



ALAN GRATZ

something

A Horatio Wilkes Mystery

rotten

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藏书章



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*To my middle school and high school
English teachers:*

*Tom Pettitt, John Tatgenhorst, Martha
Gill, Dale Norton, Warren Heiser, Neil
McMahon, and Mary Jo Potts—see? I
was listening.*

Special thanks to Liz Waniewski for drinking the water, Regina Castillo for letting me steal her joke, Jon Manchip White for teaching me the art of murder, Brian Winfrey for listening to me talk about Horatio for years, William Shakespeare and Raymond Chandler for their invaluable assistance, Wendi and Jo for their infinite patience and support, and teachers of English everywhere.

**“Something is rotten
in the state of Denmark”**

-HAMLET, Act 1, Scene IV

CHAPTER ONE



Denmark, Tennessee, stank. Bad. Like dead fish fricasseed in sewer water. I said as much to my friend Hamilton Prince as we rode in his 4x4.

“You get used to it,” he told me. “Just think of it as the smell of money.”

And here I had always thought money would smell better.

The Elsinore Paper Plant was the source of the stink, and the money behind the Prince family fortune. Elsinore makes the paper that you use in your printer, the paper you read the sports scores on, and the paper you wipe yourself with. They make just about every kind of paper there is except the kind money is printed on, but enough of that comes rolling back in that they don’t have to bother. It was also the first place Hamilton wanted to take me when I arrived in Denmark for my month-long summer visit. I wasn’t real excited to go watch paper being made, but Hamilton was looking for any excuse to get out of the house and I didn’t say no.

I nodded at an open beer in the cup holder. “One for the road?”

“It’s just one, and we’re not going far.” He nodded over his shoulder. “Root beer for you in the cooler.”

We hadn’t talked since I had called a week ago to see if my visit was still on, but Hamilton was quiet and I let him stew. He had a lot going on, what with his dad dead and his uncle marrying his mom and all. I wanted to ask about everything, but I didn’t want to push it.

A light drizzle kicked up outside, and Hamilton threw on the wipers as we turned down a little access road. A sign told me we were headed toward the Elsinore Paper Plant, but my nose could have told me just as well. The main complex was far enough away from Hamilton’s house that you couldn’t see it, but not far enough away that you couldn’t smell it. Maybe it was once, but not now. The paper plant had been owned and operated by Hamilton’s family for generations. His dad was CEO when he died, and now his uncle Claude ran the company. Someday Hamilton would run it too. I thought it must be nice to have a six-figure salary waiting, and I said so.

“I hate it,” said Hamilton. “It’s like a prison. My own personal prison.”

Hamilton’s always been a little on the melodramatic side. It was a song and dance I’d heard before and I’d never believed it, but the tone of his voice this time gave me second thoughts.

At first I thought it was a trick of the foggy windshield, but as we drove up to the security gate outside the plant I saw a girl standing by the road holding a sign. Her hair was flat from the rain and her face was smudged from wiping away the drizzle, but you could still tell she was gorgeous. Her Windbreaker broke in all the right places and her jeans hugged her in ways they don’t teach you in kindergarten. Hamilton pulled up beside her and ran the window down.

“What are you *doing*?” he asked her.

“Protesting.” She stuck her sign in his face. It said: “Elsinore Paper Poisons the Copenhagen River.”

“Give me a break,” Hamilton said.

“Denmark’s been giving you guys a break for a hundred years. It’s time for Elsinore to come clean. That river is so polluted, it would kill you to drink it.” The rain was coming a little harder now, but the girl was undaunted.

“Nobody’s going to see you here,” Hamilton told her.

She held her sign over her head to block the rain. “*You* saw me,” she said.

I liked this girl already. “Hey,” I called to her. I pulled off my dad’s old St. Louis ball cap and tossed it through the open window at her. She caught it with her free hand and didn’t let it fall into the mud, which I appreciated.

