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—ROBERT B. PARKER, author of *Now and Then*

EIGHT IN THE BOX



A
NOVEL
OF
SUSPENSE

RAFFI YESSAYAN

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.....

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EIGHT IN THE BOX

For my wife, Candice

PART ONE

.....

The people have always some champion whom they set over them and nurse into greatness. . . . This and no other is the root from which a tyrant springs; when he first appears above ground he is a protector.

—PLATO, *The Republic*

CHAPTER 1

Richter slipped his arm down the cool shaft of the dryer vent, feeling the dampness of the metal through the latex glove. He slid the bolt lock, gave the door a shove and was inside. Locking the door behind him, he reattached the dryer hose to the vent cover. Let the police work a little to find out how he'd gotten in.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Richter breathed in the basement smells of detergent and mold and was overpowered by the pungent odor from a cat litter box. A scant amount of light from the casement window outlined the stairs leading up to the first floor. The door at the top of the staircase had been left open for the cat.

Perfect.

How nicely the City of Boston's streetlights lit up the first floor. A narrow hallway led to the living room with its French doors. Richter entered the room, careful not to bump into anything.

The walls were pale, although he couldn't make out the color. Artwork by a child with some talent hung, carefully framed and matted, on each wall. A vase on the coffee table held dried roses and Queen Anne's lace—a nice touch, the sort of thing Grandmother would have enjoyed. It was a comfortable room. He could see himself relaxing on the couch, watching one of his old movies.

He moved out of the light and stepped into the dining room, stopping to look at the family pictures on the mantel. The built-in hutch,

with its leaded-glass doors, was filled with old-fashioned teacups and saucers. The dining room led into the kitchen and back around to the front hall where he had entered. He'd completed his private tour of the lovely old Victorian.

Now he had more important things to attend to.

Richter made his way up the stairs. The moonlight shining through the stained-glass window on the landing created a kaleidoscope of muted color on the pine floors. The stairs creaked, but at midnight Susan McCarthy would be in a deep sleep. Her bedroom light had gone out two hours earlier.

Richter walked down the carpeted hall. He turned the cold glass doorknob, and the door to Susan McCarthy's bedroom yawned open.

CHAPTER 2

Assistant District Attorney Connie Darget sped through another red light before turning onto Prospect Hill Road in Roslindale, one of the old neighborhoods of Boston now being taken over by trust-fund babies. This was one of the few perks of his job. The pay was terrible, but who else besides a cop could fly around the city in the middle of the night with total disregard for traffic laws? He had activated his emergency lights, the wigwags, the strobes, the flashbacks. Driving to a murder scene made Connie feel alive, like a kid sledding down the Blue Hills, not knowing if he'd be able to stop before shooting out onto the highway below.

He stopped in the middle of the street, a few houses down from number twelve. That was as close as he could get. He left the flashbacks on so the cops wouldn't tow the Crown Vic.

Two ambulances were situated in front of the house, with a half dozen police cruisers blocking incoming traffic. It was warm for February, close to fifty degrees at two o'clock in the morning. A suit jacket was all he needed over his shirt and tie. Most of the residents of the quiet, middle-class neighborhood were outside, but the extensive yellow tape kept them a good distance away.

Connie overheard the grumblings of the crowd as he made his way toward the scene. He played up to his audience, brushing past them with a practiced expression of intense focus.

"Why won't they tell us anything?" a woman asked.

"I don't know, but it's a bad sign when the paramedics are still waiting on the sidelines," said a man in pajama bottoms and a sweatshirt.

"They're probably all dead!" the woman said, her voice rising. "I've seen this kind of thing on TV. If the victims are dead, then their bodies get treated like a crime scene."

TV can teach you something after all, Connie thought.

The media had taken over the parts of the street that were not taped off. Television reporters were interviewing neighbors, fishing for sound bites for the morning news. Connie flashed his credentials to a uniformed cop and moved toward the crime scene.

As one of the young prosecutors handpicked by the district attorney to represent the office at all murder scenes, Connie had access to a world most civilians never imagined. Members of the Homicide Response Team were supposed to oversee the integrity of each investigation. In reality, they stayed out of the way and let the homicide detectives from the BPD run the show. Connie flipped the smooth, black leather billfold with its gold badge back into his jacket pocket.

After his first few homicides, he noticed that the police gave him more access to crime scenes, maybe because he looked the part of a seasoned detective. With his cleanly shaven head and BPD notepad, he blended right in. And he was a city kid, like most of the cops, not some rich carpetbagger from the suburbs who'd been afraid to come into the city until his politically connected parents got him a job in the DA's office.

Connie skirted the taped perimeter. He never walked through a crime scene unless he checked in with the detectives first. He saw a cop he recognized and walked over to get an update.

After a quick handshake, the officer leaned in close. "Connie, one vic, a female, Ocean Frank before we got here. That's all I know. They haven't told us shit, other than to keep the crowd back."

