
KILLING CRITICS

CAROL O'CONNELL



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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BONE BY BONE
FIND ME
WINTER HOUSE
DEAD FAMOUS
CRIME SCHOOL
SHELL GAME
THE JUDAS CHILD
STONE ANGEL
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THE MAN WHO CAST TWO SHADOWS
MALLORY'S ORACLE

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FOR MY FATHER

He was one of those quiet heroes who worked until the day he died. He was also a man who could do a financial transaction on a handshake; he bought our first house that way. And people who've known him since he was a child will tell you he never told a lie in his entire life. What spare time he had was spent in public service; what spare cash he had was given away. This remarkable man filled a church when he died, and the planet was diminished.

PROLOGUE

SPEAKERS WERE HIDDEN IN EVERY WALL, THEIR CLOTH covers painted over many times to render them invisible and to baffle the sound of Jean-Luc Ponty's *Civilized Evil*. Throughout the evening, the dark sweet music of the jazz violin had been muted—strings and drums subdued to the level of a backdrop for a hundred inane conversations. A ripple of notes chaining into chords wove around the art gallery patrons as a subliminal entity. The crowd inhaled the music with every breath and it hovered over their food and wine.

Dean Starr's head nodded, almost imperceptibly, to the beat of a drum just beyond the reach of his awareness. Much was beyond him this evening. In fact, he had just been stabbed and hadn't the wit to realize it.

Drugs and wine had sabotaged the switchboard operator of his brain. All internal lines of communication were botched, and trauma was never connected to pain. He had felt the contact, but knew not what it was, for he could not see inside himself, could not grasp the damage from the steady needle of the ice pick. And now the blood was leaking from the chambers of his heart. Weakened without understanding, Dean Starr slipped to the floor, his head gently settling to the hard wood as though to a pillow.

A card wafted down to his chest. His eyes rolled toward the small white rectangle, but he was unable to read it, and felt no inclination to lift his head. Liquid warmth was spreading outward from the center of his back where the tiny hole was—the small back door to his damaged heart.

Lizard skin shoes approached his prone body in the company of patent-leather pumps. Now, other shoe styles which he approved of joined this pair. His slow eyes roved from sequined bows to gold buckles. And there was the sound of shoes behind his head, a light dancing-shoe scuffle mingling with the tap-tap of stiletto heels, the tinkle of champagne glasses, and the chatter of mouths opening and closing to say nothing that was any longer intelligible to him—if ever it had been.

A woman's gloved hand reached down for the white card and picked it up, the better to read it. The owner of the glove tilted the card as she was putting it back where she had found it—on his chest. Now he was able to read the single word *DEAD*.

And then he was.

Long after all the pretty shoes had departed for the evening, a pair of black shoes approached the body. These shoes extended out from the blue cuffs of the gallery rent-a-cop's uniform.

"Christ," said the owner of the black shoes.

In this one word, he gave away his lack of sophistication and education, his utter ignorance of the fine arts, for he had instantly realized that this was a dead body lying in a red spread fan of blood—and not a piece of performance art.

CHAPTER 1

ALL AROUND THE FRENETIC CIRCUS OF TIMES SQUARE, car lights blinked and traffic lights glared. Above the din of horns and shouted obscenities, neon signs flashed and clashed with messages on every surface that was for sale. The wraparound sign on the old Times Building sent headlines in a band of bright letters running around the facade. Mounted over the running words was a giant motion picture screen with an ever changing array of full-color commercials.

At street level, less electrifying messages rode the backs of men with sandwich board signs. Pedestrians moved in quick streams of intricate traffic patterns, flying through the rush hour, dodging those who moved into their path to hand them bright-colored ads for local stores. The beggars also worked this fast-paced stream, moving along with their marks to flash broad smiles and holler pitches for spare coins. And on every corner, there was a great war of odors from the street vendors' carts, as pretzels battled with roasted animal parts.

