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*By Hy Conrad*

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Despite Thurman's presence, Monk and Natalie attend the funeral of Judge Oberlin, and it's a good thing. In typical fashion, Monk examines the body in the casket—and finds evidence of poison. The judge was murdered.

When Captain Stottlemeyer shows the same symptoms the judge had shown, Monk detects the work of a diabolical killer who wants both men dead. With his friend in danger and an enemy close, Monk will have to put his reservations aside to crack the case in time.

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## Mr. Monk and the New Lieutenant By Hy Conrad Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #274993 in Books
- Published on: 2015-05-05
- Released on: 2015-05-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.80" h x .80" w x 4.20" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 288 pages

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## Editorial Review

### Review

#### Praise for the Monk novels

“A highly entertaining series....I get a big kick out of the *Monk* novels.”—*Mystery Scene*

“Conrad aptly continues to craft these quirky novelizations . . . always funny and entertaining.”—*Kings River Life Magazine*

“What’s left to say about [the] *Monk* books? You already know they’re some of the very best TV tie-in books being published today. More than that, they’re some of the very best mystery novels being published today, period.”—Rough Edges

### About the Author

**Hy Conrad** was one of the original writers on the USA Network television series *Monk* and stayed with the series for all eight seasons, acting as coexecutive producer for the last two seasons and garnering three Edgar® Award nominations. In addition, Hy was head writer of the webisode series *Little Monk* and served as consulting producer and writer on the USA series *White Collar*. He is the author of hundreds of short stories, dozens of interactive mysteries, and ten books of solvable whodunits, sold around the world in fourteen languages. Hy’s new series, *Amy’s Travel Mysteries*, will debut in February 2015, with the publication of *Toured to Death*.

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## CHAPTER ONE

I have made a slow, sad discovery over the past few months. Brace yourself. You might not want to hear this: Office work is boring.

Okay, maybe that wasn’t a shock. But when you fantasize about being a private eye, when you work and plan and visualize yourself opening a real business with real clients walking through the door with exciting, life-and-death problems to solve . . . Well, let’s just say there are a lot of hours in the workday.

The red-and-black signage on the front window of our establishment reads MONK & TEEGER, CONSULTING DETECTIVES. I would be the Teeger. Natalie Teeger, single mom, ex-bartender, ex-blackjack dealer, ex-assistant to a brilliant and dysfunctional crime consultant. The Monk would be Adrian Monk, ex-cop and my ex-boss. We’re in this thing together now, trying to share our modest office space in a mini-mall without annoying each other to death.

Even though my name is listed second, I’m the official boss. I’m the one who took the time and effort to get my investigator’s license. But Monk is the one with the genius for solving any possible or impossible case—except his own case of OCD. You probably know all of this. Right? As I said, I’ve been bored and I’m starting to repeat myself.

Lately we’ve taken to splitting our hours, just to give each other a break. At first I was nervous about it. But Monk surprised me with his ability to open up the shop by himself and deal with the demands of a storefront and not scare away too many clients. He does have this habit of making mortal enemies with the other fine businesses facing onto our communal parking lot. But we’re working on that. Baby steps.

It was exactly one o'clock on a cloudy afternoon when I pulled my Subaru into an empty spot just as Monk and Luther Washington were coming out the door.

As long as I'm saying things you probably already know, I'll mention Luther. He's Monk's driver. Not really a driver. But a year or so ago, Monk met Luther and bought his car service company. Luther stayed on to manage the business and give Monk a free ride whenever he needs one. I'm sure Monk could have avoided the expense of buying a company and simply paid for his rides. But that would have provided Luther with an exit strategy he doesn't have now. Luther is financially forced to be Monk's friend. And, except for a few hiccups along the way, I think it's working.

It seemed to be working on that afternoon when I pulled up. The two of them were acting like a couple of schoolboys, scurrying around the side of the black Town Car. Luther held open the passenger door for Monk, then put on his cap and got behind the wheel. They were almost giggling.

"How was your morning?" I asked through the open window, trying to keep things professional. "Any exciting business I should be aware of?"

