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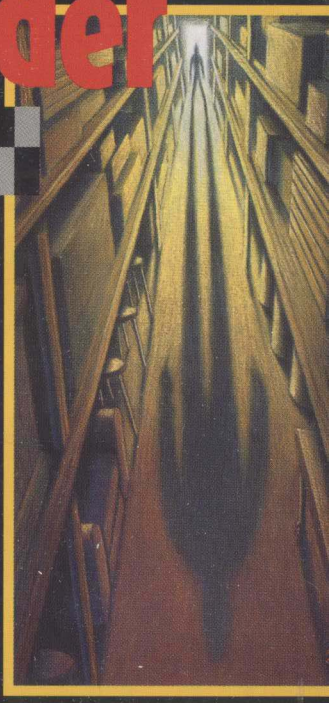
Furnished for Murder



Someone evens the score with a suburban music teacher....

ICHARD BARTH

hor of One Dollar Death

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FURNISHED FOR MURDER

Richard Barth

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One

LEO PERKINS HEARD THE SOFT FLUTTER OF wings before he actually saw the first greenhead flying low over the cornfield. The bird braked in that semicomical way of leaning against the direction of flight and laid out its webbed landing gear in front of it. The water of the little pond at the edge of the cornfield rippled with the impact and then subsided. The duck looked around, apparently was pleased at its choice of location, then darted its head under the water for its lunch.

Leo was chilled to the bone and wondering what in hell a forty-five-year-old suburbanite was doing out on some farmer's back sixty acres rather than in his own heated living room watching the Giants. Early November was for analyzing the success of earlier draft choices and midseason position realignments, not for discussions on the correct load of ten-gauge No. 2s for the three-and-a-half-inch shotgun shells. Besides, ballistics was an issue Leo had no ideas about, this being his first time hunting ducks. Full choke, partial choke . . . who knew? He did what he was instructed to do by his friend Sollie and lay down on the frosted earth and waited quietly. For a man six foot three inches, two hundred and five pounds big, lying quietly was not easy. Between the dozen little stones pushing against his body and the broken corn stubble impaling him, Leo was uncomfortable. So much for the joys of camaraderie, he thought.

The two men were lying in the stubble of the cornfield five yards away from the edge of the pond. Sollie's quivering dog,

Bonaparte, was between them. Leo nudged Sollie with his toe and indicated the mallard, the first of the morning.

Sollie motioned with his hand to wait. Leo had no idea what for. His fingers were freezing and the sooner he got his duck and got back in the car, the better. There had to be a place to get coffee nearby. Forty-five minutes lying prone on the cold ground was about his limit.

The orange-legged Canadian greenhead bobbing in the water was a big duck, fully plumed and with a layer of fat that was supposed to make eating it a delight, but Leo supposed the appearance of one bird meant more were on their way. He grimaced and tried to shift into a more comfortable position. Sollie frowned at him and put a finger up to his lips. Damn, Leo thought, working his frozen fingers back and forth to get the blood flowing. Capiletti's Meat Market in Harrison would have been easier.

The two men raised their heads slightly at the sound of a distant whir of wings. Within eight minutes another half dozen birds had landed, and the small pond began to look like a carnival target booth. Still Sollie waited. He knew the promise of floating scrap corn kernels and the security of brother mallards would bring in another dozen birds. The problem was with Bonaparte. The Brittany spaniel by their side was more accustomed to suburban Westchester than the fields of Schoharie County, and there was no telling how long he could contain his baser instinct to pounce. After five more of the big curly-tailed birds landed on the pond, Sollie started to crawl into a better firing position. The birds were unaware of the two men so close by in the corn stubble. Ten seconds maybe, and Sollie would give the signal.

But suddenly, through the deathly silence, the sharp noise of a watch alarm intruded, and the dozen birds shot up as though the surface of the pond had suddenly turned into a skillet. Sollie cursed and took five precious seconds to stand up and get into position with his shotgun to his shoulder. Leo jumped up also and started yanking the trigger.

