

# Trinity

A Haydn & Speaker Mystery

## Chapter 7



Connie Haydn had a quiet breakfast on the drizzly morning of Tuesday, May 16. He couldn't make special preparations for his upcoming conversation with Andrew Stonehurst because he knew nothing about Stonehurst beyond Rita Grabek's identification of him as the person who said Jason Bigelow "gave hardware retailing a good name." As his mind floated over the course of the investigation thus far, he reflected that even though Eleanor Wilkinson Trout had worried that the probing would suck her inheritance away, thus far—since their time was free—he and Shrug had not cost her a single cent, unless Shrug planned to charge the account for a phone call to Seattle. He was beginning to pull out books that would allow him to answer the questions about the alphabetical listing of nineteenth-century baseball players when the phone rang. George Fielding reported that Maria Tedesco (aka Mary German) had walked into his office, saying that she thought the sheriff and Connie Haydn were

probably wanting to talk with her. “She’s sitting right here, Connie, and since you’re the man with the questions, do you want to come down?” Connie happily acceded, purposefulness suddenly injected into his morning plans, and fifteen minutes later he was in George Fielding’s office.

Connie had never seen Mary German without her waitress dress. She was somewhat prettier than he had remembered, perhaps slightly older-looking too, and certainly more anxious. Is it the fact that this is a sheriff’s office? Or is it what she wants to say? he wondered.)

“I think you want to talk to me, Mr. Haydn. I’m Maria Tedesco.”

Connie looked straight at her. He was smiling, but he was uncertain where to begin. “I didn’t mean to scare you yesterday at Angelo’s. I had no idea you were the very person I was asking you about. I apologize for startling you with...”

“Don’t worry about that,” she interrupted. “I didn’t think you had put the pieces together yet. But I was afraid you would, and I stupidly ran away. And of course, that clinched it. If I’d just done my job, you probably wouldn’t have made the connection. But it’s not the first dumb thing I’ve done in my life.” The last remark was commentary, not directed to anyone in particular.

“What I’m interested in, Mary”—Connie’s attitude

was, he supposed, avuncular—“is the death of Vincent d’Amato. I guess you know that. I’m supposing you were a friend of his because you visited him on the day of the fire that killed him. I’m trying to talk with the three surviving visitors of that day, to find out what they can tell me about Vince and his activities. May I ask you about that?”

“Yes, please. I’ve decided that since I’ve done nothing wrong, it’s best to talk with the authorities.”

Since George Fielding was listening to the conversation, Connie quickly said that he was not a police officer and had no authority of any sort. “If you think that you’re in need of legal advice, I’m sure that Mr. Fielding can suggest an attorney.”

“No, really,” she replied. “I mean it. I’ve done nothing wrong—except to hide a personal secret. And that doesn’t violate any law.” She was recovering her composure.

“Is the secret relevant to my inquiries?” Connie asked, curious but still very wary of treading into private matters.

“It explains why I was at Vince’s. We were going to be married after Bianca got the divorce.”

Connie sat silent. He felt he could hear the silence of George Fielding behind him. Whatever explanation he had expected from Mary German after discovering that the waitress was the mysterious “Maria Tedesco,” it was not a declaration that she was to be Vince

d'Amato's future bride.

"Okaaay..." he said, buying time for his brain to get back into gear. "I had never heard of this before. I knew he and Bianca were separated. I knew that—this is awkward, so I'll put it bluntly—he had affairs." Mary German winced, but nodded in agreement. "But somehow I hadn't expected romance to be the basis of your visit. If that sounds rude, I apologize. But Vince was about forty-five in 1996 and you must have been, what, about eighteen or nineteen?"

"I know all that. And it does sound odd, I suppose. But I'm a bit older than you think—twenty-five now, twenty-one when he died. Vince was kind and good to me at a time when I was desperate." German suddenly seemed uncertain about what to say, and Connie waited for her to recover her self-command. "First," she continued, after about ten seconds, "I was an unwed mother. Vince wasn't the dad, if you're curious." She then took out a photo of her son Paul to show to Connie and George. "Second, I was new to town. And Paul's dad in New England wasn't going to help at all. Third, I was trying to better myself, and one thing I did was take an evening course in spoken Italian at the public library. That's where I met Vince. He said he was trying to make contact with his heritage. We enjoyed talking to each other, he took to calling me Maria Tedesco, and that's where my secret name came from."

Connie inferred from the orderliness of this presentation that German had rehearsed it in her mind before coming to the sheriff's office.

"Why did you give the secret name and not your real name to Rita Grabek?"

"Who is she?"

"The newspaper reporter who re-opened interest in Vince's death about six months after the fire. Since she mentioned your name in her articles, you must have volunteered the fact that you'd visited the house. But why do that if you want your identity unknown?"

"I needed to find out what she was doing, what she knew, what she was thinking. So I got in touch with her, had the conversation I wanted, and by giving her the wrong name—and I guess I should have invented a completely new one—I made sure she couldn't easily track me down."

"When were you at Vince's house the day of his death?"