"Exciting," Monk echoed, then seemed to change his mind. "Uh, no. Nothing exciting. We got an inquiry about a child custody case, which I turned down. The landlord came by with a plumber to check out that smell in the bathroom. They said it's my imagination, but my imagination doesn't smell like that. I'll call them again in an hour. Oh, and the hippies next door are still making a racket. You don't even have to press your ear to the wall to hear their antiestablishment music. It's practically blaring."

"Yeah," said Luther with half a grin. "They're really causing pain."

Monk answered that with half a chortle. "Causing pain. Good one."

Hmm. I wasn't aware that Luther had even met the hippies. "Okay," I said, stretching out the word. "What's up with you two?"

"Nothing, boss," said Monk, and he rolled up the window. "Go, go," I could hear from behind the tinted glass as Luther scooted back out of the space.

I watched them drive off, make a right onto Divisadero, and blend in with the downtown traffic. Okay, I thought, heaving a deep sigh. Time to visit the hippies and apologize. For whatever.

The hippies, as Monk called them, owned Paisley Printing, the shop just to the right of ours as you face the parking lot. Peter and Wendy Gerber were probably still in their twenties, thin and scruffy. Back in the seventies, they might have been labeled hippies. Since then, other labels have come and gone to describe their look: granola, new age, sixties retro—or, to quote my father, old-school San Franciscans.

Peter and Wendy were sweet and good-natured, struggling to make ends meet in a business dominated by the likes of Kinko's and Office Depot, not to mention the surge in desktop publishing. They certainly didn't deserve to have Adrian Monk holding his nose every time he smelled a whiff of incense, or his pounding on the thin walls every time he heard the music of the old guitar that Peter plucked on during the spells between their printing jobs.

"Natalie," Wendy called out warmly through the open door. At least she still considered us on speaking terms.

"Wendy. How is everything? I hope Adrian hasn't been bothering you."

“Adrian? What a sweet old soul he has. No, I haven’t seen him.” Wendy was a long-haired brunette, but with the kind of frizzy, flyaway hair you might expect on someone my age. She swept back a long strand. “I expected to see him pacing out front, you know, spooking away customers, only we don’t have any customers.”

“Natalie.” Peter was toward the back of the shop, looking up from a laptop. He sported a scruffy three-day growth that always looked the same. “I love it when Adrian pounds the wall. He can’t help but keep time, so it’s like I’ve got my own drum section. Freakin’ cool.”

“My bad. We did have a customer,” Wendy recalled. “Clyde. I forget his last name. African-American dude with a very centered aura.” She held up her hands as if holding the aura for me to examine. “Teeny tiny order but super weird. We wasted all morning getting it right.”

“Time is never a waste,” Peter corrected her. “It’s an artificial construct reflecting the circular flow of the universe. We’re all part of it, you know.”

“Don’t mind him.” Wendy laughed. “You can decide for yourself if it was a waste.” And with that, she led me behind the counter to the monitor on top of the main, white-laminate work space. “I guess it’s for a clinic or a medical supply business?” She phrased it as a question.

Wendy used her mouse to bring up the image of a poster. The letters were big, almost magenta on a multicolored background, in a kind of retro-forties font. There was no illustration to speak of, just four oddly spaced words filling the lower part of the sign, plus an arrow.

HIP  
CAUSING YOU PAIN?

“I guess it’s a window ad,” I suggested. “For a hip replacement facility? You’re right. It is super weird. How big was the final product?”

“Clyde was very specific,” said Peter as he joined us at the worktable. “It had to be exactly two feet two inches by three feet seven and a half inches. He kept looking at a photo, but real James Bond secret-like. He kept fiddling with the color and spacing. It must have taken us an hour plus.”

“And after all that, he only wanted one copy,” said Wendy, shaking her frizz. “We kept telling him a dozen would be almost as cheap, but he said he only needed one. Matte finish on a self-adhesive plastic-peel backing. All-natural inks, too.”

“Did he pay cash?” I asked. I had a sinking feeling about this story. “Did he wait and take it with him?”

“Whoa,” said Peter. “Both of those. It’s like you’re tapping into his spirit.”

“Unfortunately, I think I am.” From the start there had been something familiar about the font and the colors—and, now that I thought about it, about the African-American man . . . and the phrase “causing pain,” which I’d run into more than once in the past few minutes. Just call me Sherlock.

