

Trinity

A Haydn & Speaker Mystery

Chapter 11



Connie and Shrug met for breakfast at the Bob Evans Restaurant on Saturday morning, May 20, to lay plans for their imminent confrontation with Bianca d'Amato. Connie's anger—"she lied to us, brazenly and coldly"—had only intensified overnight, and when he swung himself out of bed Saturday morning, he was ready to storm her with the challenging truth. Shrug, however, counseled a different approach, and as coffee, eggs, and toast restored Connie's equilibrium, he came to agree that a light touch might extract more than indignation would from a woman who obviously believed herself to be cleverer than her pursuers. "We don't know the full extent of her effort to deceive," Shrug noted. "And we certainly don't know what else she did while she was in central Ohio on June 1, 1996. Let's give her a little rope and see if she goes to the gallows."

They decided that their opening gambit, to be pronounced as soon as she opened her front door, would

be: “You’ve been toying with us, Bianca.” If that didn’t prompt her to begin speaking the truth, they would follow up with: “We now know what you really did.” They then drove over to the d’Amato house and, even though the hour was still only 8:25, knocked noisily on the door. Connie and Shrug meant to command the situation.

Attired in a yellow kimono that clashed garishly with her red hair, Bianca d’Amato answered the knocking with a look that might have passed as either smug or bewildered. It’s all in the eye of the beholder, thought Connie. It turned out that the second line of the friends’ ploy wasn’t needed. Confronted with the assertion that she had been toying with them, Bianca smiled and said, “So you finally figured out I was behind the squirrel. It’s about time, boys.”

In fact, of course, neither Connie nor Shrug had figured that out. What’s more, they hadn’t even given much thought to the decapitated rodent since the far more ominous attack on Shrug had occurred. But they were getting good at disguising surprise—and good too at shaping statements that revealed little while encouraging further disclosures. “Yes,” Shrug said, without missing a beat. “And we know why you did it.”

“So you found out about the money,” she replied, her tone matter-of-fact and her face cold. “How did you do that?”

This unexpected statement was too much even for the self-control of the proudly self-commanding investigators. “What money?” Shrug asked, about a half-second before Connie asked the identical question.

A long silence ensued, and then Bianca, with a smile that could only be called a smirk, invited them into the house. “It looks like we need to talk, boys” she said. A bit shame-facedly, the two friends sadly agreed.

She offered them both cups of coffee, which they accepted happily, eager to get some device for their hands. “Here I thought you’d figured it all out, and it turns out you were just laying a trap for me. Hot damn!” But she said it with surprising good humor.

“I hope you’ll explain all this,” said Connie somewhat abashedly, “for you’re right: this isn’t the direction we thought this conversation would take.”

Bianca sat quiet for a few seconds—whether to gather her thoughts or to decide how much to reveal, neither Connie nor Shrug could tell. “It goes like this,” Bianca said. “I’ve had a little secret. I get money—and I’m supposed to keep quiet about it.”

This statement—at first surprising but then, in light of years of speculation about Bianca’s living style, less so—suggested all sorts of avenues of inquiry for the friends. Connie opted for one of the obvious ones. “Who’s giving you the money?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t. It started arriving, by

money order, about three months after Vince died, and it has come every month since then, for almost the past four years.”

“How much money are we talking about?,” asked Shrug.

Bianca d’Amato was clearly beginning to enjoy telling her strange tale. “Five thousand dollars a pop.” It was said with a note of pride, even though Connie thought she must know that the revelation is likely to end the flow of payments.

He looked startled. “Why is someone paying you this money?”

“That’s my business, not yours.” Pause. “And in case you’re wondering, I didn’t do anything wrong to get it. I didn’t even ask for it. It just came. As I say, it’s my business.”

Connie looked at Shrug, silently getting confirmation that the time had come to launch their own bombshell. “Actually, I think we do know why you get it—or at least part of the reason,” he said. “You weren’t in California on the day Vince died. You were right here, and somebody...”

