

# **Saint George's Children**

**a novel**



**Dennis  
Ecklund**

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# Saint George's Children



Ancient Oaks Press

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For Anita, with love

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Defend the weak and the fatherless;  
uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.  
Rescue the weak and the needy;  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.  
Psalm 82:3-4 (NIV)

## Chapter 1 — On the Case

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I've thought about it a lot since that cold, rainy night. I still can't think of a single good reason why she should have ended up standing there dripping icy water on the worn-out rug in front of my desk.

Ordinarily that would have set off alarm bells in my head, but what guy can be wary of a stunning blonde wearing a wet T-shirt and a spectacular set of goose bumps?

She wasn't actually wearing a T-shirt; she had on one of those tennis outfits with a polo shirt and a skirt short enough to reveal the lacy ends of what looked like a pair of white knickers. But it may as well have been a T-shirt as far as I was concerned. She was carrying a compact pocketbook and her nice, formerly white, Nike tennis shoes looked as though she had just slogged a mile in the mud.

Whatever her reason for showing up at my office, it probably wasn't my sterling reputation. I'd had a run of bad luck lately when it came to clients. Two out of three of them had ended up slightly dead, and the cops, even the cops who should have known better, were starting to give me that look they wore when scraping something nasty off the back seat of their patrol car.

"My car drowned out in a flooded street a couple blocks from here," she said, before I could speculate any further.

"I was told you may be able to help me," she added, looking around for a guest chair that should have been there, but wasn't. The cops had hauled it off for forensic analysis.

I wondered who would have sent her to me; probably not one of her friends.

"Do you have someplace I can sit while we discuss this?"

I took an army surplus wool blanket out of the bottom drawer of my desk, shook it out and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"I don't have any heat in here, but maybe this will help. Go ahead, sit in my desk chair. It's already warmed up."

"My name is Caryn Weldon," she said, tossing out the name and letting it hang in the air like a Crimson Tide "Hail Mary" pass.

"My husband is, or rather was, Edward Weldon."

Now it was my turn to feel a chill. A couple of months ago, Weldon's broken body had been found at the bottom of a cliff. Nobody noticed that he had taken a bullet, until the pathologist discovered a tiny hole in the back of his head during the autopsy. At that point the cadaver really had the pathologist's attention. She noted that, in addition to the gross injuries resulting from being tossed off a cliff, there were numerous small injuries suggesting he had been tortured before he was killed.

It had been a professional hit, according to the cops who were still speaking to me. The killer had poked Weldon in the back of the head with a .22 caliber pistol and pulled the trigger. Because of the tiny bullet's relatively low velocity, it had ricocheted around inside his cranium until its energy was spent. Scrambled brain, minimum mess; a nice neat kill.

Thinking about that kind of an ending gives me the willies. Did he know it was coming? Or



did the hitter sneak up on him? I would later learn it was neither of those scenarios.

Eddie Weldon had been one of those pillar-of-the-community guys. Knew the right people, nice wife, country club membership, bid high at the charity auctions — he had pretty much checked off all the boxes. As a silent partner in a popular local auto dealership, and owner of a well respected accounting firm, he was “doing very well” as they say. He and his wife lived in an upscale community near the country club. Everybody liked Weldon, and it was hard to believe someone wanted him dead. But someone surely had.

During their investigation, the cops didn’t find any family members with a motive for having him rubbed out. In fact, they couldn’t find any relatives at all.

The story was front-page news for a couple of days, and as the weeks passed by, the story cooled. The cops ran out of leads and the news people moved on to fresh blood. It appeared Weldon’s murder was spiraling down the drain to cold case status. Lately the gossips were circulating rumors that Weldon may not have been as clean as his public image would suggest — that he had run afoul of organized crime in his accounting business. The cops said they had found no evidence of shady dealings, but people will believe what they want to believe.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I said. “How can I help you?”