“Natalie, where are you going?”

Peter and Wendy followed me out of the shop and to the right. I couldn’t stop them, not that I wanted to. If I was right, they deserved to see it.

And there it was, plastered on the stucco wall that separated Paisley Printing from the third shop in the row,

the Farmers' Natural Market, a pricey, overly quaint food store. Gracing the wall space—as recently as an hour ago—had been two side-by-side paintings, both done in an old-fashioned style, brightly colored and reminiscent of fruit crate labels. The first announced the presence of “Fresh Baked PIES” while the second celebrated the shop’s “Fair Trade COFFEES.”

“Freakish mystery solved,” I said.

At the moment, the coffee painting was completely obscured by Peter and Wendy’s newly printed hip ad. I had to hand it to Luther; it was a perfect fit. It covered the coffee ad perfectly. And the letters, with a nearly identical font, lined up with those of the pie painting next to it. “Not cool,” said Peter, staring at it and tugging at his stubble. “Who would do this?”

The “this” in question was the following:

FRESH

BAKED

HIP PIES

CAUSING YOU PAIN?

The bold red arrow pointed directly to the Paisley Printing storefront. “Fresh baked hippies.” I moaned as I read.

“It was Adrian, wasn’t it?” said Wendy. “Why would he . . . I know he has his issues going on. But I thought he at least respected us.”

“It wasn’t Adrian,” I stammered. “I mean, it was. Obviously. But he doesn’t do practical jokes. Clyde, your African-American dude? His name is Luther and he’s Adrian’s friend. Luther must have been the force behind it.”

“It is kind of funny,” Peter admitted, getting over his initial shock. “We worked so hard making it just right. And the whole point was to prank us with our own work. Good job.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “I’ll go talk to the market people. I’m sure they can peel it off without harming the wall.”

“It’s totally harmless and peelable and biodegradable,” said Peter. “The dude paid extra to make sure.” He stretched to his full height, grabbed the top two corners and slowly pulled down the fake hip ad. It came off in one piece, and he just stood there, holding it, staring at it, his eyes drooping at the edges. “We like to take pride in our work, you know? Make the client happy.”

“I’m sure they were happy,” I said lamely.

A few minutes and several more apologies later, I was back in my office, at my desk, on the phone, doing my best to yell at Luther Washington. Or should I say Clyde?

“It was Mr. Monk’s idea,” he said smoothly, refusing to raise his voice in response. “I acted as the facilitator, you might say.”

“That is so not true. I know Adrian a lot better than you do. He would never even think of pulling a prank

like that. He can be unthinking and self-centered and a dozen other things. But the man is not cruel.”

“Well, maybe I did go proactive,” Luther admitted. “But I had to do something to stop his whining about the hippies. I figured he needed to feel some control over the situation.”

“And hurting their feelings made him feel in control?”

“Hey, the poster was his brainstorm. He went through the whole morning smiling and focused and not worried about a thing.”

“I know. That’s how he gets when he’s in the middle of a case. But a case is a lot more productive than insulting a couple of sweet people we have to work next door to every day.”

“So we punked the hippies. Big deal.” Luther lowered his voice to a growl. “We all got our ways of dealing with Mr. Monk. You use your psychology and I use mine. It’s as simple as that.”

It wasn’t as simple as that. Being a caretaker for Monk is a delicate proposition. In the past I never had to worry about some stranger coming in and leading our little genius astray. For one thing, it takes a rare character to put up with him. For another, Monk has a moral compass of magnetized iron. He won’t even warn me about a lurking patrol car on a freeway when I’m going a few miles over the speed limit. “Yes, I saw him, but I’m not a radar detector,” he would say as the officer would be busy writing me a ticket on the side of the road. “That would have been cheating.”

But there are always gray areas, chinks in Monk’s armor. One of those chinks is his need for friendship. Luther is Monk’s employee and has a vested interest in at least pretending to be a friend. And Luther, I was discovering, had ways of working outside the box.

I don’t know which happened first—Luther hanging up on me or Daniela Grace walking through the door. Let’s say they happened at about the same time. “Daniela,” I said, putting down my phone and breaking into a big smile. “Good to see you.”