"How'd she die?" Connie asked.

"No idea."

"Who's here from Homicide?"

"Mooney and Alves. They're inside."

"I should've known," Connie said. "Only Sergeant Mooney would close off this much of a street as a crime scene. He's got half of Rozzie taped off."

"That's why he's the best." The cop pointed toward the side porch. "That looks like Alves now."

Connie had met Detective Angel Alves on his first day as a virgin prosecutor in the South Bay District Court. Not even four months ago Alves had been promoted to Homicide, but the two of them had stayed in touch. Connie watched as Alves directed two patrolmen to the back of the house before turning toward the street. Connie raised a hand to catch Alves's attention. Even at a murder scene at two in the morning the detective looked sharp in his tailored suit. They made eye contact and Alves waved him over.

"Good morning, Conrad," Alves said, extending his hand.

"Please don't call me that," Connie said, shaking his hand. "You sound like my mother."

"Okay, *Connie*, nice of you to show up." Alves looked pointedly at his watch. "We've been here an hour. The reporters made better time than you." Alves tilted his head toward the cameras that were focused on them.

"I only got paged twenty minutes ago." Connie shook his head. "Those guys in Operations are useless. Once they called so late I showed up after the scene had been cleared. Then I got chewed out by the DA. I don't like to rat people out, but I'm calling their captain about this."

"Do what you have to. Nobody's going to think you're a rat. We've got another ugly scene here."

"Another?"

"Remember Michelle Hayes, just before Christmas? She disappears and all we find is a bathtub full of her blood."

"I thought we had her as a domestic."

"We did, originally. She'd been through a nasty divorce. But the guy had an airtight alibi. Out of town on a corporate team-building junket, where the whole office goes into the New Mexico wilderness for the

weekend to play Boy Scouts. Probably spent most of their time shopping in Santa Fe. No other suspects, so the case goes cold. Until tonight.”

“Who’s our victim?”

“Susan McCarthy. Also recently divorced, but still friendly with the ex. She got the house and kid in the settlement. According to her parents, the ex took the daughter to Disney World for February school vacation. We’re assuming it’s Susan’s blood in the tub, but we won’t know till the DNA comes back. The crime lab is looking for known samples to compare.”

“Any motive?”

“Nothing. Tonight’s the first sign that the Hayes murder wasn’t isolated. We’ve got a sick bastard on our hands, Connie. Whoever did this has the same MO.”

“Copycat?”

Alves shook his head. “We never released the details. The media never picked up on the story. We’re not as lucky tonight.” Alves motioned again toward the reporters circling them. “I heard a few of the uniforms calling him the Blood Bath Killer. Wait till the *Herald* gets ahold of that.”

“What do we have so far?”

“Not much.” Alves took out his notepad. “We’ve got the district detectives canvassing the neighborhood for witnesses and the crime lab processing the house. Sarge is upstairs with a few of the civilians from the crime lab. Last time, the guy left us nothing to work with. He may have made a mistake this time.”

“What’s that?”

“We found a sneaker print in the dirt by the cellar door. No signs of a forced entry, so it may not mean anything. We’re taking a plaster mold, just in case. If he didn’t come in through the basement, then we’re thinking McCarthy may have let him in. Maybe they had a date and then he decided to kill her.”

“Who found the scene?”

“Nine-one-one call. Never says a word, leaves the phone off the hook. Just like the Hayes case. Dispatcher figures someone accidentally

hit the preprogrammed emergency button. Kids do it all the time. We have to send a cruiser out anyway. Uniforms get here in less than five minutes. Side door's wide open. Kitchen phone's still off the hook. Then they find the bathtub and the blood. Looks like our boy wants to personally call us out to see his work."

"Where's the bathroom?"

"Upstairs. You're not going to throw up on me, are you?"

"I'll never live that one down, will I? That woman's body was rotting for days before the neighbors smelled the stench. And you clowns didn't warn me to put VapoRub under my nose."

"Just busting your chops." Alves smiled. He turned and led Connie into the kitchen. The kitchen looked perfectly ordinary, nothing out of place except for the telephone receiver dangling from its cord.

"The guys that answered the call knew what they were doing. They didn't touch anything. We're going to take the phone off the wall and fume it for prints. And we'll need elimination prints from all family members."

Much of what Connie knew about police work he'd learned from Angel Alves, especially during ride-alongs when he could watch Alves in action. Walking through this normal house, knowing that a person had been killed upstairs, Connie remembered one of the first lessons Alves taught him, about the importance of watching a person's hands. As Alves put it, "No one is ever going to shoot or stab you with their eyes or their feet. If someone's going to kill you, it'll be with his hands."

As they made their way to the second floor, Connie thought about the terror Susan McCarthy must have felt as she took her final breath. He paused at the top of the stairs and looked down the hall where a woman had lost her life. How true Alves's words were.