"Late in the afternoon—maybe about 4:30. But I really can't be certain. He was feeling tired from a string of visitors, and his leg was hurting him a lot. It wasn't getting better the way the doctor said it would."

That's interesting," thought Connie. Bianca had said Dr. Sanderson was Vince's physician. It might be useful to talk with him.

Meanwhile, Mary German was continuing. "We

kissed a bit, but he couldn't make it into bed, and so we just spoke some lame Italian with each other. Then I left. I had an Italian class at the public library that night—the reporter asked me about my whereabouts, but I wasn't insulted—and I needed to get dinner for Paul and me before class.”

“What if someone had come to the house while you were there? How would you have explained your presence?”

“That's easy, for that day at least. I brought some cake from the restaurant. Vince liked to have food brought in when he was feeling bad, and so if anyone was curious, I was just the cake-deliverer.” She smiled, obviously pleased that she and Vince had worked out that cover story.

At this point George Fielding jumped in. “What time was the Italian class that evening?”

“They're always at 7:00. I know where you're going with that question, and I doubt that I could prove I was in attendance that evening. But I was.”

Connie was curious about a different aspect of Mary German's story. “Where was Paul when you were at the Italian class, or the restaurant, or Vince's?”

“My mother had come to live with us by early in 1996. In part it was to help me. In part it was because her health was failing and she didn't want to live alone. So we took care of each other, and she looked

after Paul when I was out.”

Connie decided to change the subject. “Do you know why Jason Bigelow visited Vince that afternoon?”

“No. I was surprised to learn he had. I didn’t even know him. So I was surprised too when he was accused. But his conviction was no surprise. He couldn’t give an alibi, and he left that pen behind in the basement. It all seemed pretty incriminating.”

“So you didn’t know that Jason Bigelow was one of Vince’s friends?”

“No. Vince never spoke of him. When we were together, we just talked about us.”

Connie hesitated. The tone of this conversation had left him puzzled, and he decided he wanted to address his perplexity directly. “I don’t mean to be rude, Mary”—to himself he thought that that must be one of society’s most popular lies—“but I’m not sure I understand all of this. You tell us this story so matter-of-factly. And yet you’re saying that you and Vince d’Amato were deeply in love. I guess I’m surprised you’re not more devastated at what happened to him.”

“You misunderstand me, Mr. Haydn. When Vince died, I cried. I cried for days. I cried until I drove my mother crazy. ‘No man is worth this,’ she’d tell me. And now, at a distance of four years, I know she was right. I really cared for Vince. But I now know the feel-

ing wasn't mutual. The first hint was the will—nothing in it for me. The second was the revelation—and that's what it was, you can believe what you think—that he was a skirt-chaser. I hadn't known. For a while I hated him for it. He was as lousy as Paul's father, and interested in exactly the same thing. But then the feeling of rage faded. And about two years ago I began to realize that Vince had been a good episode in my life. Whatever his motives, he had made me happy, he'd made me feel good about myself. That's more than lots of men have done. And he liked Paul."

"Oh, so Paul met him."

"Yeah, but I doubt that he remembers. He was so young, that was long ago, and I don't talk about Vince. Right now I'm trying to keep men out of my life. They're likelier to cause hurt than good. Sorry, gentlemen."

Connie liked the way Mary German thought. She was sensible—a good eighteenth-century trait—she acted on the basis of probabilities even if they might be miscalculated, and she understood that if people do not choose to take control of their lives, they choose by default to let events and moods and inertia seize control. Neither option assures success, but the former raises its likelihood.

Connie and George Fielding ended the conversation by confirming Mary German's new address and by

thanking her for coming in. Fielding assured her again that the law had no interest in her. Then she walked out into the rain, leaving some questions answered and others all the more vexing.



Father Diego Gonzalez, the priest at Our Lady of the Sorrows, was a man well known to Shrug Speaker. Almost as old as Shrug, but with much less hair on the top of his head, he had spent decades nursing Humboldt's Catholic community back to health, and it was now the most vigorous of all the congregations in town. Since Shrug was an Episcopalian, he was not a communicant at Father Gonzalez's church. But the two men shared an interest in classical music, and while Shrug was simply a listener (and in private, a performer), Gonzalez was an organizer and promoter of music, almost an impresario, for the residents of greater Humboldt. Under his leadership the town had developed a reputation, extending even into the Columbus press, as a place in central Ohio where good music could sometimes be heard. Thus, when Shrug called Gonzalez on Tuesday morning to query him about the possible waywardness of Vince d'Amato, the priest invited his friend to join him for mid-morning tea at the rectory.

“I guess you’ve heard what Connie Haydn and I are up to,” Shrug said after a few minutes of catch-up-with-each-other conversation.

Diego Gonzalez laughed, saying that he imagined everyone in Humboldt had heard. “You’re trying to re-open a cold case file.” If a voice can be said to be puckish, it was his.

Shrug was struck (as he was every time he spoke with Father Gonzalez) that the priest was perfectly bilingual, speaking English without a trace of his Mexican birth and Spanish without a trace of Anglo distortion.

