When you talk with her, insist on paying for her time. Travel, alone, will take up her entire day."

"She doesn't need to come to Portland; she has remote viewing skills. I'll just turn on the speakerphone. She'll be more sensitive if she stays at home in her lair."

“Good call.”

“What’s the other prong in your approach, Jesse?”

“I want to contact Fritz Weller and Archie Lapointe. They are both respectable investigators, and their workloads may have fallen off as ours has picked up. I’ll see if they are interested in handling some of the overflow. In return, they could help us out when we need backup. Archie is especially tough and hardnosed. He might come in handy when push comes to shove. I’d like him in our corner—shoving back.”

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Angele drove down to Portland on Thursday morning. I remained in Augusta for one more day, tied up some loose ends around the office and hung my new calendar on the wall. I was warming to the idea of Italy in March, but it was slightly disconcerting that the months were written in French. With Google Translate at my fingertips, I took a felt pen and wrote “Gennaio” under “Janvier.” I was beginning to feel European. “C’est bon, n’est-ce pas?” I heard myself say. “Oui,” I replied. I had no idea how to say that in Italian.



4

Aspirin & Beef Jerky for the Band

Every lead guitar player I know has attempted to copy the style of Mark Knopfler. Before long, most of them give up trying. Eric practiced the “Sultans of Swing” licks for weeks, but finally said in frustration, “No way I can do this. He’s just too good.”

In October, Billy persuaded Eric to give Knopfler’s riffs a second try. In 1982, *Dire Straits* released the song, “Private Investigations.” The song opens with an airy, though somewhat ominous, orchestration on the synthesizer. Billy duplicated that sound rather easily. Eventually, Eric was able to cover the guitar parts. The bass line was simple enough for me, and I sang the vocal:

*A bottle of whiskey and a new set of lies
Blinds on the windows and a pain behind the eyes
Scarred for life, no compensation
Private investigations*

After Eric, Billy and I had gained some notoriety from the Lavolette case, “Private Investigations” became our most requested song.

Our band received a jolt of media coverage when the murder convictions were handed down. Turnout at our gigs doubled, and sales of our first album soared. We released the CD in August and had planned to name it *Falling Apart*, the title of our most popular original song. Billy, who does our promotions, had other ideas. He insisted on changing the album’s name to *Deadly Capers*. He smelled the buzz coming. He has a keen olfactory sense, which, I believe, he acquired from his dog, Alonso.

Our next scheduled appearance would be in Portland on New Year’s Eve at The Rusty Tavern. We practice at my place in Augusta every Thursday evening. During the warmer months, we set up in the barn, but in early December, we moved inside the house. I pushed the furniture against the walls in the living room to make room for all five of us. Besides Eric, Billy and me, there’s Amanda Cavanaugh and Willie Franklin.

Willie is our drummer. His girlfriend, Amanda, sings and plays flute. She left the band for a brief period in mid fall, and it looked as if Willie would be taking a hike as well. But after becoming overnight celebrities, we were able to coax them both back into the fold. We could have found another drummer easily enough, but Amanda is a real star. She has a great voice and a sultry, intoxicating stage presence. She is irreplaceable. Our cachet plummets without her.

Amanda and Willie were the first to arrive Thursday evening. Willie was sniffing and looked rundown. Amanda, on the other hand, was brimming with zest and nuzzled in close as she gave me a “Hi, how are ya?” kiss on my neck.

“Doin’ fine, Amanda. And you?”

“Ready to roll,” she replied, eyeing me closely. She followed her double entendre with “Is Angele out of town?”

“Yes, she went home this morning,” I replied, as calmly as possible.

Amanda smiled back and winked. Willie blew his nose and glowered.

“Do you need help with your drums, Willie?” I asked.

“Nah, but I could use some hot tea with lemon and some Extra Strength Tylenol.”

“I’ll see what I’ve got.”

Willie went back outside to get his kit, while Amanda followed me into the kitchen.

“You wearin’ that boy out, Amanda?”

“No way. He’s been in bed for a week—*alone*.”

“I know I’ve got some Tylenol around here someplace,” I said, changing the subject.

“Can you fill the kettle and light the stove? The matches are on the window sill if you need them, but I’m thinking you can get the fire started by snapping your fingers.”

Amanda blew me an air kiss, but opted for the matches.

“I’ll save the sparks for later,” she suggested.