He got no further. Bianca leaped to her feet. “You dick-head! You shit-face! Who told you that?” Pause. “So that’s what this is all about! You’ve played me for a jerk, and I obliged.” She flung her arms about wildly. “God, Bianca, what a fool you are!”

The tantrum raged on for several minutes, as Bianca d'Amato stormed about the room, waving her arms and shouting at no one in particular, while Connie and Shrug—men who valued and expected self-control in lives—stared in stunned amazement. It was, thought Shrug, like a stage show: she can't be for real.

Finally she slowed down and Shrug, trying to sound stern, said, "I take it, Mrs d'Amato, that our information is accurate—that you were in central Ohio on June 1, 1996."

"Yes." The voice was suddenly subdued.

"Were you in Humboldt?"

"No." The voice was lower still.

Connie mused to himself that "this woman switches moods faster than..." He couldn't think of an apt comparison and dropped the thought. Instead, he jumped in with as strong an impersonation of the unctuous good cop as he could manage. "You understand, I imagine, how this looks." Am I being too solicitous, he worried to himself. "All this time you're the one who has had the best motive for killing your husband, but you've been spared suspicion because everyone thought you were in California. Now it turns out you were in Ohio."

"But not in Humboldt," she murmured.

"There must be a story behind this, Bianca. We

want to hear your story.” He fell silent.

She looked beaten. The swagger in her face was gone, the edge to her voice softened. “It’s a complicated story—and a stupid one too, I guess.” Pause. “I’ve been a Tom Watson fan for years, almost a groupie, and I’d go to the Memorial each year to follow him—and Jack and the others too, of course.” The reference to Columbus’s own Jack Nicklaus sounded exactly like the afterthought it was. “I was in California in early 1996, and I just assumed that I’d miss the Memorial that year. In fact, I was scarcely thinking about it. But then a friend proposed that we get together for...” She interrupted her account with a new thought. “That’s how you found out isn’t it—from Annabelle?”

Connie nodded.

“I’ll bet it was that damn photograph.” The remark was aimed not so much at Connie and Shrug as at the vengeful muse of fortune. “I knew that sooner or later someone would see it who could realize its significance. And yet I couldn’t figure out any way to tell her she shouldn’t display it. Damn!” But her anger was now far more subdued, and she merely resumed her tale. “Annabelle suggested we meet for a final Memorial fling before she left town for what she knew would be an indefinite length of time. I thought it sounded like a great idea. We love golf. But I didn’t want Vince to know, because then he’d want to get

together—and I had no taste for that prospect at that time. So I flew into Columbus on Friday night, met Annabelle on Saturday morning, followed Tom through his great third round, celebrated my good luck at having come east to see Tom’s comeback, and then flew back to the coast that night on the red-eye. I had neither desire nor opportunity to visit Humboldt that day. And I had no idea that Vince had died in a fire until my sister phoned me in California on Sunday. So then I flew right back to Ohio. End of story.”

Still trying to sound sympathetic, Connie said, “That certainly makes a kind of sense. But it can’t be the end of the story. Why keep all this a secret? And how does it tie in with the money?”

“I said it was complicated. And here’s where the complications begin. Since I was supposed to be on the West Coast on Saturday, and since I was reached on the West Coast on Sunday, no one thought to ask me if I had been in Ohio on Saturday. After a bit, I noticed that everyone was assuming I’d been in California. So I got cold feet about revising my story: it was so simple just to let people keep believing what they wanted to believe. Especially since I hadn’t killed my husband.” Pause. “Okay.” She adopted the tone of the realist. “I wasn’t dumb. I also realized that if foul play was involved in Vince’s death, my being far away from

Humboldt would immunize me against suspicion. And so what had begun as a silence of, let's say, convenient simplification fairly quickly became a silence that served as an alibi. Annabelle was gone by now, and being caught up in her mother's health problems, she wasn't likely to say anything to anyone in Humboldt that would undercut the false impression I had let stand. Of course I was scared that somehow someone would spill the beans. And I kept telling myself that, if I'm asked about it point-blank, I'll tell the truth. I realize now—and probably realized then—that that was self-deception. Happily for me, no one asked. And so after a few weeks I thought sure I was safe.”