“I hadn’t thought of coming to you,” Shrug continued, “until yesterday. But I had an odd conversation with Sandra Peabody—you know, the realtor—about Vince d’Amato. She said I should ask you about Vince’s integrity.” Shrug paused, then added. “That’s not quite the way she put it. But you get the idea.”

Diego Gonzalez considered his reply before beginning. “I probably can be useful to you on this question, though whether it has anything to do with Vince’s death I don’t know. I guess that’s what you’re trying to figure out, though.”

He got up, pulled a notebook of some sort from a shelf on the wall, walked to the window and back, pressed his hands together, and then returned to the story.

“I believe that Sandra Peabody and her husband had good reason to be angry with Vince d’Amato, though if I’ve got the story right, they’ve got even better reason to be angry with themselves. And I’m assuming she told you something about that problem.”

Shrug nodded.

“In lots of ways,” Gonzalez continued, “Vince was not a very nice man. He cheated on his wife, though I’m with Dante in regarding carnal sins as among the least significant. He broke promises, and as Dante teaches, that’s a more serious matter.” Pause. “Here’s a story. You know how Our Lady of the Sorrows tries to sponsor several important musical occasions for Humboldt each year. Their character often changes, but all are designed to enliven the musical climate here in town.” The priest stopped briefly, signaling that he was moving from context to tale. “Well, about fifteen or twenty years ago”—Gonzalez shuffled through the pages of the notebook but apparently couldn’t find what he was looking for—“we raised money to stage a musical show. Our plan was to cast it with local talent. We hoped to present a good musical production in Humboldt and to give the folks of the town a chance to get real theatrical experience by getting involved in a real theatrical enterprise—some working behind the curtains, some working in publicity, some in finance, and some of course as perform-

ers. It's never cheap to put on a show, even when most of the labor is in effect being donated."

Father Gonzalez got up and started to walk around the room again.

"Vince d'Amato was the treasurer for the project. It probably wasn't widely known, but he liked music and Bianca was a pretty good trumpet player. To cut to the chase, Vince stole the money. It came to more than \$10,000. So the production had to be called off."

Shrug was startled at what Gonzalez seemed to have left out. "What you're describing sounds like embezzlement. That's a crime. Why wasn't Vince prosecuted? Or was he, and I just haven't heard about it?"

"No, he wasn't. And it was chiefly owing to me that he wasn't." Gonzalez let that remark sink in before continuing. "When I became aware that the money was gone, I confronted Vince d'Amato with the evidence. He was deeply sorry for what he'd done—'contrite' is the word I'd use in some situations. He spoke of how he'd over-committed himself, gotten behind in loan repayments, faced unexpected bills. All the stories one hears in these situations. I sort of half believed him, half didn't. But I'm ashamed to say my real concern was for the credibility of the church's musical projects, and so I decided that if Vince would repay the money, I wouldn't press charges. He did repay it, within about two years. So with the crime

itself kept secret, the only casualty of Vince's action that the community was aware of was the plan to mount a theatrical production. We had to cancel the show not long after rehearsals had begun. And I publicly attributed that cancellation to my naiveness in trying to move ahead with an idea that was more complicated than I had expected. A year later Our Lady of the Sorrows sponsored Alice in Wonderland, and the success of that show drove the embarrassing collapse of plans of the previous year from everyone's mind."

Father Gonzalez put the notebook down, resumed his seat, and put his hands on the table before him. Maybe the notebook was a prop all along, Shrug thought, to help him through this painful tale. "My motives weren't very good, my judgment wasn't very good, and I now realize that I served chiefly as an enabler. But over the years I've soothed my conscience somewhat by telling myself that at least I turned Vince d'Amato into a useful member of the congregation. So far as I know, he never tried to play fast and loose with the church again. And it goes without saying, I hope, that I never let him oversee financial matters again."

"But what about the contributors? Didn't they want their money back right away when the plans foundered?"

"Yes, and they were paid." Long pause. "From church funds." A very long silence ensued. "As you can

see, I feel guilty and stupid enough about this that I hoped to hide this embarrassing final detail from you, even though the story hardly made sense without it.” He fell silent.

Shrug was silent for a few seconds. Then he said, “You’re being too hard on yourself, Diego. If it helps at all, let me assure you that I’ve done stupid things—even bad things—with other people’s money. It’s life. We just move on and hope that we won’t do it again. I suspect there’s not a guiltless person in the world.” Pause. “And I’m not just making a theological point in saying that,” he finished, with a puckish inflection of his own.

Father Gonzalez smiled gently, and Shrug thanked him for helping him come to a better understanding of Vince d’Amato. Then he decided to clear the air by changing the subject.

“What can you tell me about Bianca d’Amato? When I first met her a few days ago she had startling hair and wore startling attire.