“Don’t get too excited, dear. I don’t come bearing a new case.”

Daniela is a senior partner in a white-shoe law firm, although with her, the preppy white oxfords had been replaced by black Manolo Blahnik heels. She was skirting the upper reaches of middle age, thin and stylish and reminiscent of my mother. It takes a village to keep these women looking so spectacular.

I tried to hide my disappointment. “You don’t have to have a case to come and visit. It’s always a pleasure. Do you want some tea?”

“No, thanks. Just a quick question.” She stood in the doorway as if expecting me to get up and go over to greet her—which I did, of course. “The last time I was here, I noticed that printing company next door. Have you ever availed yourself of their services?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact.” I don’t know why I say half the things I do. “Just availed ourselves this morning. They did a project for Adrian.” I was telling the truth. And I suppose I was feeling a little guilty and sorry.

“Was Adrian happy with their work?”

“Happy?” I replied. “He was practically giddy.”

Despite the years of expertly injected Botox, Daniela managed to raise her eyebrows. “High praise indeed.

My firm is putting together a series of IPO documents for one of our clients. All very hush-hush. We would do it in-house, but frankly our people get paid too much by the hour and don't have the time. You say these printers do high-quality work? Are they reliable?"

"Very reliable and great quality. They did a color match on a sign that was incredible."

"Good," said Daniela. "Personal recommendations are always the best." She took a step out the door and examined the hanging sign. "Paisley Printing."

"They're good people," I insisted. "They won't overcharge and they seem very careful and honest."

"Done," said Daniela, and made a right turn out the door without ever coming fully inside. "I'll say you recommended them."

"Please do," I called out after her, then turned back to face my empty office.

At least someone was getting a job today.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

It turns out we got a job, too. Peter and Wendy might have considered this the result of my good karma, but only if they ignored Monk and Luther's bad karma.

Less than five minutes after Daniela went over to introduce herself, my phone rang. It was Captain Stottlemeyer with a consulting gig. We hadn't had a police case in months, not since that infamous triple homicide in that warehouse on Stockton Street. I guess that's the curse of specializing in weird, unsolved murders and living in a relatively safe city.

Once or twice during this dry spell we'd run into the captain. But neither of us had seen Lieutenant Amy Devlin in ages. She was the captain's number two and I was eager to see how she was doing. Even though it had all worked out, I knew the triple homicide had been hard on Amy, both professionally and personally.

As soon as I hung up, I called Monk's apartment. When he didn't answer, I swallowed my pride and called Luther. "Yep, he's with me," Luther reported. "We're shopping for apples."

"How's it going?"

"We found eight, so I'm thinking another fifteen minutes."

I told Luther about the job and gave him the address, a stately single-family home on El Camino del Mar, just a five-iron shot from the Lincoln Park Golf Club.

When I pulled up, they were already on the scene. Luther was leaning against his Town Car, munching around the core of what looked like a red Gala. He didn't like going into crime scenes—squeamish, I guess—which was fine with me. "Sorry about the prank," he said, not looking at all sorry. "How did the hippies take it?"

"They were amazed and shocked and hurt," I said. "But they'll get over it."

"Good. Tell Mr. Monk the cars are all booked this evening and all day tomorrow, so I won't be able to drive him."



“That’s fine. You shouldn’t have to do it anyway. Just because he’s your boss . . .”

“I don’t mind it in small doses. It’s kind of like a social experiment.” Luther handed me a brown paper bag filled with small, flawless apples, then got into his Town Car. “By the way . . .” He started rolling up the driver’s side window. “There are nine left.”

“Nine? What’s he going to do with nine apples?” Luther just smiled and pulled away, leaving me holding the bag.

I was still standing there when Monk came storming out of the house, wearing blue booties and plastic gloves. “Natalie, Natalie, Natalie.” He was almost screaming.

“It wasn’t me,” I instantly tattled. “Luther ate one. I couldn’t stop him.”

“What? Apples? Who cares about apples? Devlin’s gone. And that’s not the worst part.”

“How can she be gone?”

By the time I got him somewhat coherent, Captain Stottlemeyer had come out to join us. He was also in booties and gloves and didn’t look pleased that his investigation had been interrupted. “What happened to Devlin?” I demanded.