Eric and Billy arrived and went straight to the living room to set up. As usual, Alonso made a beeline for the kitchen. He parked himself by my refrigerator and let out a weeping moan.

“Don’t you ever feed this guy?” I called out to Billy.

“All the time, Jesse. He’s got four hollow legs. Just pat him on the head and tell him, ‘Later, dude.’”

I opened a 3-ounce pack of beef jerky instead. I keep Jack Links on hand for band practice. Alonso takes his prize and disappears into my bedroom every time; he’s not the kind of dog who shares his treats. If I give him enough, we don’t see him again till we’re finished playing. He grabbed the whole package and lumbered down the hall.

The band was out of kilter until a handful of aspirin finally medicated Willie’s attitude. From that point on, it was clear sailing. Our recent celebrity put a charge in all of us and renewed our commitment to playing well. We would probably always be a local band; we knew our limits. We also knew that Amanda had a higher destiny; it was the elephant in our room. But for the time being, we played like there was no tomorrow.

Willie was packing up his drum kit when Amanda called over to me, “Jesse, come here a second.”

I shuffled over and listened to the following proposal...

“You can see that Willie is under the weather. Maybe I should stay here for the night. I don’t want to catch what he’s got. We have a solid gig on New Year’s Eve. If I come down with a cold, I’ll be no good to us. I could sleep in your spare room.”

Willie raised his eyebrows and blurted out, “I have a spare room, Amanda. You’ve been sleeping there for a week, and you’re still right as rain.”

“I don’t know, Willie, I think I’m coming down with something.”

She’s coming down with something, all right, I thought, but I kept that remark to myself.

Amanda knows I’m monogamous, but she also knows she is positively irresistible, and she likes to push Willie’s buttons. Everybody wants to be in Willie’s shoes—for a night. But when dawn breaks, it would be a whole ‘nother thing. Few men have the grit to keep up with her. Willie’s therapy is what keeps him out of mental institutions; he beats the daylights out of his drums.

“Load him up on vitamin C and put our drummer boy to bed, Amanda,” I replied. “He needs some TLC. Besides, the sheets on my spare bed aren’t clean. Eric crashes here during the week when he’s working late.”

She gave me a mischievous smile and said, “OK, Willie. Let’s go home.”

As they filed out the door, Amanda brushed up against my arm and kissed me on the neck again, this time on the other side—for good measure.

“Sweet dreams, Jesse,” she said as the door was closing.



5

Evelyn & the '58 Cadillac

A light snow started to fall just as I arrived at Our Lady of the Seas. It was Friday morning, and the church parking lot was empty. Around back, a lone car was sitting in front of the rectory—a vintage Cadillac Eldorado convertible. It was bright yellow with a white top and looked to be in mint condition. I parked my Forester two spaces over, to give the old timer some breathing room, and walked around it for a closer look.

“It’s a 1958,” came a voice from the porch.

“A real beauty,” I called back. “Monsignor O’Reilly?”

“Yes. Come inside, out of the weather.”

When I got to the door, we shook hands and he said, “It was my mother’s first and only new car. My father bought it for her the week I was born. She was forty years old at the time. For fifteen years, they prayed to have a child and had almost given up hope. Then I came along. God always responds to prayer, Mr. Thorpe, but He has His own schedule.”

“No doubt about it,” I concurred. “A ‘58 Cadillac. That makes you...well...middle aged.”

A gentle smile crossed his lips.

Compared to the car, his home was austere. He showed me to the living room and invited me to sit down. Other than a statue of Mother Mary on the mantle and a crucifix on the wall, there wasn’t much of anything in the room, just a sofa, an easy chair and a bookshelf. No television, no stereo. *Why would Father Francis O’Reilly want to hire a private investigator?* I thought.

The monsignor looked kindly at me for a while without speaking. I decided to let him break the ice.

“This isn’t easy for me,” he said slowly. “I hear 200 confessions every week. Human woes surround me like atmosphere envelops the earth. My parishioners open their hearts and pour out their sins to me. Then, I give them to God. I’ve been listening so long now that nothing I hear disturbs me anymore.”

He grew quiet and pensive. It was my turn to nudge the conversation forward.

“I’m not a priest, Father, but I’m here to help in any way that I can. Whatever you tell me is as confidential for you as those confessions are for your parishioners.”