“Ah yes, *la bella Bianca*,” Gonzalez’s smile widened. “She remains a pretty faithful communicant of the church. I think she’s always changing her hair color and choosing clothes that are—what shall I say?—garish because she wants to be noticed. Not as someone who is pretty might be noticed, for she isn’t pretty. And not as someone who is important, for I don’t

think that kind of reputation would mean anything to her. But perhaps just as someone who is, well, different. Her own person. An individual. By contrast, if I may get personal for a moment, you strike me as a person who prefers not to be looked at.” I guess I’m pretty transparent, Shrug thought. “Bianca, on the other hand is a person who wants to be looked at.”

Gonzalez continued. “What’s she like? Well, she is competent on the trumpet and maybe on some other instruments too. She likes travel. And her passion, as for so many others in Humboldt, is golf—playing it, watching it, talking it. I just don’t understand the fascination of hitting a little ball into a little hole or watching other people do it.”

Shrug recalled that Hercule Poirot had made a similar comment. But his next remark was more topical. “It seems to me that she lives beyond her visible means. Do you have any thoughts on that?”

“Not really. I’ve heard the talk. She is positioned, I suppose, toward the ‘more generous’ rather than ‘less generous’ end of the spectrum when it comes to giving to the church. But aside from the house she lives in, I don’t see any evidence of her being wealthy beyond what might be expected. And I know nothing about her background, or whether there was money in her family, or what kind of insurance settlement Vince left for her.”

“This is an awkward question, so I’ll just put it out there. Did she behave strangely when Vince died?”

Among friends, questions of this sort weren’t problematic, and so Gonzalez answered without any pretense of demurrals. “No, I don’t think so. Grief—especially as a consequence of sudden death—manifests itself in lots of ways. And given my line of work, you know I speak from experience. Bianca was somewhat on the hysterical side. But that didn’t strike me as out of character. In fact, I guess I’d have thought it odder had she been on the more self-composed side. She was out of town the day of the death, but she arrived by the next day.”

“I’m assuming you knew that the reason she was out of town was because the marriage was going through a rough patch.”

“Yes, and it wasn’t the first time. Vince’s randiness kept posing problems for them. But they’d always gotten back together in the past. They had, after all, been married for more than twenty years. It was not exactly a well-functioning marriage, but they needed each other.”

“Did you know anything about Jason Bigelow?”

“No. I’m far likelier to know Catholics than non-Catholics in Humboldt. I sometimes shopped at Bigelow’s hardware store. But it was a complete surprise to me when he appeared on the radar screen.”

Since Shrug seemed finally to have run out of ques-

tions, Father Gonzalez tried one of his own. “How is your investigation going? Can you tell me anything about it?”

After thinking this question over, as if he were himself reflecting on the state of the investigation for the first time, Shrug replied cautiously. “Actually, there’s little I can tell you or anybody right now. Connie and I have been accumulating information rather like a vacuum cleaner—at least that’s the image in my untidy mind—but since we don’t know which factoids are relevant, or really if any of them are relevant, it would be imprudent for me to say anything.” Shrug thought a bit longer, then added, “I appreciate your asking though, for I realize that you’re inquiring more out of an interest in a successful outcome, whatever that might be, than out of mere curiosity.”

“You’re more generous than is warranted,” the priest replied, “but I am grateful for your kind impression of me.”

With that, the two men said goodbye, and Shrug set out into the rain. He thought it typical of Father Gonzalez that he had not asked him to speak to no one about the revealed secret. He knew I’d tell Connie. He knew that neither of us would want it to go further. But he also knew, since no one knows where this investigation is going, that I couldn’t make a promise. He quickly turned his mind to the imminent task of

drawing maximum benefit from his afternoon interview with Jason Bigelow's attorney.



Connie Haydn almost always drove when he and Shrug Speaker went to Columbus together. Connie's Buick was roomier than Shrug's Jetta, and Connie was, by mutual agreement, the safer of the two drivers. They set out just a few minutes after 1:00, umbrellas in tow as the already wet weather turned gusty as well. An Amish buggy passed them on Main Street, going in the opposite direction. They drove onto the bypass, through a construction area, beneath the underpass, and through the little town of Commerce—what a misleading name! Connie thought—before reaching the state highway that took them past the low, greening cornfields of central Ohio toward its capital city.

The two friends used the drive to fill each other in on recent findings. Shrug was surprised to learn that Jason Bigelow had approached President Morrison about joining the board of trustees of the college and even more surprised to learn of Maria Tedesco's hope—to Shrug, this mysterious woman would always be Maria Tedesco—to marry Vince d'Amato. Connie in turn was surprised to learn that Sandra Peabody had admitted to being scammed by Vince d'Amato and

more surprised to hear how Father Gonzalez had chosen to avoid involving the law when dealing with Vince's theft of funds from the concert program. Connie and Shrug now had a fairly clear idea of the sequence and timing of visitors to Vince d'Amato's house on the day of his death: Tyler Delsin at 1:00 or 1:30—"whatever 'fairly early' means," said Shrug—and Norman Wilkinson not long thereafter, Sandra Peabody at mid-afternoon—"we'll say 3:00," said Connie—and Maria Tedesco at about 4:30.