“She took an administrative leave,” said the captain. “But between you, me, and the fence post, I think she’s quitting.”

“And that’s not the worst part,” Monk repeated.

I didn’t know which was more disturbing, the fact that Amy was thinking of quitting or the fact that she hadn’t told me. “Quitting? Why didn’t she tell me?” I said, covering both bases.

“Wait till you hear the worst part.”

“All right, Adrian. Tell me the worst part.”

It was at precisely that moment that the worst part came out of the doorway, looking as smug as you can in plastic booties and gloves. “Are you girls coming inside or not?”

His name was A.J. Thurman. Lieutenant Thurman. His father, Arnold Senior, had been a captain on the force—a well-respected, stand-up guy who’d retired just a few years back. No one knows how Arny Junior became a lieutenant. It certainly wasn’t due to his social skills. Monk and I had known A.J. for years. Even as a rookie, he’d been a rude loudmouth with no respect for anyone.

“The worst part is Lieutenant Thurman,” said Monk.

“I realize that,” I whispered out of the corner of my mouth.

“Then why did you ask?”

A.J. shook his head. He has a look that just screams “cop”: intimidatingly large with a sandy crew cut and enough substance around his middle to let you know he means business. His laugh, right at the moment, was mean and condescending. “There’s no love lost on either side of this, Nattie girl. But since the captain is determined to waste taxpayer money on you . . . what do you say? Anyone up for fresh booties?”

“Lieutenant Thurman is my new partner,” said Stottlemeyer, lowering his voice to a growl. “And since we’re all professionals, I expect you to get along.”

“You replaced Amy with him?” I had to ask. “Him?”

“That’s not what I meant by getting along.”

From then on we tried to keep it civilized. I deposited the bag of apples in my car. Then the captain joined us in donning new footgear and hand gear. Seconds later we were in a huge Arts and Crafts living room that looked like it hadn’t been touched in a century, with a beamed ceiling, dark wood wainscoting that came up to my shoulders, and a stacked stone fireplace you could roast an ox in.

Two CSIs were working the room, one of them dusting for prints, the other taking scrapings from under the fingernails of the body on the hardwood floor beside the grand piano. He finished with the second hand, bagged the results, then stepped back and let Monk in there to do his thing.

The victim was an elderly woman dressed in a sky blue bathrobe and matching slippers. The presumed weapon was at her side—a carved stone doorstep, probably used to hold open the substantial front door during the month or two of hospitable weather we get every year. Monk examined the bloodstains on the stone and the gaping wound on her left temple where a section of her skull had been caved in.

“The name is Margery Burns,” said A.J., referring to a small spiral notebook. “She lived alone. No one else came or went on a regular basis except the weekly cleaning service. Today was their day. Around one p.m. they found her like this. The body was a few hours old, ten a.m. or thereabouts. The ironic thing is . . .” He paused to chuckle.

“Today was her birthday,” said Monk, barely looking up from the body.

“How did you know?” The lieutenant glared at Monk the way a Puritan might have glared at a witch.

“The piano is covered with unopened birthday presents and cards,” Monk pointed out, “meaning that her birthday was coming up but hadn’t yet arrived. She didn’t open things until her birthday, apparently. I approve of that.”

“So what?” said A.J. “Tomorrow could be her birthday. Ever think of that? Or the day after.”

“No,” countered Monk. “Ms. Burns has a ring of pearl and alexandrite on her right ring finger. Those are both stones for June and today is June thirtieth, last day of the month. Alexandrite is a fairly rare stone and combined with a pearl, it practically screams birthstone ring. Plus, you just said the word ‘ironic’ with that mean little laugh of yours. What was I supposed to think?”

“Today’s her birthday,” A.J. confirmed, and went back to his notes. “Our reconstruction is that a burglar broke in through the kitchen pantry door. When the victim heard the noise and came downstairs, she confronted the intruder and was attacked with the doorstep. On her birthday. The burglar then ran upstairs, took a jewelry box and cash from the victim’s bedroom, and fled the scene.”

“Why didn’t he take the rings from her fingers?” I asked. This was a standard question.