Only two people, a man and a woman, were not in motion, and the whole world moved around them. The woman stood near the curb, flashing white teeth and large breasts. Both her profession and her unnatural shade of red hair fit well with the advertising atmosphere. "Care to dance?" she called to every passing stranger. And then her eye fell on the elegant lone figure in the expensive suit.

With a predatory stare, she watched this man from the distance of a few squares of the sidewalk. He didn't belong here. She checked the length of the curb for the limousine that should accompany such a man, but there was none in sight.

He was staring up at the roof of the building across the street. Only this afternoon, a derelict had hovered at the edge of that roof. And then, the ragbag had spread her skinny arms on the wind and sailed off the high brick wall. So like a bird she was, even as she fell, and caused no more than a brief interruption in the flow of the square, only the time it had taken to improvise the foot traffic around the body and over it, and some had trodden on it. But to compensate for that indignity, the dead woman had received two minutes of fame on the evening news.

Now the man in the expensive suit seemed fixated on that same ledge. The woman strolled over to him and lightly touched his sleeve to call his attention back to the earth, to her.

"Sugar, if you're waitin' on another jumper, I'd say you've got some time to kill." She rolled her shoulders back and thrust her breasts out in a none too subtle offering.

"Thank you." He inclined his head, and she knew if he'd had a hat he would have tipped it. "But I'm afraid I have an appointment," he said, addressing her as a lady and not a whore.

His dark hair was threaded with silver, and his moustache did not quite conceal the line of a faded scar. The scar made him look a little dangerous, and she liked that. And there was something about his mouth that would make any woman wonder what it might be like to sleep with him. She was wasting her time here, and she knew it. Yet she lingered awhile. Perhaps it was the challenge of those eyes hooded in shadow.

She came closer.

The beams of a turning car flashed on his face, flushing out the shadows with brilliant light. And now, though it was spring and the evening was mild, she wrapped herself in her own arms. Her sudden shiver was not caused by any expression of his intentions, for surely he had been born with those eyes

Imagine a baby with eyes like that.

Obediently, her imagination conjured up the face of an infant with alien irises the color of blue frozen water, and with black pupils like onrushing missiles.

Well, ain't that cold?

She looked up to the man with another question in her thoughts. *Did your mama shiver when she suckled you?*

In a burst of intuition, the woman, who truly understood men, realized that this man's entire life had been shaped by his eyes, which could not convey any semblance of humanity—only bullets and ice.

She forgot the pitch to sell her body. In silence, she stepped back and watched as he turned away from her and entered the Gulag. The restaurant's glass door swung shut behind him.

The Gulag was brightly lit to obliterate any trace of ambiance which might induce the patrons to linger over their food. *Eat and get out!* said the overhead fluorescent lights. The strong aroma of coffee dominated the single room, riding over the stale odors of bygone meals.

J. L. Quinn threaded his way through tables of tired conversations and the quiet islands of solitary book readers. A cockroach ran for its life across the cracked linoleum in advance of the man's handmade shoes. Quinn sat down at his regular table, a small square of Formica in company with two plastic chairs.

Few people knew that he frequented this place. Those few had often pressed him with variations of "Why in God's name would you eat in a hole like that?" The famed art critic always responded with high praise for the cheeseburgers. *This* from a man who had authored four books on fine art, whose suits were tailored by maestros, and whose moustache never trapped crumbs.

He glanced at his watch. Detective Sergeant Riker would be arriving soon. Riker's urgent business could only be the recent murder of that hack artist—and this made him smile. The police department was so right to suspect an art critic. In his youth, Quinn had taken a postulant's vow to kill off bad art before it could spread.

Near his table at the back of the room, a long countertop bore the ravages of the last shift of rush hour in the deserted dishes and crumpled napkins. The two men seated on counter stools were not regulars, and unlike the other patrons, they eyed him with grave suspicion. In unison, they bulked up their shoulders to make themselves larger than they were. By the warehouse logos on their T-shirts, Quinn guessed their vocations as manual labor, and in their expressions, he intuited avocations of mindless violence.