"Only the time and slot of Jason Bigelow's visit is unknown," said Connie, "and since both of the obvious witnesses are dead, that's going to be a hard one to pin down—unless, maybe, Rita Grabek's got that information somewhere in her notes."

"I'm adding that to the list of questions to put her the next time I call," said Shrug. "More to the point," he added, "we now have everyone's alibis for the crucial evening hours of, say 6:30 to 7:30. Not that any of them are terribly strong."

"Or in any way confirmable at this point," remarked Connie. "Oh," he added, "we don't have Norman Wilkinson's. That's another question to put to Rita Grabek—where was Norman that evening?"

"Who in this bunch of people is a decapitator of squirrels, do you suppose?" Shrug asked, somewhat light-heartedly.

“Good question. And since we’re not backing off, maybe another warning is coming. The whole thing is a little disorienting,” Connie continued. “I get up in the morning and tell myself that I’ve got to be careful. But since I don’t know what or where the danger is, I can’t change my behavior in any way. So I just tell myself that I’m too old to learn new tricks and plow ahead. I’m hoping, I guess, that whoever made the warning won’t go beyond that.”

“Me too,” said Shrug. “But then there’s the voice inside that says, ‘if they’ve murdered once, they probably won’t hesitate to murder again.’ Like you, I’m not backing off. But I’m not feeling so happy-go-lucky about this investigation as I did a few days ago.”

Having acknowledged their fears, the two friends spent the rest of the drive talking about the subjects that often filled their conversations in less aim-oriented times. Shrug told of his grandchildren’s accomplishments and then of the cardiologists’s report that some significant narrowing of two arteries in his chest had been detected. Connie told of worries over the increasingly severe soreness in his knees and how they were leading him to begin to second-guess his plans to go hiking in Canada in August. They jointly puzzled over the recent appearance of herds of llamas on several countryside farms. They even shared views on their current writing projects, Shrug explaining to a

bemused Connie how he was struggling with trying to translate the arguments for God's existence into modern terms and concepts, and Connie in turn explaining to an authentically engaged Shrug how he was trying to explain in an article-length piece how Kant misunderstood Hume's epistemology.

As the car swung onto the Columbus outer-belt they exchanged amiable taunts about the coming evening of chess. Once Connie found a parking place—one of the great things about Columbus, he thought, is how much cheaper parking is here than in New York—the two men set off, protected by coats and umbrellas, on their coordinated missions. Though they scarcely noticed it, each felt himself basking in the ruddy cheerfulness of the affirming habits of friendship.



Thomas Kerwin's office was on the third floor of an older building near the center of town. To Shrug's surprise the Irish-born secretary whom he had talked to the day before was closer to a *seanmháthair* than a *cailín*. He was asked to take a seat, and about ten minutes later Mr. Kerwin emerged from his office with a young couple whose demeanor left Shrug uncertain about whether they were pleased or displeased with the service the attorney had given them. Kerwin, a stubby

man, introduced himself and invited Shrug in. The office was small but not cramped, and Shrug noted its walls featured Irish political posters. Shrug sat on one side of the desk, Kerwin on the other, and with a small smile—and a gesture toward the file on his desk—Kerwin asked Shrug how he might be helpful.

Kerwin's face and tone gave the impression that he was a man who valued the efficient use of time, and so Shrug gave him the short form of what he was now coming to think of as the "authorized version" of the story of the investigation. Kerwin took it in quickly, said that his paralegal had searched the files for the folder now on his desk, and asked again how he might be helpful.

Worrying now that Kerwin just wasn't much interested in being cooperative, Shrug moved immediately to his central question. "Do you know why Jason Bigelow wouldn't make use of an alibi he said he had?"

With this question, Kerwin's body language subtly softened. Maybe he thought I was going to challenge his conduct of the case, Shrug thought. "No I don't. His silence was finally an insuperable obstacle. I explained the consequence of his stubbornness to him. His wife pleaded with him. But he wouldn't budge."

"Do you think that he was silent because he didn't really have an alibi?"

"Actually, no. He was a hard guy to get to know. But

I finally came to like him. I think he was really innocent of the charge and for some reason—protecting somebody or something, misplaced pride, shame, deep fear, who knows?—he was willing to risk a guilty judgment rather than disclose his secret.”

“Most of the people we have talked to recently took his silence to indicate guilt. You didn’t. Why?”

“That’s simple. Most people didn’t talk directly with him. All they knew was that the prosecutor said that Mr. Bigelow claimed he had an alibi but wouldn’t produce it. You can imagine what a prosecutor can do with a statement like that. But I did talk with him. And I saw him. An unhappy man. A puzzled man. But not, I finally concluded, a guilty man. I told him that I thought the jury would convict him if he didn’t give them an explanation, but he just told me to do my best. And I did.”

“How did he happen to choose you as his attorney? Did you know him?”