"God damn that alarm," Sollie cursed, and tried to hit a duck that was ten yards farther away than it should have been. He missed, missed with the second barrel, and bent quickly

to reload. Leo fired at one farther away. He watched in surprise as it stopped flapping its wings as though its battery had been turned off and tumbled headfirst back into the pond. His second shot went wide of a bird that had made it past the treetops. Two more shots rang out from Leo's left, and Sollie shouted delightedly as one of them found a bird that was forty yards away. They both reloaded, but by the time they brought their guns up again, the sky around them was empty. The Brittany spaniel, being more of a flusher than a retriever, hesitated to go into the cold water for the first duck, but Sollie urged him on. The drake floated, an oily rag in a foam of feathers. In a minute it was lying at Sollie's feet and Bonaparte was shaking himself off. Then the dog took off for the bird slapped out of the sky by Sollie's load of heavy, half-choked shot. The smell of cordite lingered over the field as the dog came back. After dropping the second bird next to the first, he stood waiting for the praise he knew he was due. His owner patted him once, then turned around and went over to Leo with a look that was not meant to ingratiate. "What the hell was that noise?" he growled.

Leo looked sheepish. "My watch. Little alarm goes off every hour."

Sollie shook his head as he looked down at the two birds. "Could have had us a half dozen easy," he said. "Next time turn the goddamn thing off."

Leo nodded but thought sure as hell there wasn't going to be a next time. The sight of the little bird sagging out of the sky bit his memory.

Two

THE RIVETZ FURNITURE STORE WHERE LEO and Sollie were employed was located off Mamaroneck Avenue in White Plains. It encompassed more than fifty thousand square feet of display area with an additional one hundred thousand square feet of warehouse facility. Inside this vast arena was just about every conceivable article of furniture, every current swatch of fabric or leather to upholster these items in, enough chrome and glass to re-create the New York Pavilion at the '64 World's Fair, and enough wood to provide paper for a week's worth of *National Enquirer*s. This was a furniture supermarket, the embodiment of a marketing concept to rival Henry Ford's revolutionary notions about manufacturing. While there were acres of merchandise in styles ranging from pre-Greco/Roman to postmodern, the heaviest concentration had an Italian influence. Turning a Westchester house into something resembling an eighteenth-century Tuscan loggia would have been a piece of cake for the professionals at the store. "Rivetz Has It" was the motto emblazoned above the entire complex and repeated a mind-searing fifty times a day on local TV and radio stations. And if, by chance, Rivetz didn't have it on the floor, then there was always the warehouse, which was, in the words of their best publicist, a vast playground for the discriminating buyer.

This "playground" was in a building the size of three football fields and seventy feet tall, set on a concrete pad with industrial steel shelves reaching from floor to ceiling. These shelves were broken into compartments, each capable

of containing a small car, but instead holding a couch, or a dining table, or a Barcalounger, or some other article of furniture. Row upon row of varnished or upholstered items trapped in large cages. The Alcatraz of furniture stores. And moving up and down these aisles were heavy-duty forklift trucks to reach up the fifty or so feet and pluck down the three-cushion, pleated-skirt, sloped-back sleeper sofa with the burgundy flame-stitch pattern . . . just like the lady ordered. An observer felt like an ant in a doll house. The Rivetz salesmen knew their merchandise and sold it with a passion befitting men on a 5 percent draw—all, that is, except Leo Perkins, who had found that whatever he did, he still took home the same five hundred and change a week. The way he figured it, people were going to buy when they were ready, and there was not much a salesman could do to convince someone that what she really needed was a whole new dining-room set if she just came in for a replacement chair. No way in hell, so he just waited at the order desk and responded politely when a customer asked for assistance.

Leo Perkins was in Dining Rooms and happy to be there. It gave you a chance to get some reading done, unlike Bedding where Sollie worked, or Lighting where Hanley was. Those places were always jumping. From any sales analysis, you'd think all people did was wear out their mattresses screwing and then turn around and throw lamps at each other. Anyway, one large dining-room ensemble added up to a gross of wall sconces. Not that he hadn't tried other things . . . like last year's flirtation with Children's Furniture. But one week was all he could take, the way those women came in with specifications for their kids' desks. They called them "work stations"; you'd think each one was harboring a little Einstein.