“Because he’d just killed an old lady and wasn’t cold enough to pry them off,” said the lieutenant. “Besides, anyone who watches TV knows that handling a corpse can leave tracers—fingerprints, skin fragments.”

“And why did he use the doorstep?” Monk asked. This was not a standard question.

“What do you mean?” asked the captain.

Monk stood up from the body. “I mean there are heavy objects all around.” He pointed. “There’s what looks like a Roman bust on the piano, a heavy crystal vase in that niche by the stairs, two matching Chinese pots on the tables under the window. Sharp objects and blunt objects everywhere. Yet the killer walks over to the front door and bends down to pick up a doorstep. Why?”

“Why do you think, Monk?” asked A.J. Monk rolled his shoulders but didn’t answer.

“Captain?” The dusting CSI had finished the room and was ready to give a preliminary briefing. “We’ll need to take elimination prints from the body and the cleaning service. But it looks like the perp did some wiping down. There are wipe streaks on the doorstep and the doorknob. Also the coffee table top and one of the chairs; chair arms and back.” He pointed to a pair of wood and leather chairs in front of the coffee table.

“Could that have been done by the cleaning service?” asked Stottlemeyer.

“I think not,” said the CSI. His name was Ted and we’d worked with him before. A smart guy. “They were last here a week ago today, so there’s a slight dust layer on most things—except the doorstep and chair, et cetera, which, as I said, have been wiped down.”

“Are there prints on the other chair?” asked Monk.

“Yes, sir. My guess is they’re old prints from the victim, but we’ll have to wait until we get to the lab to be sure.”

“So our burglar-murderer wiped down a chairback,” I said. “Why would he do that?”

“Plenty of reasons,” said Lieutenant Thurman. “After killing her, he sat down to think things over. Or he touched the chair during the commission of the crime, maybe knocked it over and had to pick it up.”

“Pick it up?” The captain shifted his gaze to the chaos of the blood and the corpse not five feet away. “That was very tidy of him.”

“Or the bad guy took a seat and waited for Mrs. Burns to come down the stairs this morning, which goes against your theory of a burglary gone wrong.” That was my opinion.

Ted had no opinion of his own. That wasn’t his job. With the room now clear, he excused himself to go upstairs to work on the bedroom, where the jewelry box was missing. A.J. waited until he was gone. “Enough of the fancy questions, Monk. It was a burglar, plain and simple. Come back to the point of entry and see for yourself.”

“I don’t need to. You go,” said Monk to the rest of us. Then he raised his hands in his patented style, as if framing the scene, and began focusing on the grand piano.

The kitchen pantry was at the back of the old house, beyond the parlor and the dining room and the kitchen. On the door to the rear yard, a pane of glass had been broken just above the lock mechanism. A trail of muddy footprints was staggered across the white tile.

There are several ways to tell if a bad guy broke into a house or just faked a break-in. And all these ways are known to anyone who has ever read or watched a mystery. For example, glass shards outside the window would indicate it had been broken from inside. A shard caught in the trough would prove the window had already been open. The lack of footprints on the outside . . . etc. Any of these clues is a red flag and easily

avoidable by anyone with half a brain and half a minute.

In this case, there were none of these indicators, which proved nothing. But it was enough to make A.J. adopt a smug I-told-you-so grin. Meticulously, he led us through the lack of evidence, then actually said it: “I told you so.”

“Maybe.” The captain shrugged. “It’s a decent theory, don’t get me wrong. But let’s get Monk’s opinion.”

A.J. bristled. “I should have known. What you’re saying is you trust Monk’s opinion more than you trust mine.”

“No, Lieutenant, that’s what I’m trying very hard not to say.”

### **CHAPTER THREE**

On our way back to Monk and the grand piano, we passed the dining room again, and for the first time, I noticed two middle-aged women sitting patiently, their hands folded, as if waiting for dinner to be served. “Is she still out there?” the taller, more pulled-together one asked meekly. I could barely hear her.

“Yes, ma’am,” said A.J. “The coroner’s people should have her bagged and removed within the next fifteen.”

A.J. would have just left them there and moved on. But the captain decided we could spare a few humanizing moments. We joined him at the table as he sat down to explain what was happening and to express his condolences.