“No, I didn’t know him. He didn’t want a Humboldt lawyer—and that’s natural enough under the circumstances—so he chose, randomly I suppose, someone in Columbus. Neither he nor his wife said I’d been recommended by anyone. I didn’t inquire, but if I had to guess, I’d say that they called the Columbus Bar Association referral service.”

“What can you tell me about Rita Grabek? She was

a reporter for Humboldt's local newspaper back then, and it was her articles that re-awakened interest in the fire that killed Vince d'Amato."

"I don't think I ever spoke with her. But I heard of her as I prepared for the trial, and she was pointed out to me at the trial. Why do you ask?"

"We're trying to figure out if she's a reliable source. Do you have any thoughts on that?"

Thomas Kerwin knew that Shrug was also interested in his own reliability. "Her stories didn't help us. For some reason she zeroed in on Bigelow, and in some ways she helped make the prosecution's case. But she didn't fabricate evidence." He seemed not to want to dwell on this aspect of the trial. "Look, newspaper reporters always get things wrong. Lots of things. But if you're suggesting that she might have tilted the news or distorted the facts, well no, I didn't think that. So, in short, she hurt us but not, so far as I knew, with lies."

"But she identified other visitors. Why didn't you check on them?"

"Well," Kerwin replied, somewhat testily, "I didn't have a corps of private investigators to call on." He lit a cigarette. "And besides, drawing attention to them would only have underscored the fact that Jason wasn't offering an alibi."

Though not happy with this explanation, Shrug

moved to an edgier question. “Why didn’t Patricia Bigelow testify?”

Kerwin hesitated briefly and then, standing up and staring out the window, spoke as if distracted. “I wish... that was... well, I finally went along with her desire not to. At first, I thought she’d be a big help, but she resisted the idea of being questioned in court, and the more I talked with her, the more I realized she was, well, flaky... unpredictable... maybe fragile... in short, a poor witness. And it’s not as if she had anything useful to say. After all, from an evidentiary point of view all she could do was confirm that Jason hadn’t been home—a point that Jason’s refusal to use his alibi was already underscoring. So I stopped pressuring her. That was, in retrospect, probably an error. Maybe his spouse could have made the jury more sympathetic to Jason. Who knows?” His monologue finished, Kerwin returned to his desk and sat down.

Shrug let the silence hang in the close room for a moment, considering how to proceed. He decided that he might be best served by changing the mood of the conversation. “You say you liked Jason Bigelow. Not everyone has spoken of him in that manner. Why do you think you warmed up to him when others found him, well, hard to get to know?”

Kerwin smiled, flipped a pencil about in a particularly eye-catching way, and leaned back in his chair, exhal-

ing a cloud of smoke. “I liked him because he told interesting stories about himself. For example, he loved selling hardware. His father had done it before him. He imagined that in providing the things people needed to make their homes more commodious, he was helping them lead happier lives. Maybe all salesmen try to think about themselves in that way, but Jason was credible as he talked, quietly and almost shyly, about having a ‘calling’ to help people. I know it sounds odd, but that’s what he said – a calling.” Pause. “Or here’s another example. He liked to help people by giving them advice—‘supportive advice’ is what he called it—in the crises of their lives. He said he did it only when it was solicited. He spoke of a young woman who had sought advice when she found herself pregnant. He had listened to her, determined that she needed reassurance that getting an abortion would be okay, and then had nudged her along in the direction her inclinations were taking her. And he told me of a friend who had been wrestling with whether to commit an elderly father to a nursing facility. Again he figured out which way the son was leaning and gave encouragement. This isn’t clinical stuff. But he sounded to me like a person who wanted to be useful. And a person who took pride in what he regarded as his successes.”

Shrug, as usual, was taking lots of notes, but he needed to follow up on one final line of questions.

“After the conviction, did Jason Bigelow want you to appeal the outcome?”

“No. And that’s a bit strange. He said he’d just serve out his term—it was fifteen years—and asked me to come see him occasionally.” At this point Thomas Kerwin’s voice dropped a bit. “And you know, I never did.” Pause. “Of course, I didn’t know he’d quickly die in a prison fight. But still...” His voice dropped off. “I suppose that’s why I was curious when your call came. I didn’t serve him badly when he was tried, but neither did I give him the kind of moral support he reached out to me for after the trial. If it matters in any cosmic sense, I hope you can establish his innocence.”

“Oh, it matters,” said Shrug, “if only because God cares.”

Thomas Kerwin looked briefly startled. Shrug suspected that he was not accustomed to hearing such straight-forward professions of the engagement of the deity in his office. The two men shook hands, and Shrug left. On the way out he noticed that the paralegal had a small photo of Gerry Adams on the shelf behind her desk.



When Connie Haydn set out into a soggy Columbus afternoon to interview Andrew Stonehurst, he tried to

imagine for himself what a liaison in a state hardware association might look like. Middle-aged probably... a bland face... glasses... a conservative suit... maybe somewhat overweight. Pause. I've obviously been brain-washed by Sinclair Lewis. He smiled to himself.