The girl pulled her hair back into a ponytail and slipped on the hat, and I saw I was wrong. She wasn’t gorgeous; she was stunning.

Her head now covered, the girl brought her sign back down in Hamilton’s face. He shot me a nasty look and gunned the 4x4 on through the plant gates.

“You don’t have to encourage her,” he said.

“Friend of yours?” I asked.

“Her name’s Olivia. She’s a townie.”

I glared at Hamilton, but he ignored me. We both went to an expensive private boarding school called Wittenberg Academy in Knoxville, Tennessee, and when you reduced the school to its lowest common denominators you got two groups—the boarders and the townies. I’m a townie. I’m *from* Knoxville. I go to school at Wittenberg, but I don’t live in the dorms like the rest of the students. There are twenty-three of us townies. We know one another, and everybody knows us. It costs us less to go to Wittenberg—much less—and if

it didn't, most of us couldn't afford to go. Sometimes the rich kids won't have anything to do with us, but Hamilton had never been like that. That's why I didn't like the way he called Olivia a townie, like she was beneath him or something. It wasn't like Hamilton, and it pissed me off.

"You mean the Olivia you used to write letters to and call every other night on the dorm phone?" I asked him.

"Yeah," he said. He kept his eyes on the driveway. "I kind of stopped calling. I think she might be mad."

"You think?"

Hamilton shot me another look, but I dodged it. I have to admit, I was a little sore. Part of it was the townie thing, and part of it was the way Hamilton just dropped girls, like there were always more waiting in line. Worse, there always *was* someone waiting. Hamilton's got that sort of blond Nordic swimmer's build girls dig. Good chin, hard nose. Dresses sharp. He's well-read, well-bred, and well-heeled. Everybody loves him. Everybody but his ex-girlfriends.

But I'd been friends with Hamilton long enough not to be a player hater. He was the kind of guy who could have easily looked down his nose at somebody like me, but he didn't. We'd bonded on the baseball field our freshman year, and I'd been Hamilton's unofficial third roommate ever since, using his room as my base of operations while I was on campus.

Hamilton parked the car. "Come on, we have to check in at the security station." He grabbed his beer and dashed through the rain to a small concrete building. I took a deep breath and reminded myself (again) that Hamilton wasn't himself right now, and I left my root beer and my attitude in the car and followed him.

Inside, one of the security guards was practically hugging Hamilton.

"Why haven't you come to see us since you got back?" the guard asked him. The patch sewn on his rent-a-cop uniform said *Bernard* in cursive.

Hamilton shrugged. "You know. Busy."

Bernard nodded sympathetically.

"We was real sorry to hear about your dad. He was good people," the other guard said. His patch said his name was Frank.

"Not like that uncle of yours," Bernard mumbled. Frank elbowed him.

"Say what you want, guys. You're among friends," Hamilton told them. "Speaking of, this is my best friend from school. His name's Horatio Wilkes."

We shook hands. From the looks on their faces, Hamilton's introduction was all it took to earn me their lifelong devotion.

"Should we tell him?" Bernard asked.

Thunder rumbled outside. It fit with the sudden chill in the air.

"Tell me what?" Hamilton asked.

Frank looked around, as though there might be spies in the little ten-by-ten-foot room we were in. He beckoned us into the monitor room, where a dozen screens flickered with security camera images of the Elsinore Paper Plant and Hamilton's home. One of them showed the front gate where Olivia still stood, holding her protest sign and wearing my baseball cap and looking pretty.

Bernard pulled an old coffee tin off a high shelf and withdrew an unlabeled videocassette. "We prob'ly should've shown you this as soon as you got back from school," he said, "but like you said, there was other stuff going on."

"You guys got Olivia on tape half-naked or something?"

Hamilton joked, trying to break the strange tension in the room.

Frank gave Hamilton a weak smile and started to say something, but then just popped the tape in the cassette player instead.