Orantes came up to Leo and motioned to his watch. The little sonofabitch, Leo thought. Exercising the rights of his office like some goddamn little colonel. Orantes was section head over Dining Rooms, Lighting, and Carpets. His job was to monitor sales, give pep talks, rearrange the displays, set the holiday schedules, but more important, tell his people when to go to lunch. For this he got a guaranteed forty grand

a year, and he didn't have to sell so much as a prayer rug. A college grad, no less. Four years, so he can tell me when it's twelve-thirty.

Leo put on his jacket, slipped the brown bag with his tuna-fish sandwich out of the drawer where he was sitting, and headed toward the little room set out back for employee lunches. What with all the millions of dollars worth of furniture out front, it was a cruel joke that the decor of the lunchroom was strictly linoleum and cracked vinyl. But Leo liked the lunchroom, since he had forty-five minutes to talk with his friends and maybe even get in a quick game of chess.

Hanley grinned at him as he entered. The two men had a shared distaste for Orantes and both owned houses in Harrison. Paul Hanley was short, with a lean jogger's body, thinning red hair, and a face that had enough lines on it to make him look ten years older than his forty-two. Leo was much taller at six foot three and also prided himself on staying in shape by using a home rowing machine that Barbara had bought for his last birthday. A boat on the Sound would have been better, but how could you beat $95.98 including instruction manual?

Hanley pointed to the seat next to him. "Care to dine with me?"

"If you don't mind sitting down with a guy who hasn't had a sale all morning," Leo said. "I might get nasty." He slumped next to his friend and withdrew the sandwich. He looked at it for a moment without moving. "Sollie tell you about the hunt?" he asked.

"Yeah. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I think that's the last invitation you'll get." Hanley took a bite of his own sandwich. "Well, I think you still got an open invitation at the poker game. We're on this Friday."

Leo shook his head. "You know that's not my game."

"I don't know why you got to go to that dump, McArdle's, every Friday night," Hanley said. "We could use an extra hand."

"Get Orantes," Leo said with a smile.

"Fuck Orantes, that asshole ain't getting inside my door. You know what he did to Collins last week? Made him stay

late dusting the tops of the track lights. Now, who the fuck looks up on the top of the track lights?'' Hanley leaned back. ''The guy's a real jerk.''

''You want coffee?'' Leo asked.

''Yeah, light and sweet. That machine doesn't know from regular.'' He flipped fifty cents onto the table and Leo took it on his way to the back of the room. When he came back Hanley had the paper open and was looking through the sports section. Sollie spotted the two of them as he walked in and came over.

''You believe those Jets . . . those idiots,'' Sollie said. ''Two screen passes for interceptions . . . against the Bills no less.'' He rolled his eyes. ''It's a good thing we weren't near a TV yesterday. I would have died.''

''I think I'm going back to watching college ball,'' Hanley said. ''I can't wait until baseball season.''

''What, so the Mets can break your heart again?'' Leo said.

''Hey, you're forgetting '86.''

''They just did that to set you guys up for seven more years of anguish. Stick with the Yankees . . . no illusions.'' Leo took a sip of his coffee and made a face. ''That machine doesn't know from coffee, period.''

''So,'' Sollie asked, ''any sales this morning?''

Leo shook his head. ''It's been quiet.''

''Wait 'til you hear this one.'' Sollie leaned forward and his face took on an impish grin.