Out of habit, the art critic touched one finger to the scar above his moustache. The two customers abruptly ceased to ogle the man who smelled of money. They swiveled on the counter stools to turn their backs on him. Quinn flirted with the idea that his scar had the power of a talisman. This was the single fanciful thought in his otherwise pragmatic mind.

His regular waitress was standing at the next table, piling dirty dishes on a tray. She saw him nod and walked to his table to take his order. He noted all the signs of the long day's warfare in the food stains on her clothes. The blue-jean legs below the hem of her apron were stained with an artist's rainbow of oil paints.

"I'm waiting for someone, Sandy. Will you give me a few minutes?"

"Whenever, Mr. Quinn."

She was his type, attractive and intelligent, but she was a painter. He had never bedded an artist, though not for the lack of offers. A sense of ethics had always prevailed and prevented any forays into the art community. There were women enough elsewhere when he wanted one.

Sandy deposited a second menu on his table as she passed by with her tray artfully balanced on one arm. "For your friend," she called back over her shoulder.

He glanced at the door. Detective Sergeant Riker had arrived.

Though more than a decade had passed since they last met, Quinn recognized the man's slouching silhouette on the other side of the glass, which was too fogged with grime and scratches to allow for much more detail.

Sandy was already appraising Riker as he pushed through the door, and by the dip of her mouth on one side, the waitress judged him to be a bad tipper. Her eyes opened a little wider as the man with two days' growth of beard walked to Quinn's table and the art critic stood up to greet his guest.

At fifty-five, Riker was not much older than himself, but Quinn thought the detective wore his years less well, and certainly with less style. He would not have been surprised to learn that Riker was dressed in the same suit he had on twelve years ago when they had sat down to this same table to discuss a more personal murder.

As Riker shook hands with Quinn, there was a tone of apology in the rituals of "Hello" and "Good to see you again." There was great regret in the detective's brown eyes as he took his seat opposite the art critic.

One might believe Sergeant Riker's suit had been slept in. Not true. The wrinkles were determined by the way the garments landed when tossed onto some piece of furniture or, missing that mark, the floor. And the network of red veins might mislead anyone who didn't know how red his eyes could be when he was living in the bottle. This evening he was only showing the wear of a night without sleep, and the heavy reading of old case files.

"Thanks for seeing me on short notice, Mr. Quinn." He noted the art critic's tan, a side effect of having a summer home in the Hamptons. Quinn's glowing good health and trim figure fit well with Riker's idea that money could buy absolutely everything. Now he caught his own pasty, dregs-of-the-booze reflection in the mirror behind the counter, and he turned away.

"I assume your visit concerns the death of Dean Starr," said Quinn in his cultured voice, which exuded breeding and a privileged education at the finest private schools on the eastern seaboard.

"Yes, sir, it does," Riker said, with a rough New York accent that spoke of a night school education paid for by blue-collar jobs. The policeman looked down at his hands. The left was scarred with a bullet wound, and the right still bore the marks of a felon's teeth. He knew these hands could never, in one million years, touch the cool fair skin of the women Quinn was accustomed to.

Riker had always understood the art critic's attraction to the Gulag. This place was Quinn's source of women, the rare animals with beauty and talent. He had to trap them in their natural habitat of poverty, and the restaurant was a low-budget haven for actresses and writers.

"Mr. Quinn, did you read Andrew Bliss's column yesterday?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

Riker pulled a folded newspaper clipping from his inside pocket. "I'll cut to the best part." He held it at arm's length and read with the squint of a man who would not wear reading glasses. " 'The new art wave was first heralded by the graffiti artist who defiled the city walls—artist attacks architecture. Then it progressed to the vandal artist who scarred the work of others—artist attacks art. And now we see a further escalation in the performance-art murder of Dean Starr—artist attacks artist. This is the new wave-full-blown now—Art Terrorism.' " Riker spread the clipping out on the table and looked up at Quinn.