He offered a tentative smile and continued solemnly, “The vow of chastity is a daily struggle for me. Usually I win the battle over the flesh—but not always. I’m not just a priest with a flock, I’m also a father with a child.”

I was only slightly surprised to hear this revelation. To be honest, I was no more startled by his infidelity with God than I was by the Cadillac convertible parked out front. They sat like bookends, with bibles and catechisms propped in between.

“I see no problem at all with that, Monsignor. But why do you need a private investigator?”

“It’s about the mother. Her name is Nicole Levesque. Four years ago, she began

attending mass once or twice a week, but never on Sunday. She seemed to like the peace and quiet of a small gathering of souls.

"One morning, Nicole came early for confession. Of course, I can't tell you what she said, but actually she wasn't really confessing any sins, so I suppose it might be all right to share it with you."

He paused for a few seconds and then added, "No. We don't need to go there. Suffice it to say that we became friendly; it was entirely platonic. She stayed after mass, and we shared some tea.

"The next day, she seemed quite agitated. I asked her what the trouble was, but she wouldn't tell me. She just started crying. When I reached out to take her hand, she came on to me as if we were lovers.

"We had sexual intercourse only that one time, and I didn't see her again until a year later. She dropped in to tell me that she had a baby girl, and that I was the father.

"I knew she had had some boyfriends, so I requested a paternity test. She was already prepared for that. She had the child's DNA report with her in her purse. She told me that there had been only two possible fathers, and she had gone to the other man first because he was more likely. It turned out not to be the case.

"Nicole and I went to a testing facility, and we each provided a sample of our saliva. The test results came back a week later. It proved conclusively that I am the father of Evelyn Levesque. She chose the name, 'Evelyn,' because the baby was born on New Year's Eve, and 'Lynn' is Nicole's middle name."

"Did the DNA parentage test follow the strict chain of custody requirements set down by the courts?"

"I'm not familiar with that. But she already had the DNA profile for Evelyn from the first test. As far as I was concerned, Nicole didn't need to be retested either, but she insisted."

"I see," I replied after some hesitation.

"Nicole has been perfectly discreet about all of this. She asked if I could help pay to raise the child, and I readily agreed. We both prefer that I pay her just once a year; frequent meetings might draw attention and raise eyebrows. We also decided that I would make cash payments. I provide her with \$15,000 a year."

"How did you arrive at that figure?"

"We submitted our incomes, taxes and expenses anonymously to a Maine state facility, and they determined my annual responsibility."

"OK. Go on."

"I see Nicole only one time each year. I have asked her to keep me informed as to how my daughter is doing, and she calls now and then and talks about her. Evelyn seems to be doing fine. She'll be three years old next Tuesday. I'm due to make my annual support payment on Wednesday at one o'clock. That's why I called you."

"Do you want me to pass the money to Nicole?"

"No. No. It's not that. The problem is that Nicole won't allow me to see my daughter. I have asked many times, but she refuses. She says it could be a problem for both of us. She has never given me her address or phone number. She's afraid I'll keep calling or come by her apartment unannounced. She brings a picture of the child each time I give her money. That's all I ever receive. A photograph."

Father O'Reilly went over to the bookshelf. He picked up a Bible that was resting on top and opened it in the middle. He then cradled the book in his hands and walked over to where I was sitting. I braced myself for a reading. Instead, he removed the bookmark and handed it to me.

"That's Evelyn. The picture was taken last year on her second birthday."

“She’s darling.”

“I want you to find her,” he replied resolutely. “I have to see her. I need to hold my daughter.”

There was no significant background in the picture. It was a close up of a little girl, sitting on a carpet and smiling into the camera.

“I want you to be there, undercover, when I give Nicole the money. Take some pictures of her and follow her home. If I know where she lives, I’ll be able to see Evelyn.”

“Will she be driving a car?”

“Probably not. She didn’t last time. I tried following her, but it didn’t work out.”

“Tell me how that went.”

“We met in Deering Oaks Park and sat together in the bleachers of the ball field north of the pond. She talked non-stop about Evelyn for ten minutes and gave me that picture. Eventually, she said it was time for her to go, so I handed her the parcel of hundred-dollar bills and walked back to my car at the curb. She waited for me to pull away before getting up from her seat.

“I drove to State Street and turned right, which would be the normal way for me to return to the parish. When I got to Park Avenue, I was out of sight, so I made another right and parked my car in a lot on the far side of the street where I could hide.”