“But then,” said Shrug, “an offer came, probably in the mail.” He was guessing, but he was confident that he knew how this tale would end.

“It wasn't exactly an offer,” d'Amato replied. “It was a money order for five thousand dollars, made out to me. And there was a note. All it said was, in effect, your secret about June 1 is known, but there's no need to worry. As long as you don't tell anyone that you were in Ohio on that day, you'll keep receiving five thousand dollars a month. Oh, there's one more thing. At some point I may ask you to do something for me. If that request comes, and you don't comply, the monthly checks will stop coming.” Bianca d'Amato hesitated, perhaps to let the oddness of this communi-

cation sink in. Then she concluded her tale. “But no request ever came... just the monthly money orders. I never heard from my mysterious benefactor again. And since it was in my own interest to keep the secret, I was in the happy situation of being paid to do what I would have done anyway.” Her appearance was so abject that Shrug thought she was somehow seeking their forgiveness even more than their understanding.

Connie and Shrug thought the story over for a few moments and, on the whole, thought it believable, if only because it was outlandish from her point of view and yet, from their point of view, consistent with the emerging sense that only some remarkably clever plot could explain the connections which seemed to bind Vince d’Amato’s death with Jason Bigelow’s conviction and—perhaps—with Beatrice Morrison’s death.

They talked for a while about the squirrel—“I’m really sorry,” d’Amato said, “I just kind of panicked; and I took you guys for wimps”—and about the money orders. These checks came, it turned out, from Atlanta, and were probably (Connie speculated) traceable, if it was deemed useful to find their source. Bianca d’Amato was worried that now that she had revealed the secret she was supposed to keep, the stream of monthly checks would end. Connie and Shrug could not pretend otherwise, though they added that, since their investigation was informal, it might

not be necessary to go public with d'Amato's acknowledgment. D'Amato also said—a happier moment for the friends—that she felt more at ease now that she had the secret off her chest.

After sorting through these issues to no definite conclusion, Shrug said that he hoped they could explore one further matter before leaving. “Deputy Fielding said the post-fire investigation disclosed three anomalies about the basement where the fire started. A crawl window was unlocked. A patch of candle wax was found on the floor. And financial records were missing. Is there any light you can shed on these?”

“If you're asking whether I had anything to do with any of them,” she said, a hint of truculence returning to her voice, “the answer is no. If you're asking my impressions about them, I guess that it's the window that surprises me most. Vince really wanted to keep the house safe against intruders. So leaving a window unlocked would have been uncharacteristic. But then again, he was really lame at that time. I don't know if he went to the basement at all—it would probably have been hard—and if he did, he probably couldn't have done much about an unlocked window up above a bookcase. So maybe it was unlocked because he couldn't get at it to lock it. As for the financial records, I guess it's odd that they're gone—did someone check

his office?—but I can't be helpful on that. I remember him keeping our accounts down there, in two small boxes at the bottom of the stairs. But I left it all up to him—paying checks, retaining records, etc. It's hard to figure out why someone would want to steal them, and even if they were stolen, I sure don't know when. As for the candle wax, my sense is, 'who cares?' I'll bet everyone keeps candles in a basement, and so of course some wax will be found after a fire. So what?"

Neither Connie nor Shrug thought these responses very satisfactory, but they had run out of any zeal for protracting the discussion. So after steering the conversation into the channels of closure, they rose to leave, draining as they did so the last drops from their coffee cups. A subdued Bianca d'Amato saw them to the door. She was, they concluded, too proud to ask again that they keep her secret. As for Connie and Shrug, they were much too wise to offer a promise they might not be able to keep. But neither of them left with the impression that Bianca d'Amato should stand high on their list of suspects for any of the crimes they were interested in.



Shortly after noon George Fielding phoned both friends to invite them to his office to hear about the

preliminary findings from those investigating the death of President Morrison. It was an invitation they were delighted to accept.