“It’s absurd, of course,” said Quinn, “but quite interesting if you know Andrew. Have you met him?”

“No, I left messages for him, but he never called back. I’m gonna try to catch up with him at Starr’s wake.”

The art critic’s handsome face had hardly aged since their last meeting. There were no deep lines about the eyes to say the man had ever laughed out loud. Quinn had a limited range of expression, devoid of emotion even when he smiled, only communicating cool indifference and elan. Riker might be the only man alive who had ever seen him cry. And that had been an eerie sight—tears falling from his dispassionate, ice-blue eyes.

“Mr. Quinn, do you see a direct connection between Dean Starr’s death and an artist?”

And maybe another connection, an old connection?

“Not really,” said Quinn. “I suppose you could call the murder performance art, but it wasn’t very sophisticated—labeling the body that way. You wouldn’t actually have to go to school to do a thing like that.”

“You said if I knew Andrew—”

“Well, it’s interesting that Andrew Bliss would do anything this progressive on his own. He usually follows some other critic’s lead. Naming a new wave in art—that’s pretty daring. It might be the most courageous thing he’s ever done, however misguided and ridiculous.” Quinn pointed to the clipping. “May I?”

Riker turned the paper around and pushed it to the other side of the table. Quinn ran one finger down the lines of type, reading rapidly. Riker wondered if he did not detect relief in Quinn for what he had *not* found in Bliss’s column.

“It’s a bit of a stretch,” said Quinn, “from vandalism to murder.”

Riker leaned back in his chair. He could not shake the old memory of the night J. L. Quinn had cried. Riker had given the art critic shelter in the back of a squad car and kept guard over the crying man until Quinn was in control of himself again. Tonight, Riker was debating whether or not to prepare him for what was coming. Could he afford that?

No, he could not.

Inspector Louis Markowitz could have kept pace with Quinn, but the old man was dead, and Riker had drunk away too much of his own store of brain cells. He needed an edge in dealing with this man. He put his compassion away and proceeded like the good cop that he was.

“Would you take a look at this?” Riker pulled a plastic bag from his pocket and slid it across the table. Inside was a letter, neatly typed and unsigned. “Don’t take it out of the bag—it’s evidence.”

Quinn silently read the text which Riker knew by heart: ‘There is a direct link between Dean Starr and the old murders of the artist and the dancer. Twelve years ago, you knew that Oren Watt’s confession was a fraud.’

Riker reached across the table to tap the plastic bag with one finger. “Someone sent a clipping of Bliss’s column to Special Crimes Section, along with this letter.”

If Quinn was jarred by this reminder of his young niece’s murder, he gave away nothing, not even by the lift of an eyebrow. “I would have thought Koozeman was the obvious connection, since all three murders were done in his gallery. Are you really taking this letter seriously?”

Riker nodded. “The envelope was addressed to me. Not too many people would remember the name of a case detective on a twelve-year-old homicide. And the writer thinks Oren Watt’s confession was fake. Would you say that indicates an inside view?”

The art critic lit a cigarette with steady hands, and no waver in the flame. “You’re reopening the old

case?”

“It was never officially closed.” Riker fumbled in his pockets for a pack of cigarettes, and then a second thought stopped him. His own hands were not so steady before that first drink of an evening. He had missed his breakfast beer and worked straight through his lunch beer. “Markowitz never believed Oren Watt was the killer. And as I recall, sir, neither did you.”

Still no response from Quinn. The man seemed bored by it all. What the hell was going on behind that mask?

“Both killings had the same method,” said Riker, “if you consider the old double homicide a performance art. Do you? The body parts in the first—”

“The bodies were arranged as artwork,” said Quinn behind a haze of curling blue smoke. “I see the association, but I don’t know that it’s a strong one.”