“That’s a difficult prospect in a yellow Cadillac convertible.”

“It certainly is,” he replied with a sheepish grin. “As you might surmise, I’m not much of a private eye.”

I smiled and said, “The second thing they taught us in PI school was, ‘Never drive a yellow car when you’re on a stakeout.’”

“Really?” he said pursing his lips. “What’s the first thing they taught you?”

“This can be a dangerous job; always say your prayers.”

Father O’Reilly laughed and then said, “That’s the first thing they taught us in seminary.”

Monsignor Francis O’Reilly was an endearing, yet unassuming, man. For starters, he was wearing blue jeans and a green flannel shirt. I figured he changed from his vestments after morning mass to a more casual outfit for my benefit, since he had no idea as to my religious persuasion. The deep and inviting wrinkles on his cheeks and around his blue eyes told me that he smiled easily and often. I imagined that he greeted everyone, even strangers, as though he were meeting the babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Perhaps every day was Christmas for him. If PBS is looking for another Mr. Rogers, Francis Kevin O’Reilly is their man.

“I changed jackets, put on a hat and hurried back toward the park. I caught sight of Nicole walking south on State Street. I had hoped she had a car parked nearby, so I could either follow it or at least get the number of her license plate. But she kept on walking. She looked over her shoulder a number of times; I had to keep my distance. I don’t think she saw me, but it’s possible that she did.

“When she reached Congress Street, she turned right and caught the Metro on the other side of Longfellow Square. Heaven only knows where she went.”

“I’ll bring an assistant. We’ll do the best we can, but there are no guarantees. If she is determined to be elusive, it will be a challenge. There are numerous ways to lose a tail.

“I suggest we use a GPS tracking device. There are a few options. We could plant it in the package of money. The tiniest ones are so small that it’s very unlikely she would detect it. However, she might transfer the money to her purse and discard the package.

“I assume you’ll be giving her 150 hundred-dollar bills. We could actually put the little device in the middle of the wad and place a wrapper around the bills. She probably wouldn’t find it before she got home. On the other hand, if she took the money directly to the bank, we’d be busted. But...it will be New Year’s Day, so that probably won’t be an issue.

"Another possibility is for you to slip it into her coat pocket. Tell me, when you are with her, do you sit close or keep your distance? Do you hug?"

"She's a little uncomfortable with that. In fact, last year when we met, I went to hug her, but she held up her hands and said, 'You know what happened the last time we did that.'"

"Why don't we do this? We'll give you the tiniest GPS device available to carry with you. You can put it in the package of money or slip it into her coat pocket. On her person is better than in the package because we don't know if the money will follow her home. You can decide which alternative will work better when you are with her. We could even use two devices—one in the package and one in her pocket. Keep in mind, however, that if she sees the unit and knows what it is, we'll lose the element of surprise at future meetings."

Father O'Reilly thought for a minute and said, "I'll take one with me. I'll know what to do when the time comes. In the meantime, I'll pray for guidance."

"That's reasonable. We'll put a microphone on you as well, so we can hear your conversation. Will that be all right with you?"

"That's fine. There's something I want to share with you. I don't know if it's important or not, but it might be. As a priest, I look for vulnerabilities in people. I do that so I can help those in need. Jesus was a shepherd; I am carrying on with His mission."

"When I first met Nicole, she seemed totally unsure of herself. That's why I took special interest in her; she was troubled. After Evelyn was born, Nicole changed dramatically. She became poised and self-confident. It was an unusual transformation. I've been a priest for over thirty years. I study people. It's my job—it's my life's work—to be vigilant and to nurture others. It's quite rare for an individual to turn life around so completely."

"\$15,000 a year is a fair piece of security, Father."

"Yes. There's that. But there's more to it. I can't put my finger on it, but something shifted inside her."

"She's now a mother. Maybe that brought her down to earth."

"Perhaps."

"Are you suggesting that she might have entrapped you?"

"No. I don't think so. I hope not anyway. She seems too sweet for anything like that."

"Any little thing can end up being important in an investigation. I will definitely keep your personal evaluation in mind, especially if something unexpected happens, or if you require us to delve deeper into her affairs. For now, we'll put one foot in front of the other."

The padre nodded slightly, without unfurrowing his brow.

"Where are you supposed to meet with her this time?"

"In the same spot as last year, the bleachers at Deering Oaks Park."