''Mrs. Williams comes in from Scarsdale, gotta be eighty if she's a day . . . Very proper, very grandmotherly . . . nice clothes. The guy she's with is under his own steam, but just barely, he's got a cane and sits down on every flat surface he can find. So she asks about the special on the Sealy Posturepedic XP50 that we've been running in all the papers. You know, two twins for the price of one on that load of mattresses in the warehouse we overbought. Mrs. Williams wants to know if she can get the Sealy King, the XY10, for half-price also. I explain the deal to her and she just shakes her head. 'I need a king,' she says. So how about you buy the two twins and put them together, I tell her. Same size. Re-

member now she's gotta be over eighty. She leans closer and lowers her voice. 'I wouldn't want Herman worrying about getting caught in the crack coming over,' she says.'' Sollie leaned back. ''Now how do you like that?''

The two other men applauded.

''How old you figure Herman is?'' Paul asked.

''Ninety easy,'' Sollie said. ''He should be giving seminars.''

''Christ, why didn't I marry a Mrs. Williams,'' Hanley said and shook his head. ''Seems like all the active women are under twenty-five or over seventy-five.''

''So wait five years,'' Leo added. ''Herman can't last too much longer and then she'll be available.''

''Thanks,'' Hanley said and slapped the newspaper open.

''Don't take it personally,'' Sollie said. ''I don't suppose any of us got a Mrs. Williams at home.'' He looked over at Leo and smirked. ''Or what?''

Leo looked him square in the face and said with mock dignity, ''There are other things in life equally as important as good sex. Good sandwiches, for instance.'' Their explosion of laughter made some of the men at the surrounding tables look over at them. Hanley took another bite of his food and went back to his paper. After a minute he shook his head.

''Christ, every day I thank the Lord I moved out of Queens. Here's a story about a high-school science teacher in Astoria that was busted for abusing one of the kids in his lab.''

''Showing her some new jean-splitting experiment, I suppose,'' Sollie said with a grin.

''What, it's a garden of Eden up here in Westchester?'' Leo asked. ''What about all the drugs in the high schools?''

''It's all the black kids,'' Hanley offered.

''Don't fool yourself,'' Leo said. ''There's more drugs in the Scarsdale high-school parking lot than at Pathmark. Amanda's only twelve and she knows what's going on, and that's in Harrison, not Scarsdale. Harrison kids' allowances don't rival the GNP of a small African nation.''

''At least it's clean everywhere,'' Sollie said. ''You been to the city lately?''

''With the taxes I pay on my crummy split level they could

sponge and talcum the streets of Harrison every night, for Chrissake." Leo took a swallow of his coffee and sat back.

"Don't mind Leo," Hanley said. "He's in one of his knock Westchester moods." He motioned to his temple. "Happens every time there's a full moon."

"Which is hard enough to see through all the pollution," Leo said. "What kind of a place is this?"

"The kind of place you can get all sorts of private lessons for your kids. Sarah's jealous of all the things the other kids are doing," Hanley said. "She even mentioned your Amanda and her piano lessons. I get it twice a night, coming and going."

Leo shook his head. "If I had my way I'd rather see Amanda concentrate more on her homework. But Barbara thinks that other stuff makes her more 'well rounded,' whatever that means."

"As far as I can tell, 'well rounded' means a kid with a father who's into a second mortgage," Hanley said. "Or am I wrong?"

Leo smiled. "Something like that. Seriously though, you never thought of Florida . . . maybe Texas? If only to get away from Orantes. There's a Rivetz in Tampa and one in Fort Pierce."

"You're kidding," Sollie said. "Where'd I go hunting?"

"Crocodiles," Leo said. "Or maybe you'd take up fishing."

Sollie laughed. "Can you see the look on Bonaparte's face when he dives into the water and comes up with a 'gator?" He took a bite of his sandwich and shook his head. "Maybe you're young enough to change, but not me, not my dog, and certainly not my Alice."

"Yeah, it's always the wives," Leo said disgustedly. "But that doesn't mean you gotta stop trying."

"In your case," Hanley said, "I think it does."