“The first point,” Fielding said, after ushering the two friends into his office and closing the door, “is that nothing so far suggests that Beatrice Morrison’s death was anything other than an accident—or perhaps suicide.” Fielding let the addendum hang out there in space for a moment. He smiled broadly, hinting that he had some relevant information that he would in due course disclose. At the mercy of the deputy’s theatrical sense of timing, Connie and Shrug could only try to settle more comfortably into their rather rigid chairs.

“She died almost instantaneously, of massive head and upper body injuries sustained when she crashed into the steering wheel and windshield of her car. She had been drinking a bit, but her blood alcohol level was within legal bounds. In short, she wasn’t drunk.” Pause. “And she hadn’t taken any drugs.” Pause. “And she hadn’t belted up.” Pause. This guy speaks with silences, thought Connie. “She was traveling at high speed, way over the limit—a speed that was especially unsafe at that turn along the old Delacourt Road. The car had no malfunctions that we’ve found. She drove straight off the road, and there’s no evidence that she tried to brake. So... if she was competent to know what

she was doing, and if she drove off the road at that speed, the likeliest explanation is that she was choosing to kill herself.”

Connie interrupted at this point. “Since you’re talking only in terms of probabilities, I take it that she left no note.”

“If she did,” Fielding replied, “we haven’t found it yet. It still might turn up, of course. We haven’t gone through all the papers in her office yet—it’s a real clutter there—and sometimes people who commit suicide mail their explanations, in which case we might not learn anything until Monday. But I have other reasons to think suicide is the likeliest explanation.”

Connie and Shrug were the guests and could only wait to find out what George Fielding was holding for dessert.

“Her secretary, a woman named Marigold Penderthwaite, says that ever since Tuesday President Morrison has been behaving very oddly.”

“In what way?” Shrug asked, hoping to move Fielding along.

“Well, for one thing, she started canceling appointments left and right—even appointments with bigwigs like trustees and a state legislator. And she took to just walking out of her office and not telling Ms. Penderthwaite where she was going—very atypical behavior, I was told. But what had Ms. Penderthwaite

most concerned was President Morrison's appearance when she came into the office on Thursday morning. You need to know that Beatrice Morrison was ordinarily very conscious of her clothes; she said that when she looked good, Humboldt looked good." Connie knew this was so. In fact, he had occasionally heard that maxim from Morrison's lips. "On Thursday she appeared looking—and these are Ms Penderthwaite's exact words—as if she had chosen her wardrobe from the Salvation Army and then slept in it."

Shrug winced. "Did Ms. Penderthwaite know why this change had occurred?" Connie asked.

"No," Fielding replied. "She says she asked President Morrison if everything was all right—our words to that effect—and got chewed out for her trouble. So she dropped the subject. But she says that such discourteousness to a subordinate was completely out of character—that ordinarily Beatrice Morrison was the best of bosses."

Connie and Shrug were both keenly aware that, by Ms. Penderthwaite's account, Beatrice Morrison had begun behaving erratically the morning after Connie had asked her if she knew of any connection between IBM and the six colleges. Whatever the mystery here was, the realization that Connie and Shrug might be closing in on it seemed to have had a horrific effect on President Morrison. Each man silently pondered pos-

sibilities as Fielding continued.

“I’ve been saving the most interesting point til last,” he said. As if we didn’t know, thought Shrug, a bit pompously. “When we entered President Morrison’s house, we found, stretched out on her bed, a long black academic gown and a black Halloween mask.” He paused for a long time. “Don’t you see,” he said, annoyed that Connie and Shrug weren’t giving him the pleasure of expressing shocked astonishment, “it almost surely means that Beatrice Morrison was the person who attacked you, Shrug.”

It was not an incapacity to grasp likelihoods that immobilized the two friends; they had understood Fielding’s point even before he spelled it out. Rather, it was the sheer awfulness of the emerging picture. Somehow... in some way they didn’t yet understand... their investigation had driven a fine person to such total distraction that she had attempted to commit murder and then taken her own life. What they had undertaken as a lark and had transformed into a serious effort to clear up a miscarriage of justice had become an occasion of devastation. A sense of shock and incomprehension left their faces drawn.