“Eddie was a genuinely decent man, and I’d like to know why someone killed him. He deserves better than the ugly things some people are saying about him.”

“The cops have pretty much covered that territory.”

“Not exactly,” she said. “They reported they could find no evidence of criminal activity in his businesses. That’s a long way from exonerating him. Until we know who killed him — and why — people will continue to believe he was involved in some kind of crime.”

Actually, given the facts, the odds were good that he had run afoul of some sort of criminal enterprise. I thought about doing the ethical thing and telling her there was nearly a zero chance I could turn up anything the cops had missed. We have some sharp investigators in our local cop shop. Then I thought about the fifty bucks remaining in my checking account, and instead, I asked her if there was anything she hadn’t told the police.

“No, I told them everything I know, and they haven’t even acted on everything I told them. In the last week or so I’ve had a feeling someone has been prowling through the house. Nothing was obviously disturbed, there was nothing I could point to that was missing or out of place, just a creepy feeling someone had been there.

“What did the cops say about that?”

“They put it up to my mental state and discounted the idea.”

“Has it occurred to you they may be right?”

“No.”

“Well, it’s an idea you should consider. Do you have a security system?”

“Yes, but it became a real nuisance with false alarms. We planned to replace it.”

I took out my pocket notebook and asked her a few more questions to get a better picture of her late husband. Sometimes people know things that they don’t consider relevant, so they skip them when relating “everything.”

Her answers were about what you would expect when inquiring about a pillar of the community. The news stories had left out one interesting aspect of Weldon’s life. According to his wife, he had been a passionate collector of art with interests in early impressionist paintings and Meiji period Japanese art.

You can hardly choose more opposite directions than these two genres. In a way, it made sense to me. The impressionists showed you the world in soft focus leaving it up to your

imagination to fill in the details. The Japanese sculptors and carvers during the Meiji era sought to create objects in absolute, real-life detail. Maybe having both types of art in his house created some sort of visual balance.

“How much do you need for a retainer?” She asked, derailing my train of thought.

“A check for \$3,000 will do,” I said, doubling my usual fee. “That will cover a week of my services and basic expenses. If I rack up any extra expenses, I’ll bill you. After the week is up we’ll see where we are.”

She took out her checkbook and began filling in the blanks. Watching her, my good angel began to tweak my conscience for overcharging her. My bad angel argued that she could easily afford it. My good angel countered with the knowledge that I’m just not that good at detecting. My good angel doesn’t always fight fair.

“I have to be honest with you,” I said. “Your money may be wasted, because I doubt very much that I’ll find anything more than what the police have learned, and even if I do, it’s liable to be something you won’t want to hear.”

“A person’s time is always worth something. I’m sure you’ll give me my money’s worth,” she said, tearing the check out of the checkbook and handing it to me. “I really don’t care how much it costs. I just want to be sure no stone is unturned in clearing Ed’s reputation. If, on the other hand, we learn he was involved in crime, then that’s just something I’ll have to live with.”

I noticed she was still shivering. I decided it was time to change venues. Unlike my office, the beater I drive has one redeeming feature — it has a great heater.

“Why don’t I give you a ride home? You can get someone to pick up your car tomorrow,” I suggested. “Is it legally parked where you left it?”

“Thanks. I think the car will be OK.”

The Weldons lived across town from my office, which is located in a low-rent area. Driving her home through the rain, the windshield wipers beat a steady rhythm as I continued my effort to learn “everything.”

“This is an odd route you’re taking,” she observed.

“Yeah, well, I’m trying to stay on high ground — my car doesn’t swim any better than yours,” I said, adding, “were there any unusual incidents in the days before his death?”

“Nothing, really,” she said. “Wait. Now that I think about it, one day when I dropped by the office he took a phone call that seemed to disturb him. When I asked him about it, he flashed that lady killer grin of his and said it was just a difficult client. He seemed to be his usual cheerful self at home after work.”