The Ohio Hardware Retailers Association filled the second floor of a small but pleasant brick-fronted structure a bit south of the Capitol Building. Connie approached the receptionist and asked for Andrew Stonehurst. She told him she'd just seen him, and directed him to take the left turn at the end of the corridor on the left. Connie strode down the hallway he'd been directed to, looking at the names on the doors. When he reached the end, he turned into a smaller corridor. Seeing no names on the doors in this passageway, he asked the black custodian who was working in the hall where he might find Andrew Stonehurst.

"I'm Andy Stonehurst," the young man replied.

Connie swallowed quickly while the possible implications of the unexpected answer whistled through his mind, and then said, "I understand that you were a friend of Jason Bigelow. May I ask you some questions about him?" His voice was level but he felt a surge of expectation in his chest and arms. The corridor suddenly seemed narrower and yet brighter.

"Why?" the young man answered—hesitantly, ten-

tatively, and fearfully.

“I don’t think he set the fire that killed Vince d’Amato, and I’m trying to gather evidence that might prove his innocence. Can you help me?”

Andy Stonehurst looked Connie in the eyes for a few seconds, then lowered his own eyes to the floor. Connie realized that he was crying. So that’s it, Connie said to himself, the pieces quickly falling into place. Connie put his hand on Stonehurst’s elbow, hoping to lead him to a folding chair propped against the corridor wall, but before Connie could begin guiding Stonehurst toward the seat, the weeping man collapsed in on Connie’s chest, sobbing and gasping. Startled, Connie stiffened, but he kept his grip on Stonehurst’s elbow. He said nothing. He could only wait.

Several minutes passed in the quiet hallway. No door opened, no voices called out, no footsteps interrupted the soft moaning of the grief-stricken man. One of Connie’s great virtues was patience, and he stood almost motionless, as the young man’s paroxysm slowly subsided. To Connie it was as if a dam had been blown away. But the unexpected turn of events also left Connie with a few moments to collect his thoughts.

Andrew Stonehurst is—was—Jason Bigelow’s gay lover, he thought to himself. He is not even twenty-one now, and so he was about sixteen in 1996. He

probably knows where Bigelow was on at least part of the day that Vince d'Amato died. And he has not gotten over the loss of Bigelow. Connie tried to summon his facility for coherent reasoning. Or maybe it's more complicated than that. Maybe he's crying because he feels guilty about something. Connie turned that thought over in his mind. After all, if he could have provided an alibi for Bigelow and didn't, he must feel awful. This notion held Connie's attention for a few seconds, but then a new one appeared. But maybe I've got this whole thing wrong. Maybe what Andy Stonehurst is releasing isn't grief but an accumulation of fears that has been building up for years. Connie worked on this idea. What has he got to be afraid of? Exposure, I suppose, if he's in the closet. Maybe some kind of punishment for underage sexual activity? Connie realized that that didn't seem likely, but he also realized that he knew next to nothing about whether Ohio law was interested in under-age homosexual activity. Maybe Andrew Stonehurst still lives at home, maybe he has another lover now, maybe he's married. Connie couldn't help smiling at himself. His ignorance was chasmal. Until Stonehurst was able—and unless he was willing—to talk, much would remain obscure.

When Andy Stonehurst finally brought his tears under control, he suggested that they walk to a small

lounge off the end of the corridor. He said he wanted to talk, that he needed to talk. And in the privacy of the lounge, amid the uncleared litter of coffee cups, cigarette butts, and snack wrappings, he poured out the accumulation of four years of stifled sadness, self-reproach, and anxiety.

In outline, his story was fairly simple. He had come to Columbus from California in 1995. He had met Jason Bigelow within months of settling in Ohio. On the day of the fire that had killed Vince d'Amato, he and Jason Bigelow had been together in Columbus. As was the custom with these infrequent and surreptitious meetings, Jason had told his wife that he was in the capital city meeting a representative of the Hardware Retailers Association. When the two men learned of the death of d'Amato, it seemed a sad event, but one irrelevant to their lives and secret. But then Patricia Bigelow, suspecting her husband of having an affair, had become curious about Jason's whereabouts on various occasions, including the afternoon of June 1, 1996, and Jason needed a way to account for his activities on that day. When Rita Grabek began probing into Vince d'Amato's death, Jason thought he saw an opportunity and stupidly tried to allay his wife's concerns by volunteering himself as a person who had visited d'Amato on the day of his death. He even told Grabek, by way of explaining the visit to a man he

scarcely knew, that he thought that d'Amato and his wife might be having an affair. ("What an odd thing to say," Connie thought to himself, though he then realized that perhaps Jason, himself suspected of adultery, would think that the tale would lend startling concreteness to his lie.) Grabek had believed the lie, and so Jason's afternoon "visit" to Vince became part of the accepted story. Jason and Andy had not foreseen problems arising from their lie, since the fire had started toward evening. But when Grabek began suggesting that Jason had a strong reason for disliking Vince, and when Jason's pen turned up in the basement debris of the dead man's house, Jason suddenly became the focus of unpleasant attention. He decided that acknowledging his lie at that point would be likely to make him seem even more suspicious, and so he stuck with it. Besides, he still hoped to keep his sexual identity confidential. And that's why he also decided—and this was the emotional crux of Andy's tale—that he would say nothing about Andy Stonehurst. Which meant that he would deprive himself of the alibi he had for the evening. He believed that, as an innocent man, he would not be convicted. And when, against expectation, the jury found him guilty, he realized that the deepest motive for his decision to keep silent was actually his love for Andy and his hope to protect him. So he stayed silent. And died brutally.