But not for long. Facts were facts and had to be faced. The two sobered friends asked a variety of questions about the conclusiveness of tests already conducted and in progress, about other information

gleaned from conversations with Morrison's associates at Humboldt College, about whether she had any close relatives—it's amazing how little about her personal life I knew, thought Connie—and about Sunday afternoon's memorial service. Then they left Fielding's office and returned to the streets of a bracingly cool spring afternoon in Humboldt. They walked half a block in silence before Connie proposed that they meet for a war room session that evening and Shrug agreed. "We may now know enough to make sense of these events," said Connie hopefully. "That sounds like you've got some ideas, my friend," said Shrug, "and I do too." But neither could smile.



The arrangement in Shrug Speaker's living room was the same as for earlier war room gatherings—card tables, paper pads and pencils, and classical music (Dvorak for a starter) in the background. Shrug brought out beer and cokes after Connie sat down.

Connie began the serious part of the discussion with a remark that unveiled the thought that had been troubling him ever since learning that Beatrice Morrison had been Shrug's attacker.

"Until today we've assumed—or at any rate I've assumed—that the decapitated squirrel and the attack

on you were efforts by the murderer to scare us off. But now that no longer seems very plausible, basically because they were contrived by two different people, but also because neither Bianca d'Amato nor Beatrice Morrison seems a strong candidate for both the murder of Vince d'Amato and the framing of Jason Bigelow."

"You're willing to let Bianca off the hook too quickly for my taste," replied Shrug, who had now had several hours to get over the unmistakable force of her presence. "And I guess ditto for Beatrice, at least until we know what those six colleges have to do with anything."

"I admit that there's still a chance one or the other of the two women lies behind this. But let me push ahead. If in fact we haven't heard from the murderer, despite the very public nature of our investigation, then it seems to me there are only three, maybe four, possible conclusions." Connie was in his categorizing mode, and Shrug just kept quiet and listened. "First, the murderer is complacent—or at least sufficiently complacent to believe that it is smarter to do nothing right now than to try to frighten us. That's my one-maybe-two conclusion. Second, the murderer has left town and doesn't know what we're up to. That seems to me really improbable. Third, the murderer is dead."

The two friends discussed these possibilities for a

bit, Shrug agreeing with Connie that the first hypothesis was likeliest but the third far from unlikely. He agreed too that the possibility that the murderer had left town was remote, if only because no one they had come upon in their inquiries (with the exception of Rita Grabek) had left town, and he couldn't believe that, inexperienced though they might be as investigators, they had completely missed a person whose life obviously crossed the lives of the principals.

Shrug got up, changed CDs, and then asked, "Where are we left with our suspects now?" He meant it rhetorically, for he proceeded immediately with his analysis. "It all depends, I guess, on which crime we want to focus on. For the murder of Vince d'Amato, his wife has always had the best motive—getting all of a husband's holdings in an inheritance beats getting only part of them in a divorce settlement—and now we know she was very close to having the opportunity as well. I don't leave Maria Tedesco and Sandra Peabody out of the calculation. Both knew him; both saw him the day he died. But it's hard to figure out what Tedesco's motive would have been, and while it's easy to understand why Peabody was angry with him, it's hard to see how killing him solves her problem."

"I don't see Mary German as a murderer," replied Connie, "but it's no stretch to see that she might have had a motive. If Bianca is right in saying that she and

Vince were probably going to get back together—and especially if Bianca was continuing to be tolerant of Vince’s flings—then Mary German might have cast herself as the woman used and abandoned. It wouldn’t be the first such killing in human history.”

Shrug was reminded that one of the many things he liked about Connie was his friend’s aversion to the standard cliché.