“Well, a killer has his own style. It’s what we call his MO—*modus operandi*. Now Andrew Bliss is saying an artist killed Dean Starr. Could he be right? Could you call this an artist’s style, the way the murder was done?”

Quinn’s eyes followed the twisting plume of smoke. “The majority of artists in this town are mediocre hacks. Most of them have no style at all.”

“Did you send that letter, Mr. Quinn? You see, twelve years ago, everyone was so sure we had the right man. It was such an ugly murder—everyone in this town wanted to believe Oren Watt did it—except Markowitz and you.”

“Sorry, Sergeant. I didn’t write that letter.”

“Do you know anyone else who thought Watt’s confession was a fake?”

“Aubry’s father, for instance? No. My brother-in-law believed Oren Watt was the killer. He was rather unhappy when Watt’s psychiatrist started hawking drawings of his child’s body parts. But he’s gotten on with his life. When Watt was released last year, Gregor never even commented on it.”

“Mr. Quinn, I need to identify the new player, the one who wrote this letter. What about Aubry’s mother, Sabra? Do you know where we can find her?”

“No idea. I haven’t seen my sister in years.” His eyes ceased to follow the smoke and suddenly locked onto Riker’s. He leaned forward. “*You always* believed Oren Watt killed my niece. Have you ever questioned him about Dean Starr’s murder?”

“No.”

“Interesting. And what about Koozeman?”

“I haven’t even talked to him. I have a direct order to stay away from the principals in the old case. And I’d appreciate it if you’d keep this conversation to yourself.”

“Understood, Sergeant.” As Quinn sat back in his chair, his eyes never leaving Riker’s face, it was clear that he understood on many levels. If the wrong man had been sent to the asylum, if the butcher had been at large all this time ...

Riker lowered his eyes to keep Quinn from dicking around in his mind. “I just follow orders, sir. I’m only a working stiff.”

“I suspect you’re much more than that. Markowitz thought very highly of you.”

Riker studied his hands. If Markowitz had such a high opinion, why hadn’t the old bastard shared more of the case? *Ah, Markowitz, always holding something back, even holding out on his own men.*

Riker retrieved the plastic evidence bag and held it up to Quinn. “This letter says there’s a link between Starr and the old murders. I need that link.”

Quinn was silent, eyes drifting to that place beyond focus where the thinking is done. Then he waved one hand to show that he had come up empty of possibilities.

Riker looked at his wristwatch, and reset it to the time of the wall clock. He pulled a small notebook and a pen from his shirt pocket. “Just for the record, sir ...” Every move, every word conveyed the tired resignation of end-game. Riker’s eyes were cast down as his pen hovered over the open notebook. Then he looked up at Quinn, with the pretense of an afterthought. “What if Oren Watt was the wrong man? Suppose Dean Starr was the one who slaughtered your niece? Oh, Christ, the things he did to her. ‘Slaughter’ is the only right word for it, isn’t it, sir? Who could blame you if you stabbed the sick bastard with an ice pick?”

Riker waited on a sign of damage from his salvo, some emotional disturbance in Quinn. Had Quinn been hoping for fresh tears? No, he never wanted to see a sight like that one again. But there should be something—jangled nerves, if not tears—and there was not. He had just bludgeoned this man with the worst memory of his life, and all for nothing.

The art critic wore the trace of a smile, as if to say he understood and there were no hard feelings. Then he absently touched one finger to the scar above his moustache.

The Koozeman Gallery had the proportions of a modest gymnasium. High bare walls glistened with the sheen of a recent whitewash. The floors had been waxed and now were beaded with the spilled wine of reporters.

The press corps was feeding by the back wall on the far side of Dean Starr’s coffin. Mountains of food were laid out at long tables and lit by ceiling track lights, as though the Fourth Estate might even have trouble locating the staples of caviar, smoked salmon, and a spectacular array of strange but edible objects skewered on tooth-picks. Glasses were filled by gallery boys in bow ties, black pants, and starched white shirts. They passed among the throng of reporters, carrying magical, inexhaustible wine bottles. The tone of the babble was jovial, all liquored up for the show.