“Any other odd calls or departures from routine?”

“Yes, and I told the detectives about this, too. Most days Ed and I would meet for lunch. Sometimes we’d have lunch with a client. On the day he was killed, he called to say he was skipping lunch to meet with someone in Tuscaloosa.”

“Wasn’t that a little far afield for him?”

“No, especially if he were in pursuit of a major account. There’s a Mercedes assembly plant and several other large, related automotive businesses in Tuscaloosa, so it’s not surprising he would pursue leads there. Ed liked network marketing, and he spent most of his time practicing it. Once he got into a group of associated businesses he would leverage his relationship to pick up other clients in the group.”

“How many businesses does his office serve?”

“I don’t know, maybe 40 or so, maybe more. It’s a bustling business. It was Ed’s baby. I was not directly involved in the firm at all, other than playing the charming hostess when necessary.

If you want to know the details of the operation, you should talk to his office manager, Winston Bibb.”

“What do you know about Bibb? Did they always get along?”

“Win is a nice guy, and as far as I know, he’s really good at what he does. He was Ed’s first employee. He ran the office and handled most of the actual CPA work, while Ed spent his time hustling up new clients. As the business grew, Ed added more employees and Win just naturally slid into managing the office.”

“Were you ever aware of any friction between them?”

“No, but it’s a rare relationship that doesn’t have its rough spots. It was a good working partnership. I’m quite sure that when they had a disagreement, they worked it out in a logical way. Ed told me he was thinking about offering Win the opportunity to buy into the firm.”

“Do you have any plans for the business?”

“Nothing solid. I may sell it. I’m sure Win would be interested in purchasing the business outright. But it might be a better deal for me if I followed Ed’s idea of offering him a partnership, according to my financial adviser.”

“Speaking of partnerships, what about Ed’s involvement with the auto dealership?”

“He was a silent partner in that business, with no active role at all. The dealership is owned by Magdalena Houston. She was one of his early clients. When the dealership nearly went bankrupt he postponed collecting his fee and loaned the business a substantial sum to keep it afloat.”

“That sounds unusually generous to me,” I told her. “I don’t know to put this delicately, but was there any chance their relationship may have been more than strictly business?”

That question provoked a smile and then a giggle that erupted into a fully fledged belly laugh.

“What’s so funny about that?” I wanted to know.

“Maggie and I have been best friends since the sixth grade. If there were any hanky panky she would have told me. I originally met Ed at a charity fundraiser and she was the person who introduced us.”

I drove on in silence while I considered what I’d learned so far. I wasn’t seeing a motive for Ed’s murder among the people closest to him. A love triangle between Ed, his business partner and his wife just didn’t seem likely. Neither was it likely his wife had anything to do with it. By all outward appearances she had been getting everything she needed in life from her marriage to a successful man who was rapidly making them seriously wealthy. That impression might change after I talked with Bibb and Houston.

“Turn right at the next corner, then bear right and drive on up the hill,” she said, dragging me back to the here and now.

“That’s not what my GPS says.”

“Apparently your GPS doesn’t know everything. This leads to the back entrance of our property.”

I followed her directions and turned off onto a road that snaked its way up a heavily forested hill.

“Turn into that driveway on the left,” she directed “The house is about a quarter-mile farther.”

Bumping the car up the steep, rocky driveway among the trees, I noted that her so-called driveway would be better described as a four-wheel drive trail. We made it up, but my old heap of nuts and bolts definitely didn’t like it. As we pulled up in front of a large, stone-faced house set into the hillside, the rain gods decided to release a fresh torrent.

“Park under there,” she said, indicating a spacious four-car berth under a huge cantilevered deck wrapped around two sides of the house’s upper level. A Lexus LS and a somewhat battered

Hummer H1 occupied two of the spaces.

“If you’d been driving that Hummer you wouldn’t have gotten wet,” I observed.