These women were not the cleaning service, as I had assumed from their outfits and their attitude. They were, in fact, two of the five daughters-in-law—Julia Burns and Louisa Burns—who had been informed of the matriarch’s death and had come over to do what they could to help out. It was a telling detail that none of the five sons had yet arrived, and only two of the daughters-in-law were there.

A.J. seemed anxious to get back to what he considered the real investigation. But Stottlemeyer behaved like a regular human, taking time with the relatives of the deceased, prodding them with a few sympathetic words. He seemed eager to listen.

The Burns family, we learned, was a dysfunctional mess, with five underachieving sons, no daughters, and the widow Margery, who had just turned eighty-two today. Happy birthday.

According to the daughters-in-law, Margery had never been a pleasant woman, and her sons had inherited many of her traits. According to the women who knew them best, all five were greedy and cheap, with very little sentimentality about the family, especially Mom.

“What about all the cards and presents on the piano?” I asked. From what I’d seen, there had been at least one red and gold Cartier box gracing the piano top.

“Pure fear,” said Louisa. “Mother Burns was always changing her will or threatening to. None of her boys had any money. One of them runs a bookstore, another does landscape lighting. My Jimmy works part-time as a mechanic.”

Julia sighed in agreement. “The wives call it the inheritance curse, this kind of underachieving attitude. If a man gets promised millions, enough to set him up for life . . . Well, it takes a certain strength of character to forge your own way in the world. The money could come any day, as my Eddie keeps saying. Or it could be

twenty more years.”

“They thought they would get some on their father’s death,” said Louisa. “But he’d left everything to Mother Burns. They hated him for that. Her, too, for keeping it all.”

“Still think it was a burglar?” I whispered out of the side of my mouth. The lieutenant grunted but didn’t answer.

“Did Mrs. Burns know her sons felt this way?” asked Stottlemeyer.

Julia nodded. “She was hurt. Called them ghouls. She stopped asking them to visit, which was fine with them. But the woman still expected her presents and cards. The boys would scrimp and save. And heaven forbid if they bought something on sale. She would somehow always know, like a sixth sense.”

“Are all the sons currently in the will?” I asked.

“As far as we know, yes,” said Louisa. “But that can change at any moment.”

“Actually, it can’t.” Monk was standing in the doorway. I don’t know how much he’d overheard, but it was probably enough. “The will can’t change, now that she’s dead.”

“You’re right,” said Julia. “Are you a policeman, too?”

“Not quite,” I said, and I took this chance to introduce ourselves—Monk and Teegeer, consulting detectives. I expressed my condolences, although it seemed like no one in the family needed consoling.

“We took their statements before you got here,” Stottlemeyer said. “Both Mrs. Burns teach at the Bay School in the Presidio. They were in classes all day until the lieutenant started making his calls to the next of kin.”

“The ME’s office just removed the body,” Monk informed the rest of us. The women looked relieved. “Why don’t we go back to the living room?” he suggested. “I want to open the presents.”

Before anyone could ask why, Monk was leading us back to the mansion’s imposing main room. “Normally I would need your permission as family members,” he explained. “But since this is a crime scene, I don’t.”

“Go ahead,” said Julia. “It’s not as if you’re ruining the surprise for her.”

“Just be careful,” said Louisa. “I know my Jimmy. I’m sure he’ll want to return whatever he bought.”

Monk started with the birthday present closest to him, the small red-and-gold Cartier box. The gift tag said it was from Carl, the eldest. “Did the mail come today?” Monk asked as he carefully untied the ribbon, pressed it flat, folded it neatly, and put it to one side.

“It did,” said A.J. “It was on the floor when the cleaning staff came. No cards or presents, if that’s what you’re thinking. Just a catalog and the PG and E bill.”

“Got it,” said Monk. A second later, he had opened the box, riffled through the tissue paper, and held up a small gold mesh bracelet. Very elegant. I’m embarrassed to say all three women in the room said “ooh” pretty much in unison.

Monk set the bracelet aside and went on to the box shaped suspiciously like a picture frame. He worked on the ribbon while the rest of us stood there and practiced the art of patience. “Would you care to know why

the killer used the doorstep as a weapon?" Monk asked the air in front of him. "Just for your information."