The night’s main attraction sat on a long pedestal at the center of the large room. The white coffin of wood was covered with four-letter words and bad drawings of obscene gestures. One small and gangly man stood behind a lectern near the casket. He seemed too young for vestment and a clerical collar. Horn-rimmed glasses greatly magnified his eyes. His gaze was fixed on the bare surface of the lectern as he tried to pretend this funeral service was not odd and unseemly, even by New York standards.

Rows of empty benches were lined up in the staggered height of bleachers at a sporting event, and in this, J. L. Quinn pointed out to Sergeant Riker, was not far from reality. The art critic and the detective nodded to the little minister as they approached the coffin together.

“Oh, sweet Jesus,” said Riker, as he looked over the scrawled writing on the white wood, and then he walked around it to read all the obscene words on the other side. “Damn kids.”

“Oh, no,” said the critic. “You don’t understand. This is art. See?” He pointed to the lower right-hand corner of the coffin. “That’s the vandal artist’s signature. You might recall the name from Andrew Bliss’s column. Later on, they’ll dump Starr’s body into a pine box and auction off this one.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“No, I can’t do that. I have no sense of humor.”

Riker looked down on the remains of Dean Starr. “Pretty messy corpse.”

Quinn leaned over the edge of the casket to study the face of moles and pockmarks, the thickened body straining at the buttons of a purple leather jacket, thighs threatening to split the green leather pants, creating the illusion of life in the stress of dead cow’s hide.

“Actually Starr looked about the same when he was alive,” said Quinn. “I would’ve expected an autopsy to do more damage.”

“Well, the chief medical examiner was out of town, so we got the discount version. That’s why my partner’s picking up the paperwork to have the autopsy done over. So the guy was always that ugly? His hair supposed to look like that?”

“Yes. It’s a neo-Mohawk. They had to trim the spikes to fit the coffin. You’re not really getting the full effect.”

“But this is no punk kid. This guy’s gotta be what?”

“Fifty-two years old.”

They took their seats in the bleachers, sitting front row center and facing the remains of Dean Starr. Beyond the coffin were twenty feet of empty space and a pure white wall. A few people, clutching black-bordered invitations, filed past the deceased. Their heads turned briefly to look at the carnage at the food tables by the back wall. Perhaps deciding the refreshments were not worth the battle, they chose seats in the middle rows.

Riker’s head swiveled slightly to admire a passing wine bottle in the hand of a gallery boy. He turned back to the white wall and sucked in his breath as he recognized Avril Koozeman, the gallery owner, a bald, heavysset man in a dark suit.

What the hell?

Koozeman had suddenly appeared at the center of the blank wall beyond the coffin.

Where did he come from?

Koozeman was walking toward the coffin with enough momentum to suggest to Riker’s crackling brain that the man had just walked through that solid wall. Now the detective was torn between giving up drink and the longing for a triple shot of whiskey to make this idea go away.

As the gallery owner came closer, Riker focussed on Avril Koozeman’s small, regular features, an ordinary face but for the black, unruly eyebrows tangling above his small gray eyes. The man carried his bulk in a way that alluded more to prosperity than to overeating. Koozeman leaned over the coffin and stared at the corpse for a moment. His expression was inappropriately cheerful.

Riker took out his notebook and leafed through it, as he leaned closer to Quinn. “He owned a piece of the dead artist, right?”

“Yes, fifty percent of all sales.”

Koozeman walked to the bleachers and smiled benignly on Quinn, who nodded in reply. The large man snapped his fingers and two gallery boys ran up to him with trays of wineglasses in three of Riker’s favorite colors: red, pink and white. Riker accepted a glass, following Quinn’s lead and choosing the red. Koozeman was still smiling as he turned and walked over to the feeding frenzy on the far side of the room.