CHAPTER 3

Swiping his key card through the scanner, Connie entered the South Bay District courthouse. He started toward the stairs leading to the district attorney's satellite office. Shit. He was covering arraignments this morning, a bad way to start the week. Another swipe of his card and he wove his way through a maze of desks to the front counter of the clerk's office. There he picked up the stack of police reports from the weekend arrests. Busy weekend. Hopping over the counter into the front lobby, he jogged up the main staircase to the third floor.

Through the glass doors of the DA's office, he saw the secretaries answering phones and checking in witnesses who had been subpoenaed to court. At least ten people were crammed into a waiting area designed to hold five. It was like standing room only at Fenway for a Sox-Yankees game, except no one was happy to be here. They were either victims or witnesses to crimes. The last thing they wanted to do was come to court and testify.

"Good morning, ladies," Connie said as he hurried past the secretaries, careful not to make eye contact with any of the witnesses. He hated treating them like homeless people asking for change, but he had work to do and no time to answer the questions they were sure to ask.

The long corridor ahead of him was on the north side of the building, a wall of windows broken up by the assistant district attorneys' work cubicles. Except for Liz Moore, the supervising ADA, none of the lawyers had their own offices. Their cubicles faced out onto Roxbury's

Dudley Square and toward the distant, mirrored glass of the John Hancock building.

As he came around the corner, Connie almost ran into Nick Costa, who was leaning back in his swivel chair. Nick looked sharp in one of his trademark tailored suits and Italian ties, his expensive wardrobe complementing his Mediterranean looks. And he didn't have to live beyond his means to look good. He was well taken care of by his parents: Greek immigrants who had achieved the American dream by founding a floral shop that had grown into the largest chain in the Boston area. Connie stuck with the two charcoal gray suits his father had bought for him when he was sworn in to the bar. "You're tardy," Nick said. "It's almost nine."

Connie pointed to his pager. "Homicide Response. I was supposed to pass it off on Friday, but one of the Gang Unit ADA's had a wedding. It sucks having two sleepless weekends in a row. Wearing this pager is like hazing for DAs. Every time you start to doze off, the damn thing beeps. The hardest part is being out at a crime scene all night and then handing the case off to the Homicide DAs."

"I thought I saw you on the news. The 'suspicious death' in Rozzie."

"How'd I look?"

"Like Mr. Clean with that shaved dome of yours," Nick said, running his fingers through his hair.

Mitchum Beaulieu hung up his phone and stood up from the neighboring partition, a red thermos cup of home-brewed tea by his lips. He tapped Nick on the shoulder. "Let the man tell his story." Mitch Beaulieu stood over six feet tall with the muscular, lanky build of a swimmer. He had light brown skin, scattered freckles and neatly trimmed reddish-brown hair. People told him that he looked like Malcolm X, and he milked the resemblance for all it was worth, going so far as to wear the same style of eyeglasses.

"Hey, Red," said Connie. "Didn't see you hiding there."

"What time did you get called out?" Nick asked.

"Two. Hardly got any sleep."

"Why are they saying it's suspicious?" Mitch asked.

Connie put the police reports down on his desk, crouched in a base-

ball catcher's stance and leaned in, lowering his voice. "Suspicious death is the understatement of the year. I get the page for a possible homicide. I throw on a suit and tie, fire up the Crown Vic and head to this old Victorian on Prospect Hill."

"Lights and siren?" Mitch asked.

"Lights, no siren," Connie said. "Victim's already dead. Didn't want to look like a jackass in front of the cops, pulling onto the scene with the sirens blasting."

"Did you see the body?" Nick asked.

"There *was* no body. All they found was a bathtub full of blood, like that murder back in December. They never had a suspect or a solid lead on the first case. They didn't even find the woman's body. Now it looks like they have a serial killer on their hands."

"What did it look like?" Mitch asked.

"What did what look like?" Connie said.

"The tub full of blood."

For an instant Connie was back in the narrow hallway of the Victorian, the metallic smell of blood in the air, Mooney barking orders. "To be honest? Kind of surreal—seeing all that blood, knowing that someone's body was drained." Connie straightened up and stretched his legs. "Got to get ready for arraignments. And I still have discovery I need to turn over in the Jesse Wilcox case. It's coming up for motions soon. I ain't letting that bastard walk again."

"Christ, Connie, who cares about a drug case?" Nick said. "You can't start telling us about a murder and then shut us off."

"I've already told you more than I should have. If Alves finds out, next time I'll be outside the yellow tape, doing the Dunkin' Donuts run."

Nick waved him off. "You don't want to tell me, fine. But don't treat me like some asshole on the street."

Connie took a breath. "Sorry, okay? I'm just wiped out. I was at the scene for six hours."

"Who found the blood?" Mitch asked, taking another sip of tea.

"Two patrolmen responding to the call. And the killer may have made the call himself. Seriously, that's it."