Investi-Sation Dorothy Inak



### By Dorothy Uhnak

NONFICTION

Policewoman

FICTION

Law and Order The Investigation

SUSPENSE

The Ledger The Witness The Bait A NOVEL BY

# Dorothy The Uhnak

## Investigation



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With love to my family . . .

Tony and Tracy

Mother and Dad

Mildred, Harold and Susan Ellis

### one one

### CHAPTER 1

If Tim Neary hadn't been late for our appointment that morning, or if I hadn't been early and alone in the office with Sam Catalano, things might have turned out differently. Just *might* have; in some ways the end was determined by the beginning. For instance, if there had been a team of detectives at the 107th that morning, the call never would have been relayed to our office, the District Attorney's Investigating Squad. We wouldn't have been the prime investigators responsible for the ultimate outcome of the case. The pressure wouldn't have been on us and on Neary in particular.

But Neary was late and I was early and Catalano did take the call from the precinct about the missing Keeler kids. Even then, there was no real reason why Catalano couldn't respond alone. Except, given what I had learned about Catalano during the ten months we worked as partners, prior to my working alone on Neary's "special" special investigation, and sensing Catalano's reaction to the phone call, and seeing right through his attempt at being casual and nonchalant, and maybe just going along with a feeling—the kind you develop after twenty years on the job—I folded my report, shoved it into my inside jacket pocket and told him, what the hell, I'd take the ride over to Fresh Meadows with him.

The Keeler apartment was about what you'd expect for the

Fresh Meadows housing complex: a living-room suite consisting of a sofa with two matching chairs, identical lamps perched on identical end tables with a coordinated cocktail table. The Keelers were not what you'd expect; at least Kitty Keeler wasn't.

She was very young; not as young as I thought at first glance, but when compared with her husband she was practically a kid. A very beautiful kid who knew exactly how to emphasize her best features. She had large dark-blue eyes, carefully decorated with a pale-beige shadow and heavy dark liner, and very thick, very long eyelashes which may or may not have been real. No other makeup except for a touch of lipstick that made her mouth look moist. When she dragged on her cigarette, as though sucking in oxygen, a dimple appeared at the corner of her mouth and another in her right cheek. After she blew out the smoke, her lips remained just slightly parted and a glint of white teeth showed.

Her figure was more than good and the blue knit jersey pants suit took its shape from her precise contours rather than from any structuring undergarments.

Her hands were long and restless; a collection of silver rings covered her fingers. Matched the jangling silver and turquoise bracelets which slid up and down along both of her wrists as she plucked and fidgeted and finger-combed her hair, which was, as she well knew, her best feature. It was shoulder length, straight and the white-blond of an albino. It surrounded her dark-browed, oval, high-cheeked face like fine sheer curtains. The color was natural; the center part showed a delicate pink scalp.

Her voice had a low, hoarse street sound which shattered the illusion created by her face. She rolled her tongue around inside one cheek for a moment, shook her head, folded her arms across her body and said, "This is terrific, George. This is really terrific. I hope they give you a summons or something, George." She dropped sideways into one of the chairs, her legs dangling over an arm. She looked from Catalano to me, then back to Sam. "Hey, isn't it against the law to make a . . . what do you call it? A false report?"

"Tell you what," Catalano said in his warm, friend-of-the-family voice, "why don't we start at the beginning?"

George Keeler began spouting words, but he was almost incoherent.

Sam held his hand up; not in an offensive way, but easy, soothing. "Hey, Mr. Keeler, look. We're strangers here. We don't know what's going on; we're here to help. Come on, sit down. Let's all stay calm, okay?" Softly, he lulled Keeler, who nodded and let himself be gestured into silence. Catalano turned to the woman again. "Mrs. Keeler?" It sounded like an intimacy.

"Okay. Okay, George wants to play some stupid game with me." She looked directly at Catalano and said quickly, "I woke up this morning and went into the boys' bedroom and they were gone. I called George and told him to bring the kids back and—"

"What do you mean, you called George?"

Instead of answering me, she nibbled on her thumbnail.

George Keeler leaned forward, eager to help. "Well, see, I wasn't sleepin' here the last coupla nights." He risked a quick look at his wife, but she was watching Catalano to see how he was taking this information. "See, I own a ginmill over in Sunnyside; I own the whole building and I got a small apartment over the place. And, well, sometimes I stay over. In the apartment. Like the last few nights."

"Okay, Mrs. Keeler, at what time did you realize the boys were gone?"

She did one of those long, slow slides with her eyes, from Catalano, across her husband, around to me. She swung her leg back and forth and rubbed the back of her neck for a quick massage while deciding whether or not she was going to bother to answer me.

Catalano leaned toward her with his lighter; he made a production out of lighting her cigarette and held eye contact with her when she blew the first drag of smoke at him. It's part of Catalano's routine; he uses it on any female he comes in contact with; I've heard that he's sometimes successful.

"I called George at about seven-thirty," she told Catalano, "and told him to bring the kids back. Instead of that, he comes over, swearing on a stack of Bibles that he doesn't have them and doesn't know where they are."

This was George Keeler's cue to repeat what he'd said for maybe the fourth time since we arrived. "I don't have the kids, Kitty. I swear to God, I don't have the kids." His wife blinked once or twice, but didn't answer him.

There was no point in letting them go around again; this could go on all day. Catalano picked up my signal easily; he is quick and intuitive—among other things—I'll give him that. He settled comfortably on the couch with the long, tall blond mother of the missing little boys and I took a firm but friendly grip on George Keeler's arm and suggested we get a little fresh air.