The pain that underscored the telling of this tale was intense. Stonehurst's convulsions far eclipsed in passion and pitiableness the weeping of Patricia Bigelow Simons that Connie had witnessed a week earlier. Stonehurst understood that the story he told was terribly self-incriminating, since at any number of points along the way, as suspicion had moved through trial to conviction, he could have intervened with the truth to protect the man whom he professed to love. But his sobs reflected more than self-loathing. They revealed that the love that had made the relationship meaningful was still alive. They revealed that he had lived four years in fear. He is still not out of the closet, Connie concluded. They revealed that the life that had been spared by Jason Bigelow's self-sacrifice had nevertheless been ruined.

When silence finally came to the lounge, Connie rose and shook Andy Stonehurst's hand. He told him that he would try to preserve his secret, though he added—and Stonehurst was prepared for this—that circumstances might arise that would oblige him to reveal part or all of the story. Connie gave him his phone number and address and said he'd be in touch if he needed additional help in the investigation. Finally he thanked him, leaving Andrew Stonehurst to complete his custodial duties in the privacy of his

own thoughts. Everything is transformed, Connie thought to himself as he left the building.



Since Connie was late in returning to the car, Shrug took refuge from the rain in a small deli, where he nursed a double latte, jotted down some notes for his article, and kept an eye on the sidewalk. Connie arrived after 5:00. Shrug suspected from the sight of Connie's striding—Connie always walked forcefully but now he was almost jogging—that the meeting with Andrew Stonehurst had paid unexpected benefits.

"Wait til you hear what I've learned," Connie said by way of confirmation.

Shrug sat back in astonished silence as Connie began the drive home with a fairly detailed narration of Andrew Stonehurst's revelation. He occasionally asked questions of clarification, but in general he let Connie determine the structure and pace of his story. He felt somewhat less sympathy for Stonehurst than Connie did—"My God, he let his friend go to jail!" he blurted out at one point—but he knew that Connie was the one who had lived through Stonehurst's tale of misery and he knew that direct experience with the people involved in complex human situations tended to blur the crisp lines between right and wrong. He

also knew that, in the last analysis, Connie was simply less judgmental than he.

By the time they were beyond the outer-belt, the two friends were thinking through the implications of Stonehurst's story. "First off, of course," Shrug noted, "there's still a murderer on the loose."

Ever the logician, Connie reminded his friend that suicide remained a possibility. Shrug threw him a "get-with-reality" look, even though he had been the one who had first broached the possibility of suicide.

"Second," said Shrug, "we might be closer to the identity of the murderer than we think, since someone is worried enough to offer up the makings of squirrel soup." He realized that he was still talking in ways that might serve to deflect from consciousness the seriousness of the threat.

"What I'd like to know," Connie said, replying less to Shrug than to the workings of his own train of thought, "is what led Norman Wilkinson to be so sure Jason was innocent. Do you suppose he knew that Jason was with his boyfriend that day?"

"It's possible, I suppose," Shrug said, "though if so, why Norman wouldn't have told us becomes a pretty big mystery."

"Do we tell George Fielding?" Shrug said after a few minutes of silence.

"I've been wondering about that too," Connie said.

“How about this—and if you think this is silly, please say so. Why not tell him we now have good reason to be confident that Jason Bigelow didn’t set the fire and add only that we plan to try to figure out what really happened.”

“He won’t like our pushing ahead with the investigation while holding back with information,” Shrug noted.

“You’re right. But what can he do about it? All we’re doing is looking into a crime that the state is finished with. Authors do things like that all the time.” Connie actually wasn’t all that confident that authors just casually picked up recently-resolved cases and wrote about them. Maybe it’s possible only under certain conditions, he worried to himself. I wish I knew more about the law. “Besides, we can’t be sure that George himself isn’t involved in some way. It sure looks like he didn’t handle the investigation as well as he might have. Was that the result of clumsiness or complicity? And now he seems awfully interested in what we’re doing.”

“And I thought he was just being helpful,” mumbled Shrug with a smile.

Connie smiled back. They then fell silent for a while, but as they swept beneath the underpass outside of Humboldt, Shrug made the last remark of the trip. “One thing seems for sure. This investigation is now pretty clearly attended with danger. And I’m glad

that neither of us has even mentioned the thought that we ought to back off. Never let it be said that the members of the Second-best Club lack courage.”

Which may explain why, at Chess Club that evening, Connie imagined he was Capablanca and Shrug imagined he was Alekhine. Until they lost their matches.