The central monitor in the bank of screens flickered with static, then adjusted itself. It became an image of the inside of the plant. A huge machine thrummed in the background, rolling acres of paper onto huge reels. The digital time stamp at the bottom gave the date as more than two months ago.

"This is thrilling," Hamilton said. "It's almost as exciting as—"

Hamilton's father walked into the picture.

"—watching paint . . . dry," Hamilton finished. He sat down and stared. It had to be a shock. The last time Hamilton saw his father alive was during Christmas break. He hadn't talked to his father for two months after that, and then one day the headmaster pulled him out of English and told him his dad was dead.

The weird thing was, this didn't look anything like Hamilton's father. The last time I had seen him he was middle-aged, with sandy brown hair and a smooth complexion. The man on the screen had snow white hair and a face like a walnut. He looked like he was a hundred years old, but it was Mr. Prince, sure enough. There was a sad, hollow look in his eyes that I knew but couldn't place.

Hamilton turned to look at me, and then I knew where I'd seen it before.

"Hamilton," his father said, startling all of us, even the guards.

"Dad? What happened to your face? Your hair?" Hamilton said to the ghost in the machine. For some reason it didn't seem crazy for him to be talking to a videotape.

"Hamilton, if the boys show you this tape, it means something bad has happened. Something very bad. It means I've been murdered."

Frank and Bernard seemed to shrink away, and Hamilton and I were alone with the ghost of his father.

"It was poison," his father said. "Slowly, over the course of weeks. Maybe months." He coughed hard. "I should have told you, I know, but I didn't want you to worry. Same with your mother. I—I saw all kinds of doctors. Got treatment. I thought I was going to get better." He coughed again. It was worse this time, and I could see Hamilton wince.

Hamilton's dad's eyes drooped. "Never knew how the stuff was getting into my system. But now, now I think somebody *did* this to me. On purpose." He hacked again, spitting up little bits of phlegm and blood. "I can't prove anything, but—"

Off camera, a door banged closed. Hamilton's father looked over his shoulder, then whispered quickly into the camera.

"It was all because of the paper plant." He broke off, coughing again. "You think you know someone. You trust them, and then—"

A shadow fell across his face. Someone stood near Hamilton's father, still off camera.

"Hello, Claude," Hamilton's father said. "Taking more dioxin samples? I, uh, there was something wrong with this security camera. Just checking it out." He looked back at the camera. "I'm sure if my son was here, he could fix it."

Hamilton put a hand to the screen, but the image had already cut to black.

"I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it," I said.

Hamilton turned. "I believe it. And I know exactly who did it."

"Who?"

“My uncle Claude.”

Frank and Bernard shuffled around, trying very hard to be somewhere else and not succeeding.

“You don’t know that,” I told him.

“Dad practically said as much! He said his name!”

“That’s just who interrupted him, that doesn’t mean—”

“He took over the company when Dad died,” said Hamilton. “And the bastard married my mother.” Hamilton spoke through his teeth. “He married *my mother*.”

Sometimes I get stubborn, and this was one of those times. “Look, Hamilton, I don’t know what this thing is between you and your uncle, but you can’t just go jumping to conclusions. You can’t be *sure* it was him.”

Hamilton stepped away and wouldn’t look me in the face.

“No. No, I guess you’re right. We don’t know *for sure*,” he said, mocking my cautiousness. “But until we do, not one of us can breathe a word about this. To anyone.”

Frank and Bernard inched out from among the filing cabinets and nodded.

“Why not?” I asked.

“It’s family business,” Hamilton told me. “Princes don’t air their dirty laundry.”

“Are you crazy? We need to go to the police with this.”

“No. Not a word. To *anyone*. Swear.”

“We swear, Mr. Prince,” Frank and Bernard said, almost in unison.

Hamilton fixed me with a stare. “*Swear*.”

Right then and there, I made a mistake. If I hadn’t, I might have saved us a lot of trouble. Maybe even kept somebody from getting shot. But nobody ever accused me of being a genius.