"Do you have a picture of Nicole?"

"Not a single one."

"OK. I'll bring *two* assistants with two cars and cameras. I'll be here at noon to set up your microphone and give you the tracking device. That will give us plenty of time to prepare our surveillance in the park. Do you have a cell phone?"

"No, I have only the phone in my house."

"I'll bring one for you so that we can stay in contact. If any aspect of the meeting changes along the way, you can call me immediately."

He nodded and said, "All right then. I'll see you here Wednesday at noon. How much do I owe you, Mr. Thorpe?"

"We usually require a \$500 retainer, but let's waive that for now. We'll see how it goes."

"Thank you so much for your help."

"We'll do our best."

We shook hands, and I walked out into the snow.



6

Sleightly out of Hand

Archie Lapointe never blinked.

His eyes moved methodically up and down the menu several times, but his lids refused to flutter. The waitress stood patiently next to his chair until he was ready to speak. Eventually, he looked over the top of his narrow reading glasses and said, “Kelly, I’ll have the Reuben and a dark draught.”

There was a precise economy in every word he spoke and every move he made. The song, “Every Breath You Take,” began looping between my ears. This, I thought, must be Archie Lapointe’s theme song. Sting’s voice was fading out over several refrains of, “I’ll be watching you,” when it dawned on me that Kelly was still waiting for my order.

“I’ll have what he’s having...a Reuben and a dark draught.”

My initial choice, quite honestly, had been a Caesar salad and tea, but I scratched that the moment Archie opened his mouth. I didn’t expect the upper hand with him, but I wanted some leverage during our conversation. This wasn’t going to be a lecture if I could help it, and a Caesar salad lacked substance. The turkey club was a reasonable alternative, but for some inexplicable reason, the Reuben took hold of my senses and wouldn’t let go. Duplicating Archie’s order may have demonstrated a lack of independence and imagination, but a voice inside my head droned, *He’s eaten here dozens of times; he knows what he’s doing.*

“Their Reuben is the best in Portland,” Archie said, as if to brush aside any concern that my luncheon order was a sign of weakness.

Archie Lapointe was the most prominent PI in the state, but this was the first time I had met him face to face. His midnight black shirt matched his hair and eyebrows perfectly. His dark silk tie had a sprinkling of orange flowers, which complemented his chiseled features and rugged complexion. His eyes were steady, yet a gentle touch of kindness seeped through his eagle-like gaze.

“So, tell me, Jesse, is it true that you impersonated a state trooper last year while working the Lavolette murder case?”

“Am I under oath?”

“Just professional curiosity.”

“In that case, yes, it is true,” I said with a grin.

“That was a nice piece of work.”

“Thank you, Archie,” I said. His praise took me by surprise. “I should add that I had some solid backup. Two friends of mine posed as FBI agents. We had the guy surrounded, so to speak. In any event, we were lucky to pull it off.”

“The governor had been murdered in cold blood, and the FBI had nothin’. They needed a happy ending, and you provided it for them. Besides, everyone loves a hero. The public wouldn’t have tolerated any blowback on you.”

“That’s what we were counting on.”

Our beers arrived, and we each took a hearty swig.

"The first time I heard your name was seven or eight years ago, during the Jacob Lewis case," I said. "The press called it 'Maine's Lindberg kidnapping.' You're the reason I went to PI school."

"Jacob Lewis. That was ugly," Archie replied in a sobering tone. "A three-year old boy loses his life for a piece of change."

His eyes squinted slightly as his face grimaced, and then he said, "Crime can be spur of the moment, but normally it's a logical event. The public is captivated by the idea of random violence. This infatuation stokes their fear. Truth is, there's always a rationale to it. Twisted—sure it's twisted—but there's a reason for every twist.

"Nowadays, physical evidence dominates detective work. The average cop on the beat relies too much on forensics and not enough on smell. They teach cops to be politically correct and to keep the evidence clean, but it takes a lot more than that to be a first-rate detective.

"Here's an example. If I know some guy ate spicy Chinese food before he committed a murder, I wouldn't start my investigation by rummaging through the refrigerators of possible suspects, searching for leftover kung pao. I'd go to Ming's Golden Duck and have dinner. I want to taste what the perp tasted. I want to smell like him. Then I'll get inside his head.

"DNA, fingerprints and ballistics are important, of course; every police detective knows how to collect that stuff. But not one in a hundred has the nose of a hound.