Riker shook his head. “I don’t get it. Starr was a real moneymaker for Koozeman, wasn’t he? Why do you call a hot property?”

“The hottest,” said Quinn, tasting the wine and approving it.

“So why is he smiling?”

“Well, he has an inventory of work. After Starr died, Koozeman raised the price two hundred percent. Of course he’s smiling.”

And now, another man, slender and slow-footed, made a more ordinary entrance, not emerging from behind a wall, but by the more conventional front door. An escaped shock of light brown hair hung over one eye, and his tie had gone awry, but otherwise, his well-styled clothes put him in the same species as L. Quinn. He seemed to drift toward the coffin by accident. In a confusion of manners, he sighed at the little minister and waved to the corpse.

Riker was watching the man and flipping through his notebook. “Should I know that guy?”

“That’s Andrew Bliss,” said Quinn. “The art critic who wrote the review on Starr’s death.”

“Not one of your favorite critics?” Riker made a note.

“Actually, he writes very well, but he always waits until the other reviews are in, and then he goes whichever way the wind blows. That’s why his last column was so unusual.”

Riker found the background sketch in his notebook. According to the bio, Andrew Bliss was forty-eight years old, but the detective was looking at the face of a boy. This illusion was helped by Bliss’s large blue eyes and full lips. Riker felt suddenly uncomfortable. Old children were wrong in the world.

“And how did Mr. Bliss feel about the dead artist? Was he—”

Conversation broke off as a gallery boy replenished Riker’s wine. He looked down at his glass, and Quinn smiled at him.

“It’s because you’re with a critic. The boy won’t allow your glass to go even half-empty. He could be fired for that.”

Riker stared into his wine and wondered how his own religion would square with the gallery’s philosophy, for he believed it was a sin to allow a glass to remain half-full.

He looked back to the second row where Andrew Bliss was seated. And now Riker noticed that Bliss’s gray hairs were fast overtaking the light brown. As he stared at the man with the young face and the old hair, Riker noticed the reddened nose. Broken veins? The slackness of the jaw, the slow-moving eye which was not obscured by strands of hair, all were familiar signs he remembered from his own shaving mirror.

So Andrew Bliss was a drunk.

“How did Bliss and Starr get along?” He chugged back his wine, and in sidelong vision, he saw the gallery boy snap to attention.

“Hard to say,” said Quinn. “I only saw them together one time. Andrew seemed a bit tense at the gallery opening.”

“You didn’t tell me you were at the gallery that night.”

“Ah, but you knew, didn’t you, Riker? I’m not exactly a low-profile guest at a function like that. And now you want to know if I was there when he died. Do you know the exact time of death?”

“The jerk who screwed up the autopsy didn’t get the stomach contents. We know he was alive at seven-thirty, and the security guard found the body at ten-fifteen.”

The gallery boy was back and weighting down Riker’s glass again.

“I was there until eight o’clock,” said Quinn. “I never saw anything suspicious, unless you count the artwork.”

Riker tipped back his glass, the sooner to forget Koozeman’s walk through the solid wall. He might need reading glasses, he would cop to that, but there was nothing wrong with his long-distance vision. And what about the myopic hundred guests at the Dean Starr show? “I still can’t believe Starr got stabbed in a room full of people and nobody saw it.”

“Well, Koozeman’s patrons are a rather self-absorbed group,” said Quinn.

The reporters were being led away from the feeding tables by Avril Koozeman. He was flanked by gallery boys holding wine bottles as lures. Bearing full glasses and paper plates filled to overflowing, the ladies and gentlemen of the news media settled into the remaining seats.

One rowdy press photographer in the back row yelled, “Bring on the noise!”

The minister cleared his throat, and tapped the microphone on the lectern.

Riker was feeling the ten cups of coffee drunk before all the wine was slugged back. Seeing no sign of a can with familiar men’s room symbols, he pressed his legs together as he leaned close to Quinn and whispered, “So where is the can?”

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