“But if,” said Shrug, resuming his train of thought, “if we focus on the framing of Jason, then our chief suspect has to be either Patricia or Gene Simons, or maybe both. They had a clear motive—getting rid of Patricia’s husband. And you’ve now learned that Patricia suspected Jason of infidelity. Weepy Patricia has been holding back on information. Maybe she’s not as emotionally mixed up as she seems to be or wants us to believe. It’s hard to see anyone else having a motive for going after Jason. I suppose that somewhere in his past of hidden gay affairs—assuming they existed—there might be something of interest. But if so, we’ve missed it totally. Not that we’ve really even looked.” All of which raised the still more difficult question: what might have linked the two victims? Connie and Shrug turned this question over at length, agreeing finally though not firmly that neither Patricia nor Gene Simons had a reason to wish ill to Vince d’Amato and that Bianca d’Amato had no reason to

wish ill to Jason Bigelow.

“That got us nowhere,” remarked Connie.

“Not quite so,” replied Shrug. “If we stay focused just on those suspects, it seems to me we can at least conclude that it would have been far easier for Bianca than for Patricia or Gene to have planted the incriminating evidence. After all, as far as we know, neither of the Simonses ever entered the d’Amato house while Bianca lived there until shortly before the murder. So, as between those two choices, Bianca seems a more plausible candidate for murderer.”

Shrug couldn’t tell whether Connie agreed, but after he got another beer for his friend, and replaced Schumann with Vivaldi on the CD player, their conversation turned to what they had taken to calling “puzzles.” Why had George Fielding bungled the initial investigation? Or had he? Were they maybe being just too hard on him? By now they had come to regard him as an ally in their investigation, but it still seemed faintly possible that he was the culprit, not the agent of law enforcement. And then there was Thomas Kerwin. Whatever might be said about the trial of Jason Bigelow, the two friends couldn’t escape feeling that that poor man had been convicted on pretty flimsy evidence—“just a pen, a possible motive, and silence, for God sake,” said Connie—and that an attorney interested in saving him ought to have been able to do better.

But why Kerwin might want to frame Bigelow remained a total mystery. Finally they returned, as they had several times earlier in these war rooms, to the question of when the fire was set. The argument for the evening rather than the afternoon rested on the flammability of the cardboard and the absence of any timing device, but both friends thought that it ought to be possible (“though I don’t know how to do it,” confessed Shrug) to contrive an incendiary mechanism that was at once simple and yet delayed.

After another change in CDs and some bathroom visits, Connie said, “We’ve been neglecting Beatrice Morrison in our discussion. Maybe that’s a mistake. We know she isn’t a separate matter. The cards with the tunes on them link her, if not with Vince d’Amato perhaps, then with the complex set of events we’re trying to understand. And now she is dead. Maybe she’s the third victim. Maybe the key question here is something like, ‘Who wanted these three people dead?’”

That remark brought silence to the room, for both men recognized that if that line of inquiry was the correct one, then they were no longer simply the inadvertent causes of Beatrice Morrison’s death (a bad enough thought) but actually the tools—the puppets—which someone else had used to bring about her death. For if someone’s intention had been from the beginning to bring down three people—Vince

d'Amato, Jason Bigelow, and Beatrice Morrison—then Connie and Shrug had been instrumental in allowing that plan to reach its final victim. It was a thought that made them both ill.

But even as they contended with that shock, their minds kept operating. As event piled on event over the past eleven days, and as disclosure followed disclosure, they had been increasingly drawn to the idea that they were coming into contact with a very complicated and evil plot. Such a plot required a mastermind. One reason they had backed away from focusing their accusatorial attention on Bianca d'Amato or Patricia Simons or George Fielding was that none of these three had struck them as being foresightful enough to devise and effect such a multi-faceted plan. And that was before they had come to realize that the plan might have been so broad as to encompass the destruction of three people.

Driven to think in this fashion, the two friends moved, almost simultaneously, to the same conclusion: that the mastermind, the culprit, the evil machinator—all these terms flashed through the mind of at least one of the men—must have been Norman Wilkinson himself. “He’s the one who set us on the track, just like he set Rita Grabek on the track before us,” said Shrug. “And he’s the one with the intelligence, the love of intricate games, and the resources to

pull it off,” said Connie. They sat in silence, absorbing the implications of this astonishing conclusion.