Three

BARBARA PERKINS WAS FIDDLING WITH the begonias when the doorbell rang. She looked at her watch, made a mental note that Harmon Parrish was right on schedule again, and headed for the front door. He had arrived that afternoon dressed once again in his soft Missoni sweater and Armani double-pleated pants. Harmon Parrish, the well-known pianist, winner of numerous local and statewide competitions, the 1968 Bogardus Fellow in European music, and a fixture in Westchester recital halls for more than two decades, had arrived for his afternoon lesson with Amanda. Barbara stood aside to let him in.

At fifty-two, Parrish moved with the light step of a much younger man. He was of average height, with a physique that hadn't changed in years. His face seemed unlined and the only giveaway of his age was the shock of white hair that outshone Toscanini's. His were the kind of looks that made other men uneasy; that hair, symbol of old age, set upon a vibrant, almost youthful, face. It was unsettling. But the women loved it. It gave him presence, ratified his status as a musician and an "artist," and made him different from their workaday husbands with their buttoned-down, pinstripe wardrobes. Harmon brought an air of sophistication to the houses where he taught. There certainly were other piano teachers in Westchester, middle-aged women and younger musicians still working on their curriculum vitaes, but few had as busy a schedule or charged quite as much. But then he was Harmon Parrish, and the thirty-five dollars bought

not only his incomparable skills for forty-five minutes, but also snob appeal. Most of Harmon's students were the little rich kids of Westchester and lower Connecticut, the ones whose parents lived in large houses with sloping manicured lawns. If Harmon Parrish wasn't the best, he certainly worked hard at giving that impression. Getting his Tuesday three-thirty time slot had been Barbara's biggest coup of 1989 and one she guarded zealously through all the arguments with Leo about the incredible expense. Harmon had explained that he usually didn't teach in Harrison but that in fact it was on a direct route between an earlier appointment in Larchmont and one in Greenwich. "Aren't you lucky," he had announced at their first meeting over half a year ago. And he was being modest.

The piano teacher moved without hesitation into the living room and sat down on the sofa. He watched Barbara carefully as she came nearer. The clock on the mantelpiece read three-ten, so they'd have to hurry. In fifteen minutes Amanda would be home on the bus. He held his hand out and motioned for Barbara to sit next to him. She rubbed her hands to get off the vermiculite from the begonias, then sat down.

"I have to tell you something, Harmon," she began. "It can't go on like last week. That was too painful."

"I know, sweetheart," he said. "Your problem is that you let yourself get carried away. That's always dangerous. Moderation . . . that's the name of the game."

"It's too hard for me sometimes. I can never get you at home, and you don't like me leaving those messages with your service. You only come here on Tuesdays . . ."

He shrugged. "Be happy I come here at all."

She gave him a black look.

"After all, before I came into your life you were bored silly in this little excuse of a house. What other excitement did you have?" He chuckled.

"Don't be nasty."

"I'm being realistic, sugar. Now both you and Amanda look forward to Tuesdays. What could be better?"

"I'm not so sure about Amanda."

"Yes, well, she's having trouble with the Mendelssohn."

He looked at his watch. "She'll be home in ten minutes, we'd better hurry." He bent over and reached into his briefcase, which contained the sheet music for his lessons. He pulled out a small envelope, removed the note from inside, and scanned it for a moment. "So now you're sending me letters?"

"Sometimes it's the only way I have to contact you."

He put the note back in casually with the music. "So you're willing to take a big risk this time." He smiled coyly. "How big?"

Barbara leaned over toward him. As she did she pulled out a fat envelope from a side pocket. "This much," she said.

"Good." Harmon Parrish smiled.

"If Leo knew he'd kill me." She hesitated only a second before handing it to him.

"Well, that's a lot better than if he took it into his head to kill me," the piano teacher said and slipped the envelope into the pocket of his Armani pants. "I hate violence. It's so . . . artless."

"No, No, NO! This section is *diminuendo*." Harmon threw his hand to his forehead. "It's not supposed to sound like a herd of elephants cavorting on the keyboard. Mendelssohn is subtlē, Amanda, subtle. Here . . ." Parrish played the section softly. "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" never sounded so romantic to Amanda's twelve-year-old ears before but she figured, if that's the way he wants it, that's the way he'll get it. She played the piece again, trying to lighten her touch on the keyboard. Christmas was still two months away, but she wanted to have at least two songs to perform before the junior high school assembly. After all, one year's worth of lessons should have more to show for it than "The Peanut Vendor" and "The Song of the Toad."

