

Excerpt from Chapter 4 "Pay Dirt"

"*Bonjour, Mademoiselle,*" said Mr Conrad, approaching the table where I sat. "*La shana tova.*"

"Huh?" I had heard his approach and every word he had said, but was operating in low gear. "Oh, yeah. *La shana tova.*"

I'd forgotten the Jewish New Year all together and it seemed odd to hear the traditional greeting. Unable to participate in the celebration, I wished he hadn't reminded me.

"So here's where you hide out in the morning," he said. "Why don't you come join me for breakfast?"

"Sure," was all I said and mechanically followed him to the teachers' cafeteria.

"Janette, is something wrong?" he asked while we went through the line.

I answered only with my eyes and he got the message.

Once we got our food we took our trays to a lonely corner and sat down.

"Is it something you would care to talk to me about?" Mr Conrad spoke quietly and leaned close.

"Yes, but not here."

"Then eat as much as you can and we'll go upstairs to talk."

Somehow just being with Mr Conrad lifted my spirits, no doubt because of his concern for me. I took a couple of bites of coffee cake, and when I couldn't eat anymore, we went up to the classroom.

There wasn't time to tell him everything. Then, when I did start on what had passed between Noonan and I the day before, the tears started. Fatherly types and brothers in the Lord like Mr Johnson gave hugs, which was what I needed right then more than anything. The young or good-looking ones generally avoided such contact, which was quite understandable; so it came as a surprise when Mr Conrad gave me his monogrammed handkerchief and put a comforting hand on my shoulder.

I let go and cried, not from fear but the sheer weight of the whole business upon my mind and spirit. After releasing some of the stress, I felt good enough to finish my story, but now there really wasn't time for it.

"You don't have to tell me," said Conrad, now very upset. "I know what it's about and I've been thinking of it ever since you told me what Noonan did to you—and it scares me to death! If you won't go to the police, I will. It has to be done and this proves it. Janette, that man will hurt you seriously if something's not done, and I really don't believe you and your friends can handle it."

"Mr Conrad, Mrs MacGregor has tried to get the police to investigate Noonan and she's the principal of this school. And do you think he has even come close to going to jail?"

"I didn't know that."

"Look, if you really want to help, there is something you can do."

"What on earth could I do? I'm not—"

"Don't worry. It's very simple, but something that's very important."

"All right, I'll do whatever I can, I promise you."

"Then why don't we talk at lunch, or after school, since I come to your place anyway."

"Let's do both so we'll have plenty of time. In the meanwhile, go put some cold water on your face and fix your makeup. It's almost time for the first bell."

At lunchtime I had more of an appetite and my mood was almost chipper, with the way things were falling together. As I walked out with Mr Conrad after Choir, I suggested the same hamburger stand where Mr Fletcher and I had gone. He shook his head and told me he'd made reservations at

a very nice Chinese restaurant a mile or so down the street on Central.

"You do like Chinese, don't you?" asked Mr Conrad.

"Oh, I love Chinese food."

"Good. I just wish we didn't have to do this under such un-pleasant circumstances. Are you doing okay?"

"I'm much better now, thank you."

There in the middle of the first row of cars was the Jaguar, sleek and silvery, with not a scratch on it. My heart beat faster as he opened the door for me. I got in carefully and rested myself against the cool, soft leather seat.

Oh, boy! Wait till the gang hears about this.

As Mr Conrad started the engine, the radio came on softly, playing jazz. Smoothly and quietly we left the parking lot and rolled onto the street. It had such a restful effect that I dreaded reaching our destination. Had he driven us all the way to Gallop, it would have been just fine with me.

In a manner of minutes we arrived at the Fairland Cafe and the hostess took us right to our table. She seated us in a booth where it was possible to sit next to each other for more intimate conversation. The restaurant was a lovely one, of course, with traditional Chinese decor in black, red and gold. But it was also on the expensive side, which gave us a guarantee that no other faculty members would be there to eavesdrop.

"Now, tell me what it is you want me to do?" asked Mr Conrad, once we had ordered and the waiter was gone.

"The ADG has new evidence that will take care of Jacob Noonan for good, but one very important piece is missing. With more people to keep an eye on him and his victims, we can get it; but that's just part of what we need you for. Having adults involved, especially as eyewitnesses, enhances our credibility. So we'll give you the details of what to look for, and when he's caught in the act, we can deliver Noonan to the police on a silver platter."

"What kind of evidence do you have?"

"So far just circumstantial, but it's detailed enough to be some-thing the police will pay attention to. I can't tell you about it here, but what I can say is that one Guild member has seen him picking up girls off campus at lunchtime. Now we just need to find out where he's taking them; that's the missing piece. Finding that piece will give us the chance to get some photographs and set up a good trap with the police."