"On difficult cases, I bring along Sherlock, my Rhodesian Ridgeback. The public thinks I'm putting him on the scent. Not true. He puts me on it. There's a difference. And when I use the word, *scent*, I'm not just referring to the olfactory function; I'm talking about a sixth, or even a seventh, sense. I begin where Sherlock begins, thinking with my nose. Eventually, something opens up. Call it intuition; call it what you like. But it's not just ordinary thinking and follow-the-dots. Instinct tells you what to do next, where to go, that sort of thing."

"The only dog I know has a nose for food, but that's about it. I give him a few morsels, and he disappears."

Archie grinned as he continued, "Most dogs are trained to bark at anything that crosses the imaginary line of your property. A real hound knows the difference between an intruder and a visitor. A real hound doesn't bark at every sound in the night; it barks at the sound that doesn't belong."

Our matching lunches arrived. The Reuben was huge by any standard—corned beef stacked two inches thick with sauerkraut and Swiss cheese spilling over toasted rye onto the plate. Lunch would be an epicurean challenge, and there was no way I could bring half of this home to Angele's apartment; her kitchen is strictly vegan. Perhaps another beer or two might wash it down. That remained to be seen.

Before I took my first bite, I asked, "I seem to remember that you started out as a policeman in Boston. Is that right?"

Archie was already working on his sandwich. I took a bite of my own and waited for him to come up for air.

"Right," he said finally. "I was on the force for seventeen years. At the beginning, I rose fairly quickly through the ranks. I solved a few tough cases and helped our precinct through some dark times. I was promoted to lieutenant in my eleventh year, but the way things were arranged at that point, it was very unlikely I was going any higher. My boss, Captain Sean Booker, didn't care for me and didn't approve of my methods.

"Like my dog, Sherlock, I kept barking at stuff that didn't belong. Captain Booker said I needed better manners. He was a hard-ass and wouldn't listen to any subordinate. He referred to me as his 'underling.' He was a complete jerk."

"You're very independent, Archie, and you handle yourself well. It's a little hard for me to imagine you dealing with a superior."

"There was nothing superior about him while he was alive, and even less so when he became a corpse. Booker was murdered on the job shortly after I left. He never saw it coming. He had only five senses. When you're dealing with the most successful and calloused criminals alive, five is not enough.

"Here's another example of what I'm saying. Policemen aren't allowed to drink on the job. What's that about? If you know the perp drinks bourbon, you'll never track him down jacked up on green tea.

"But the worst part of my job was that many of the guys in my department were on the take. I worked narcotics mostly. All day we were shaking down users. These people aren't criminals. The dealers are the criminals, not because of what they sell, but because they operate violent ad campaigns."

"So, you'd drink bourbon if the perp was a bourbon drinker. Would you take heroin to catch a heroin dealer?"

"I did that once. I wanted to get a feel for their zone of operation. I didn't know who was in charge at the time. I found out quickly that the biggest heroin dealers aren't users. The users are easy to spot. They get put away one by one. The real dealers, on the other hand, keep their wits about them. You can sniff out a middleman on smack, but the guys at the top wear suits and drink scotch."

"And if it's a woman?" I asked, playing devil's advocate.

Archie raised one eyebrow and smiled.

"That's why women are so damned hard to pinch. Police detectives are trained to look for men. If you're after a female, you'd better give the job to a policewoman. In fact, when I was working the beat in Boston, I often said, 'The best men on the force are women.' That got me into trouble too," he said with a chuckle.

It was easy to see why his boss didn't care for him. But I liked Archie. In fact, I liked him a lot. He might be covered in gristle, but a sense of humor tempered his dogged nature. He'd be a tough adversary, but a strong and reliable ally—which brought me back to the reason I called him in the first place.

"Archie, I asked you out to lunch to see if there are ways we might be able to help each other."

"I imagined that was the case."

"The Lavolette murder was resolved two months ago. Since then, I've been deluged with work. I can't keep up with it. What's been happening to your caseload lately?"

"I've got more than I can handle. The media coverage surrounding the convictions for your case has increased public interest in PIs throughout New England. If you thought you were drawing business away from me, you're mistaken. It's been a boon for all of us.

"No doubt there will be plenty of wannabes putting up shingles in the neighborhood," he added, "but they have no idea what the work is all about. Competition has never been a problem for me. The cream rises to the top, Jesse. Right now, my bills are being paid and then some."

