

# The Rushing Noise of Death

A Detective Flagg Mystery

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Chapter I  
Scots Tower

I.

The rapid crack of gunfire riddled the air, jostling Martha Leland from a doze in her overstuffed chair. She blinked, caught her breath, and flung one hand up, palm out, warding off the attack. Her panic lasted only a second. "Firecrackers," she murmured and smiled to herself, taking in a deep breath, feeling life seep through her limbs. The room glowed from the remnant of sunset across the river. *It must be around five*, she thought, as she shook off the daze of sleep, walking to the French doors where the last light of the sun caught the frosted panes, lighting them like fires.

Martha squinted against the glare and thrust the doors outward onto the wide balcony, allowing the cold to wake her fully, to sharpen her senses. She stretched her slender body in the gathering dark, refreshed, invigorated, happy. *I've done a good day's work*, she mused, satisfied that so far it had been an almost perfect day, this New Year's Eve, and before the New Year dawned it would be perfect, all the loose ends tied up neatly, her purposes accomplished. She smiled again, hugging her soft cashmere sweater about her slim shoulders, and leaned over the balcony rail, dislodging fresh snow into a powdery cascade. She watched the children below, bundled against the cold, lighting strings of Chinese firecrackers along the river bank, laughing, the burst of light and smoke tangling with the oncoming dark.

This apartment, this view of the river, and of the great stone bridge with its arches like those bridges in pictures of Florence, had always pleased her. She had moved here after her divorce

from Jack Leland when she so needed comfort, and beauty, and nourishment from her past. Now, her past lay spread before her across the river: the big refinery, the lights twinkling on against the deepening day like Christmas decorations, the flumes of steam rising vertically from the smokestacks straight into the cold, windless air until they reached the point where the river breeze caught them and pushed grey streamers across the darkening winter sky.

This was her father's realm, a man's country: oil, grit, hard work, fast money won and lost, won again, lost again—they couldn't keep a good oil man down—and how deeply Martha had loved his resilience, his optimism, his warmth. But, for good or ill, it was from her slender, striking mother that Martha had inherited her cool beauty, and her deadly determination to achieve standing, a place at the top of the fragile, glittering society that oil had built and buoyed through lean and fat times. Even in the little refinery tenant houses, row upon row, dingy and alike, her mother dreamed terrible dreams, and the dreams grew as the money grew, when her father gambled on the times and won (or so it had seemed), and her family members gathered around themselves the grand trappings that money could buy. There was more than enough, but her mother's greed for acceptance, for approval, yes, even for worship, instilled in them all an anxiety, a despairing pessimism that left them exhausted. Her mother's great needs worked them thin, leaving them without capacity for anything but the appearance of perfection. Martha, her sister Shirley, and her brother Bill, became experts at making their lives look good, look perfect—at any price. And they paid and paid as the years went by.

The snow began to fall on Martha Leland and she shivered while the children below ran with their sparklers streaming along

the icy river banks, laughing, calling, leaving a path marked in the drifts by the spitting sparklers stuck straight up and showering tiny fire fountains across the cold night. She retreated from their merriment into the warmth of her living room, closing the glass doors tight against the frostbitten air, but leaving the heavy draperies open to the glittering view.

Martha sat down in her chair to wait—to wait for an answer, knowing what it would be, for her plan had been perfect. She sat and waited into the waning hours of the dying year, anticipating release from her burdens, for an end to her worries. Into the eleventh hour now, she sat peacefully with her hands folded in her lap. Soon the big fireworks would explode from the bridge, welcoming the new year. The booms would come like the cannons in the old days, sounded to raise drowned bodies along the river towns. She shivered once more, chafing her sweated arms. Raising the dead, old bones, old secrets: how hard it was to hold the past at bay, a lonely, hard business. But she had done it, had accomplished her purpose: no one, not anyone, would trouble her again. The papers she had sent by courier that afternoon would end it once and for all; the reply, the confirmation was to be returned to her by courier before morning.

She poured herself a drink, her labors worthy of celebration. She stood before the mirror and toasted her reflection. The clock began to strike and the big fireworks on the bridge behind her reflected their lurid blossoms in the glass. The great booms began and when the bullet struck dead center at the back of her skull, she might have seen the blinding splintered light of the finale, she might have heard the great white rushing noise of death.