“It wasn’t raining when I left the house. Even if it had been, I probably wouldn’t have taken that thing. I absolutely hate driving it.”

“On another note, don’t you worry that your house might slide off the side of this hill if the rain keeps up?”

“Not really,” she said. “Before he bought this property Ed ordered a geological survey. The house is anchored in solid rock. All the mud on this mountain could wash away and the house would still be here.”

“Are we finished for now, or do you have more questions?” she added.

“There is much more I need to know, but it’s getting late and you’re probably ready to call it day.”

“I don’t sleep much lately. The sooner you get the information you need, the sooner you can get on the case. Why don’t you come in and putter around in Ed’s study while I shower and get into some dry clothes.”

Her house was even more impressive on the inside than on the outside. We entered through a very large room that obviously had been set up for entertaining, with a full length wet bar and an antique pool table at one end. A massive stone fireplace anchored the other end of the room, which was furnished with posh, leather furniture and two large-screen TVs. This place was more like a high-end sports bar than a typical den.

The stairway to the main floor brought us to the kitchen; a pleasant open design sharing space with a large living room. Two hallways led off to opposite wings.

“I’ll start some coffee,” she said, snapping the lights on.

“Why don’t you show me where you keep the coffee and I’ll make it while you get comfortable.”

She showed me the appropriate cabinets, and pointed to one of the halls.

“Ed’s study is at the end of that hall. You might enjoy looking at some of his toys while you wait.”

The coffee maker was one of those high-tech machines with a baffling set of options displayed on a mini computer screen. It took me several minutes to figure out how to start the brewing process.

“Spawn of the devil,” I mumbled under my breath. When the machine finally gurgled its intention to brew coffee, I ambled down the hall to Ed’s study.

The corridor was wide and well lighted. The walls on either side provided gallery space. One wall displayed several pleasant impressionist paintings. I didn’t recognize any of the signatures on the paintings. The other contained a gallery of fine art photographs. The photos were mostly of landscapes and architecture. I’m no art critic, but these images were of excellent quality; some were exquisite.

Ed’s study was in a large room at the end of the hall. French doors at one end opened to a small deck with comfortable chairs and what would be a commanding view of the city in fair weather. A massive mahogany desk with a matching credenza inhabited the other end of the room. A built-in glass cabinet filled one long wall. The opposite wall contained two large floor-to-ceiling bookshelves with a library ladder. The shelves were loaded nearly to capacity. A couple of easy chairs and a small table with a reading lamp provided an inviting place to sit and enjoy the book collection.

Among other things, the glass cases contained a collection of figural pieces carved in intricate

detail. The carvings were in a variety of materials and sizes. One entire shelf was devoted to carved ivory figurines. Another held insects wrought in metal. A grasshopper, a large beetle, a wasp, a scorpion and a cicada were a few of the forms represented. These appeared to be made of silver with gold, bronze and other metals applied for accents. According to the labels, they were made in the Japanese Meiji period by artists of the first rank. I suspected that, wherever he acquired them, the collection was worth more than my house — the one my second wife now owns.

From the kitchen I could hear Caryn's voice echoing down the hall, "How do you like your coffee?"

"Black," I shouted back.

Moving to the other side of the room I scanned some of the book titles. Ed clearly had an interest in history. Many titles were about the American Civil War. One book in particular caught my eye, "Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama," written by Walter L. Fleming, PhD. I had read this particular book myself years ago. People who think they know about the Civil War and the Reconstruction period that followed it should read it. They may be surprised at how much they don't know about the war and its consequences for the South. It's a rare book containing the observations of a scholar who was there during the period. I pulled it from the shelf and looked at the title page. Published in 1905, it appeared to be a first edition. I looked at a few of the others. Most were vintage books; many were first editions.

Caryn walked in and set a small tray with two cups of steaming coffee and a small plate of cookies on the table between to the two easy chairs.