"Quarter note, then the half . . . slide them together, 'Peace on earth, and mercy mild' . . . like that. My dear, you're not trying."

Amanda felt like crying. Of course she was trying, but how could she do anything with him carping away like that? What a twit, she thought.

"Dum dum dum, softly, softly, da dum dum dummmm. That's it." He looked at his watch. "Ten of four. Time for your independent summary." He got up from the bench and stretched his arms behind him. Without hesitating he turned and walked out of the living room.

Thank God, Amanda thought. Seven minutes of peace. She played the section from the Mendelssohn carol over three times and then summarized the other small piece of music she had been learning. This was the best time for her. "Independent summary" was part of Parrish's teaching method, a seven-minute block when he left her alone to practice in private all that he had shown her during the lesson. This was supposed to bring out self-reliance and the ability to fine-tune oneself before a performance. When the independent summary was over Amanda knew she was going to have to play the two pieces for him flawlessly, but at least for seven minutes she wouldn't have him breathing down her neck and making twitty comments. Piano lessons . . . ugh, who needed them? She kept hoping that her father would win in the argument with her mother, but deep down in her heart she knew that it was hopeless. The only argument she ever saw her mother lose was with the usher at a Broadway play when it was discovered they had tickets for a week later. Well, it was a tradeoff. She liked the special attention at assemblies, so she just had to put up with Mr. Parrish and his sickly sweet after-shave lotion and his supercilious manners. Now there was a wonderful word. She was so glad she had learned it the week before. Super-silly-us Mr. Parrish. She tried the Mendelssohn piece once more just as he returned.

"Now Amanda. Concert performance time," he said and sat down in one of the armchairs in the living room. "Impress me."

"Now Constance. Concert performance time," he said and sat down in the Sapporiti cream-colored leather lounger. "Impress me." It was an hour later and Parrish was finishing up his Larchmont lesson with twelve-year-old Constance Eberhard. They were in the Eberhards' music room, one of

the more than fifteen rooms in the large, plantation-style estate. Mr. Eberhard, who had put this glorious life-style together, including the three full-time servants and a score of Impressionist and Renaissance paintings to soften the bold lines of the signature modern furniture, was not at home. He was only at home between the hours of eight in the evening and seven in the morning, at which latter time he was whisked away from the slumbering mansion by his chauffeur to travel once again to the city. Parrish understood that he did something with bonds, but what exactly or for whom was unclear. What was clear was that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Eberhard had the slightest interest in Constance's musical progress. But with the three servants tooting around, there was never a shortage of hands to open the door for Parrish when he rang, even if the Mr. and Mrs. were away on one of their trips.

The smell of money in the Eberhards' household was inescapable. Every surface had been labored over with great concern by some artisan, whether it was the hand-stitched leather of the furniture, the rubbed-wood joinery of the marquetry floor, or the intimate painting on the detailed finger molding. Everything was spotless, even the inside of the Steinway grand piano, which was vacuumed, Parrish was assured by the maid Theresa, once a day. Unfortunately, this didn't help Constance's playing at all. From out of the glistening Steinway came a noise that sounded more like the inside of a recycling plant than Beethoven's music.

The young girl hesitated four times in the first section of the minuet in G major. Parrish glanced out the alarm-wired window, past the two-acre back lawn to the bulkheading and the harbor beyond. The notes from the piano came at him in a seemingly random pattern bearing little relationship to the music as written, and Parrish wished he were somewhere else, maybe on the Eberhard sailboat bobbing at the dock, maybe back at the Perkinses', where at least Amanda could string a few notes together. But this was painful. Parrish held up his hand.

"Thank you, Constance. I think we have to stop for the day." He rose and patted the young girl on the shoulder.