"Why wait? Do whatever you can to get the police in on this now. It sounds to me like you've already got something worthwhile. Can't you at least try?"

I laughed. "Mr Conrad, I can tell that you haven't had much experience with the Albuturkey police department. Yes, there are some good officers on the force, but it's really hit or miss. Some of those clowns make Inspector Lestrade look like a genius. So give it up, okay? We did a long time ago. We tried giving leads to the police before, but then we finally learned our lesson. Besides, it shouldn't be more than a few days before we can give them all of our evidence, and then they can pretend to be the heroes. As soon as we locate Noonan's rendezvous, we'll give the police every shred of evidence we've got and gladly. It will be a relief to all of us just to get this case closed."

"Well, I'll do my best to help with whatever you need. I know that your parents have my phone number, but do you?"

"Yes, but it's at home."

"Well, from now on keep it with you and feel free to call me. I want to know everything that's going on with this—Noonan case."

"I'll be more than happy to. Look, why don't we talk about something else and save the rest of this for later?"

"All right. You can tell me what I had wanted to know this morning but never got the chance to ask. Did you get to go to services this week?"

"No, but I sure would've if I'd had the money."

"I thought there might be some kind of a problem to keep you from going, but I thought about it too late. If it was just money, I'd have bought you a ticket myself and you could have gone with me. There's still Yom Kippur. Would you like a ticket for that?"

"Well—sure. But Mr Conrad, I can't let you—"

"Oh, yes you can. Besides, I've been telling the rabbi about you and he'd like to meet you."

"Uh, oh. I don't think I would do too well talking to a rabbi."

"He won't bite, I promise."

"I've heard that one before. Now, let's see, when is Kol Nidre?"

"Kol Nidre is on a Tuesday night, October 1st."

"That's what I thought. Tuesday night is rehearsal night."

"Rehearsal for what?"

"Usually it's just for church, but right now we're also working on my music for the talent show. I don't know. I'll have to talk to David about that because those rehearsals are pretty important and I had to miss the one last night because of our emergency Guild meeting. But if I can't skip it, it sure would be nice to go to services on Wednesday. Then it would really seem like Yom Kippur. Yes. That would be perfect, because rehearsal always ends up being worship anyway. But to go to Kol Nidre and then have to sit through school the next day would be a drag. Would that be okay with you?"

"Sure, that would be fine."

"Okay. I'll tell you what. Let me see if I can get out of school on Wednesday, and if I can we'll do it that way. But if not, I'll try to skip rehearsal and we'll go to Kol Nidre."

"Fine, but take care of it right away."

"I will."

That afternoon Billy "the Kid" Osborn kept me company on the way home. Billy walked slowly, but his legs were long, so that evened things out. Funny, but he wasn't in a talkative mood, so I did the talking and told him about Mr Conrad's willingness to help, then asked him to pass it on to the rest of the gang. Then we said goodbye as soon as I was in the door. Before leaving for lessons, I warned my mother that I might be late coming back from Mr Conrad's because he wanted to discuss a possible project with me. Then I made it a point to get there a little earlier than usual as I told Mr Conrad I would. He gave me my lesson but cut it short by a few minutes so we could talk about the Noonan case.

He made us both ice tea and we went into the living room and got comfortable on the sofa. Then I laid it on him.

Mr Conrad's eyes filled with deep concern as I began an edited version of what had been brought out at the last Guild meeting. Behind the horn-rimmed glasses they moved anxiously along with the thoughts in his head. But other feelings registered on his face and in his body language and it seemed he barely listened as he was transported in his mind to another place. And yet Conrad turned a sickly pale as he heard about the murdered and missing girls. Trying to gain control, his posture became rigid while horror and dread distorted his handsome features. His hands gripped the sofa so hard that his fingers went halfway into the cushion. What-ever was upsetting him, it wasn't

just the Noonan case. For him to behave like this, something else had to be affecting him as well. I could only wonder if our new ally would now be too frightened to try helping us, or that he might break down and go to the cops himself. Attempting to allay his fears, I went ahead and told him what kind of protection I carried and assured him I would be okay.

"But could you do it?" he asked, staring at me in disbelief. He was almost shouting. "Could you really pull the trigger and shoot Jacob Noonan?"

"Any day of the week. Mr Conrad, I've already thought all of this through ages ago. If it means saving a life, and taking some evil out of the world, why shouldn't I? Now, Cowboy taught me to shoot and together we taught the rest of the ADG. You know, it wouldn't hurt you to learn, too. Or do you already know how to handle fire arms?"

"No. I know nothing about them except that they kill people. I was never in the armed forces so I've never learned to use one."

"I'll teach you how."

"No. Absolutely not."