Munching a cookie and sipping the excellent coffee, I said, "If you ever decide to sell any of these books you might first want to talk to my friend, Calvin. Among other things he's a highly competent antiquarian, and many of these books may be valuable."

"Would that be Calvin Byrd?"

"That's him."

"He was the source for most of them."

"Ah, well, the advice still stands. Tell me more about your relationship with Ed. It appears that the two of you got along famously."

"We did, and in answer to your next question, we had a very normal relationship. Ed and I had the usual number of spats, but we always worked it out. He was not just the love of my life, he was my best friend," she said. "The best advice my mother ever gave me was to fall in love with a good friend. Heated passion is a wonderful way to begin a relationship, but friendship is what keeps you together."

"What about money troubles?"

"Far from it; Ed and I are dinks ..."

"What's a dink?" I interrupted.

"It's an acronym for Double Income, No Kids. Ed made much more money than I do, but that was never an issue. At the time of his death, Ed had a little over \$6,000 in his personal checking account. I had about \$7,000 in mine. We both deposited our income into a shared account and automatically transferred a monthly allowance to our personal accounts. Ed's IRA has about \$3.7 million in it, mine has a similar amount. Our stocks portfolio is worth about \$6 million. I'd say we were doing pretty well."

"We both worked on the budget," she added, "but I always deferred to Ed's financial expertise. He was a wizard at allocating money so as to make the most of our resources."

"Did Ed have any sources of income other than the two businesses?"

“No.”

“What’s the source of your income?”

“I am a commercial photographer, mostly doing catalog work. I get an occasional regional magazine assignment, and I’m gradually building up enough stock shots to register a little income.”

“Are those your photographs in the hall?”

“Yes.”

“They’re very nice work.”

“Thanks. All of my commercial work is made using digital photography, but my landscapes are created using film. I have a darkroom downstairs.”

“I thought film photography was dead.”

“For commercial purposes in general, that’s true, but there are a few photographers who still love the old analog chemical processes. Working with film forces me to exercise patience and take a slower approach. It’s sort of a mental therapy I guess.”

We sat in silence for a few moments. The Weldons had been married about 14 years, according to my notes. He had attended two years at Mt. San Jacinto Community College in Hemet, California. He completed his Bachelor’s degree clear across the country at Penn State’s college of business, in State College, Pennsylvania. He then moved to Birmingham, and one year later obtained his CPA certification from the State of Alabama.

Something about this sequence of cross-country hop scotching seemed a little odd to me. CPAs tend to be linear thinkers and as a result tend to lead linear lifestyles. Maybe he had a scholarship to Penn State. Maybe Alabama’s certification was easier. Maybe I was unfairly stereotyping CPAs. I made a note to check into it.

“I see he began his education in Hemet, California. Was that his hometown?”

“He told me he grew up in Southern California, but he never mentioned a specific town. He never talked about his family. Whenever the subject came up in conversation he would quickly talk about something else. After this happened a few times, I didn’t mention it anymore.”

Some people — me, for instance — would find it odd she wasn’t curious about his early life. Most women build their lives around relationships, including relationships with their husband’s family. Usually a veiled past will result in rejection of a potential mate.

“Didn’t that strike you as a little odd?”

“Lots of people don’t want to talk about their childhood. Maybe he had abusive parents — he didn’t talk about them, either. I didn’t want to pry.”

“Yes, and maybe he was an ex-con skipping parole.”

That comment earned me a glare from Caryn Weldon.

“If you had known him, that thought would never have occurred to you.”

“Having unkind thoughts that don’t occur to other people is what I’m paid to do. Some of the worst serial killers are said to have been very charming people.” I gave her a moment to consider that before adding, “So, you weren’t curious about his parents or whether he had any siblings or past wives?”

“Of course I was, but forcing him to open up before he was ready might have put an unnecessary strain on our relationship. I think he would have told me eventually, so why risk it?”