Shrug walked over to the CD player and put on a new disk he was pleased with. It included, as he explained to Connie, digital remasterings of arias performed by singers from early in the twentieth century. “Our difficulty,” said Connie, “is that, satisfying though this theory is from a Baconian point of view”—Shrug smiled internally, as his friend once again became a philosopher—“we still lack any sense of a motive. And for something this complicated, requiring this much planning, surely the planner needed to be moved by some deep hatred of his victims. You don’t devise intricate plots to destroy randomly selected persons.” As soon as he said that, Connie realized that he was perhaps underestimating the human capacity for prideful wickedness. But he didn’t retract his claim. Instead he completed the thought. “We have no reason to think that Norman Wilkinson hated any of these people, much less all three of them. He wasn’t crazy. So where is his motive?”

A lovely rendition of ‘Caro nome’ spun its way through the room, and Shrug, nodding toward the player, remarked that he thought Geraldine Farrar had a particularly affecting voice.

And that did it! Connie saw the light. “There was one thing Norman Wilkinson was crazy about: his

daughter Eleanor. He even said as much to me in the hospital.” Connie continued, his voice betraying both his pleasure and his astonishment. “And the unbalanced character of his feeling was revealed in his inclusion of the undeserving Sid Farrar in his alphabetical hall of nineteenth-century baseball fame!”

At a stroke, pieces began to fall into place. “We know why Norman might have hated Jason Bigelow,” Shrug said swiftly. “Bigelow had counseled Eleanor to get an abortion, and the procedure had left her unable to have children.”

“And we know why he might have hated Beatrice Morrison,” Connie quickly added. “She wouldn’t exercise her authority to admit Eleanor to Humboldt College and thus to allow her to stay near her father.”

But at this point the excitement that had suddenly sent the conversation aloft died. “What about Vince d’Amato?” Connie said. “What could Norman have had against him? Whatever it was, it must have been very important, since—if we’ve got this right—he was the first and the only certain victim of this plot. If we can’t discover a possible motive here, then this is just another case of a great theory being destroyed by one awkward fact—or rather, by the awkward absence of one fact.”

“Well,” wondered Shrug, “maybe in the case of Vince the hatred wasn’t related to Eleanor. Maybe

Vince hurt Norman in some direct way. After all, Vince wasn't a very nice man, and he had this penchant for trying to swindle people. So maybe..." Shrug stopped, smiled, spread his hands, and blurted, "No. Wait! I've got it!"

Connie stared at him impassively.

"Remember Father Gonzalez's story about how Vince's misappropriation of funds had forced the cancellation of a musical almost twenty years ago. I'll bet the musical was the South Pacific that Eleanor Wilkinson mentioned to you, and that she was the would-be Nellie Forbush. After all, she told you that if that show had been staged, her singing career would have taken off. That's a weird conceit that probably needed a father's encouragement to survive. We know that Eleanor's life dissolved after the cancellation. We know she got pregnant about that time. We know she went to Riding Rock soon after that. Maybe, for some weird reason, Norman blamed her coming apart on the cancellation. I'll bet that Norman's anger against Vince was grounded in a belief that Vince's embezzlement had precipitated Eleanor's swift descent into an out-of-control life."

"Well I'll be damned," said Connie after a moment of reflection. "It all hangs together; it just might be true." Pause. "But before we can boast of solving the mystery, we still need to test the hypothesis by figur-

ing out answers to a few more questions. Like how Norman could have set the fire. And like how he could have planted the evidence.”

“The latter probably isn’t all that hard,” Shrug speculated. “After all, we know he was in the d’Amato house on the day of Vince’s death. But the setting of the fire remains a bit of a problem. How could he do it? How could anyone do it?”

The friends agreed they needed to check back with some of their sources—Rita Grabek, Tyler Delsin, Sandra Peabody—to tie some loose ends together. But when Connie walked out into the cool and breezy May night he felt for the first time since the investigation had begun a sense of grim satisfaction that the culprit had been uncovered. Still, the satisfaction was liberally alloyed with a sense of rising anger. After all, Norman Wilkinson had apparently toyed with him, and with Shrug. And, now being dead, had gotten away with it.