"Enlighten us," said Stottlemeyer.

"Because it was cheap and heavy," said Monk. "The killer didn't want to damage anything that was part of the estate. The Roman bust or the Chinese vases are valuable. Breaking them would have hurt the killer's inheritance."

"Inheritance?" said Louisa, looking a little insulted. "Are you saying one of her own sons did this? One of our husbands?"

"Picture frame," answered Monk. He held up a designer frame. Offhand, I'd say antique platinum with a thin edge of mother-of-pearl. Inside was a photo, almost as old as the frame, of Margery and her five young sons, all smiling, unaware of what the future would bring them.

"That's from Eddie," said Julia. "I picked it out myself."

"Lovely. Where did you get it?" I had to ask.

"At Gump's on Post Street. They have some great things."

"I know," I said. "My parents used to shop there."

"Is this chitchat part of the investigation?" asked the lieutenant. He had a point, although he could have phrased it nicer.

Meanwhile, Monk had gone on to the ribbon on the next box. "Does anyone know why Mrs. Burns was killed on her birthday?" he asked the air again. "Any opinions?" I could tell he was goading A.J. And A.J. was just dense enough to take the bait.

"A coincidence," he answered. "Or maybe the burglar did his homework. He knew there'd be presents worth taking. Or maybe he figured she'd be sleeping late on her birthday."

"Maybe," said the captain, meaning I doubt it very much. "Monk, why don't you tell us? This is why we're paying you the medium-sized bucks."

Monk's mouth turned up into a thin smile. Everyone likes being appreciated. "The difference between Ms. Burns' birthday and any other day was that she opened her presents. So, we're opening the presents." He had already untied, pressed, and folded a third ribbon.

It was an unimposing gift box, the kind you could buy at any Walmart. Instead of fancy tissue paper, it was lined with crumpled newspaper. Inside the layer of newspaper was a simple glass bowl, like a little fishbowl. Monk held it up. And this time no one said "ooh."

"What the hell?" said Louisa. "How did that get here?"

"Do you recognize it?" Monk asked.

"Yes. It's usually on a shelf in our pantry. I think flowers came in it originally. You know how it is with cheap vases. You always keep them somewhere, just in case."

Monk checked the card on the piano. "'From your adoring son, Jimmy.'"

“Whoa,” said A.J. “Jimmy really dropped the ball on this one.”

“Not just the ball,” said Monk. “He dropped the doorstep, too.”

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

Two days later, I was doing the morning shift.

Business had picked up slightly. Through a personal connection—namely, my daughter, Julie—our firm had been hired to do a few background checks for a software company in Berkeley that had been founded by a few of her ex-classmates. It wasn’t something Adrian and I liked doing, and frankly, there were a lot of security companies that did this sort of thing better. But it helped pay the rent.

I was determined to finish up one of the checks before lunch, but I got sidetracked by a call I had to make to Lieutenant A.J. Yesterday I’d sent him an invoice for the Burns case and had just received an authorization for only a fraction of our usual fee. With anyone else, I might have thought it was a mistake. With A.J., I knew it was trouble.

“I’m paying you for two hours,” A.J. said when I asked. “And I was generous enough to include travel time. You and the Monkster were there for an hour, max. Your boy wanders around the house, opening birthday presents and making mysterious pronouncements. Then he spits out a name and expects to get paid for a full day?”

“But it was the right name,” I argued. “You were looking for some fictitious burglar, if I might remind you.”

“We would have checked all the angles.”

“The captain would have checked the angles.”

“I would have, too. It’s procedure. The sons had a motive, which was something I didn’t know to start with. And if Jimmy ever tried to sell the jewelry he stole from her bedroom . . .”

“Blah, blah, blah. You would have spent days tracking down all the brothers, checking their alibis. The presents on the piano would have been returned unopened, and the one crucial lead in the case never would have seen the light of day. That cheap little bowl would be back on a shelf in Jimmy’s pantry. No questions asked.”

Monk had been right, of course. Margery Burns had been murdered by her one son who’d simply grown tired of waiting. Another birthday, Jimmy Burns must have thought. Another obligation to buy something criminally expensive for a sour old woman who kept threatening to disinherit him. This eighty-two-year-old who refused to die.

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