We strolled along the grounds of the Fresh Meadows development, which is a vast complex of two- and three-story garden-apartment buildings designed to fit in with the semisuburban character of the Queens community. It is a low-crime area with a population mostly of white middle-class people who migrated from the Bronx and Brooklyn after World War II. There are wide lawns surrounding the complex, thick healthy trees and ample parking spaces for residents' cars. Included in the 107th Precinct are quiet streets of one-family homes where honest, hard-working people live and raise their families.

We walked along without speaking, then settled on a bench. George was having some problem breathing: a noisy wheezing sound escaped first when he inhaled, then when he exhaled. He dug in his pocket and came up with a nebulizer. He apologized, as though what he was doing was shameful and private. He squirted and sucked the medication loudly, and though he didn't sound any better, he said that he was. We talked a little about asthma and allergies and medications, and he relaxed; a little.

George Keeler was a badly preserved forty-nine, fifty; more than twenty years his wife's senior. He was an obese, balding, sloppy middle-aged man who was well aware of his own shortcomings. It must have been tough having to measure up to a twenty-six- or twenty-seven-year-old wife who looked like Kitty.

"Tell me something, George," I said in that easy familiarity we develop on the job. Then it occurred to me, this guy doesn't even know my name. I stuck my hand out. "By the way, I'm Joe. Joe Peters. My partner back there is Sam Catalano." We shook hands and he nodded. "Tell me, George, how come your wife is so sure you have your boys?"

He shook his head and said, "I swear to God, I don't have the kids. Not this time."

When he added the last three words to his routine denial, something small and tight in the pit of my stomach, like a little fist of apprehension getting ready to hammer at my duodenal ulcer, relaxed and began to unclench. You never *really* know where these family disputes might lead.

Keeler went into a long, drawn-out, hard-to-follow recitation of an incident that had happened last November, more than five months ago. He backtracked, went ahead, stopped, filled in details, but what I finally pieced together was that his wife, Kitty, worked as an assistant manager at the New World Health Spa on Northern Boulevard, just over the Nassau County line. The spa was one of a franchise, and last November Kitty went down to the Bahamas to celebrate an anniversary of the island spa. There was some trouble getting the regular baby-sitter, and against George's wishes Kitty left the kids with a young Scotch girl she hardly knew.

"I could size this girl up real easy," George winked, man to man. "A swinger-type kid, ya know? I checked the boys every day, see; I stayed at my apartment, but still I had a funny feeling about this girl."

His funny feeling was justified. After putting in late hours at his bar that Saturday night, he woke early the next morning and went over to check on his sons. It was a cold, snowy Sunday, not quite eight in the morning, and when George pulled into his parking slot he saw his two little kids, one just about three, the other not quite six years old, playing in the playground. Dressed in their pajamas and robes, with rubber boots over their bare feet. They were building a snow man.

"Terry, that's my oldest kid, he tells me that Patti, that's the Scotch girl, is asleep and she has a man in bed with her."

George bundled the two kids into his car and kept them at his ginmill apartment for the next few days. The baby-sitter never called him to check on the kids; probably too scared, George said. When Kitty came home, three days later, the girl was sitting, staring at the TV and chewing her nails. All she could tell Kitty was that she hadn't seen the kids since Saturday night.

"When Kitty called, I told her, 'No, I don't know where the kids are.' See, I gave her a hard time then, ya know."

He sounded apologetic for having given Kitty a hard time.

George was apologetic about everything where his wife was concerned.

"What was the beef about this time, George? How come you've been staying over at your ginmill the last few nights?"

George said that Kitty was planning to fly out to Phoenix to assist in the opening of another New World Health Spa. The regular baby-sitter, a Mrs. Silverberg, was in the hospital. Kitty couldn't get anyone to fill in. She was planning to take the kids with her, and George objected; they argued; George kept his distance until Kitty cooled off. Then the younger kid, Georgie, got sick.

"I talked to Kitty yesterday afternoon, on the phone, and she said she'd call me after the doctor came and let me know what's doin' with the kid. It looked like the measles. So anyway, last night at eleven-twenty, Kitty called and—"

"The doctor didn't come until that late?"

"Oh, no, it wasn't that. It was just that . . ."

George went a little red; every time he revealed something that Kitty did to him, it was with a combination of apology and acceptance. Hell, he only got what he deserved from her, right?

"Ya see, I guess she was still sore at me, so she didn't call me right after the doctor left. Like, to make me keep waitin', ya know?"

I decided not to ask George if he, personally, had given the kid the measles. He'd probably say, "Yes, if Kitty says so."

"Okay, so you spoke to her last night at eleven-twenty?"

"No, no. I couldn't come to the phone right then. See, I was in the middle of a hassle with these Irish folk singers I got working on Wednesdays and weekends. They're havin' this real donny-brook, because they're supposed to be on a break, from eleven-fifteen to eleven-thirty, and one of them started doin' an old-country song for one of the old-timers and the other guys got sore, yellin' how he was breaking the rule. That it was eleven-twenty and they were supposed to be off until eleven-thirty and all." George Keeler shrugged; apparently, nothing in his life went smoothly.

"So that's how you know Kitty called you at eleven-twenty? Okay. When did you talk to her?"

Poor George (I had already begun to think of him as "poor George") kept dialing his home number all night long, from eleven-