"I'm glad to hear that. I didn't want to take away anything from you, or even from Fritz Weller."

"Fritz is cashing in, too. It's an up year in the business."

"OK. Then I'll find a way to deal with the extra work. But there is one other thing I wanted to discuss."

"Fire away."

"How would you feel about working with me from time to time whenever a particularly nasty case falls in my lap? I was definitely in the deep end of the pool during the Lavolette murder investigation. There loomed a distinct possibility of more violence. I was armed, of course, but I can foresee situations when a second hired gun would come in handy."

Archie eyed me closely. He wasn't the kind of guy who leapt into the breach. He finished his beer and caught Kelly's eye. He raised two fingers and pointed to our glasses. She was over with refills before Archie said another word. After a few swallows, he looked at me again.

"I think we can collaborate now and then, Jesse. I didn't get into this line of work to run Google searches and reprimand teenagers smoking pot. There are always risks when you're dealing with real criminals. Ninety-eight percent of the job is tedious and boring. I thrive on the other two percent. Sure, you can call me when it gets prickly. I'll cover your back, and I'll expect you to cover mine."

"Absolutely. I'm not working on any dangerous cases at the moment, but I like the idea that I have someone to call in a tight situation."

"All right. I'll keep that in mind—and your phone number on my cell."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a quarter.

"Have a look at this," he said. "Read it and tell me what it says."

I looked carefully at the quarter, wondering if this was a trick question.

"United States of America. Quarter Dollar," I said.

"Not the front; the heads are all the same. Look at the back. There are fifty different tails, one for each state. What does that one say?"

I flipped it over and read aloud, "Live free or die."

"What else?" Archie persisted.

"OK... New Hampshire. 1788."

"1788, the year New Hampshire became a state. Read on."

"Old man of the mountain. E pluribus unum. 2000."

"The granite face in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. One out of many. The year the quarter was minted. OK, hand it back to me."

I did, and Archie immediately went into magic mode. He exposed the coin, first in his right hand, and then in his left. Next, he placed it in the middle of his right hand and slowly pulled his left hand away as his fingers curled around it.

I trained my attention on his every move.

Without opening his right hand, he shook it back and forth several times and then uncurled his fingers. The quarter was gone.

My mouth gaped open. I was literally astonished. I had no idea how he made that thing disappear.

"Where do you think it is?" Archie asked.

"I have no idea. I suspect it's up your sleeve. I know you didn't palm it with your other hand; I was keeping my eye on that one. I'm pretty sure that the coin was in your right when your left hand moved away."

I scratched my head and said, "I give up. Where is it?"

"Look in your coat pocket."

I felt around and pulled out a piece of paper. It had Archie's phone number and Father O'Reilly's address. I held that up and said, "You mean this?"

"No. Look in the other one," he said as if he were dealing with an idiot.

I rummaged through that pocket, and there it was!

"It's a quarter," I said with a grin on my face.

"Read the back."

"Live free or die. How did it get there?"

"Jesse, the toughest criminals are magicians. They're way ahead of you—and me. It's our job to be alert and see through the distractions. They know all about forensics. They can plant blood. They can manipulate DNA. They are dreamers, and the successful ones are very skilled. They exploit evidence to suit their needs and send detectives off trailing apparitions. Just

remember *that* when the tough case comes along. And when you see a ghost, *duck* for Christ sake! You might not get a second chance.”

“Archie, where on earth did you go to PI school?”

“BU.”

“Boston University. I read recently that it’s rated the second-best PI school in the country.”

“You can’t prove that by me,” Archie replied matter-of-factly. “School may put a diploma on your wall and a license in your wallet, but you learn how to be a PI on the street.”

“I’m sure you must have learned something at BU.”

“Let me see. Did I learn anything there?”

He rested his chin on the back of his hand and stared blankly over my shoulder for several moments. When he refocused his steely eyes on me, he said, “Well... I remember picking up two pointers on the first day of class. After that, I just wasted my time and money.”

“Two pointers? That’s it? All right, out with it, Archie. What are they?”

“The second thing I learned was, ‘Don’t trust anyone who’s still breathing.’”

“Ah, ha!” I replied, restraining an urge to laugh out loud. “I’ll try to remember that. So, what was the first thing you learned in PI school?”

“Never blink.”