Not knowing these things might have been a bigger risk, I was thinking, but I didn’t say it. It seemed to me that 14 years would be plenty of time to develop full trust in your life partner and “open up.” I doubted that Weldon would ever have told her. It could be he had a skeleton rattling its bones in the old family closet, and it was too dreadful a specter to trust the love of his life

with it. I decided to set this aside for now and move on.

“Who were his closest friends?”

“Eddie had a lot of friends, but I wouldn’t say he was particularly close with any of them. Oh, he had golfing and hunting buddies and people we partied with at football tailgate parties and social events at the country club. If he had any really close friends, it would have been Maggie and me.”

I had an inkling that Caryn and Maggie may not have been as close to him as they thought. No matter how much you know about here and now, you’re flying blind without knowledge of the past.

“Did he have any hobbies?”

“You’ve seen his books and art collections. He took up skydiving at one time, but he gave it up after only a few jumps. His schedule didn’t allow a lot of time for extra activities. One exception was coaching the Black Warrior Waterdogs soccer team. He could always find time for the kids.”

“Soccer?”

“Yes. He loved kids and he was a great coach. He was in excellent physical condition, too. He could run up and down the field with these 12 and 14 year-old kids without getting winded at all. You could tell that he had once been an excellent player himself and he had a talent for working with youngsters. His team was among the top finishers in the league every year.”

“He loved kids, but you have no children. Did he not want any children of his own?”

“Oh, we wanted them all right,” she said with a wistful smile. “We just couldn’t seem to make any.”

“I suppose you sought medical help with that?”

“We did. You don’t really need the details of this, do you? It’s enough for you to know the problem was the result of body chemistry.”

“Yours or his?”

“Mine.”

“Not treatable?”

“We tried. The therapy didn’t work. Look, can we just switch to a different subject? This really isn’t relevant to your investigation.”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to pry.”

But that’s exactly what I was doing. At this point everything affecting Edward Weldon’s life was relevant. With no real leads to follow, I needed to pry out every possible motive someone might have for wanting him dead. Did we have a possible motive for murder here? Probably not, but far less important conflicts than this have been known to provide the flashpoint for someone’s untimely demise.

“How did Ed feel about this?” I continued.

“Considering how much we wanted to have children, I thought he was sort of blasé about it. Look, I already told you I don’t want to talk about this. It’s personal and not relevant.”

“OK, OK, sorry. One last question and we’ll move on.”

“All right, ask it,” she said, giving me a look that would have shriveled a basilisk.

“Did you resent his seeming indifference?”

“Yes, damn it, of course I did,” she said, shooting me another deadly glare.

I decided to quit before smoke started coming out of her ears.

“You know, you must be getting tired,” I told her. “You’ve been a good sport about putting up with my pestering. Why don’t we call it a night and get together again after I’ve checked out a

few things?”

“Fine, give me a call when you want to meet.”

“OK,” I said.

“I want you to remember,” she told me as I got into my car, “you’re really working for Ed, not me.”

It was still raining as I drove back down the ridge. I was coming away with more questions than answers. I’ve always had the idea that everything in the Universe is knowable — if you ask the right questions. I hoped I would eventually stumble across the right ones in this case.

The questions I’d asked so far didn’t appear to be very useful. As far as I could tell, Edward Weldon’s life really began right here in Birmingham. Everything before that was effectively a blank. College doesn’t count, that’s not life, that’s preparing for life. At least it used to be, Nowadays it mostly appears to be a seething laboratory of bizarre social experiments. But that’s another story.

Edward Weldon had been an interesting and complex man. The details of his early life were a mysterious blank, as was the motive behind his mysterious death. Somewhere between those two bookends of his life I had to find the thread connecting them. If I couldn’t find a motive and a murderer during his life in Birmingham, then I would have to find it in his early life. I didn’t have anything else, so it was as good as any other theory to pursue. To that end, I planned to see if I could get my hands on his school transcripts and root around in them for a clue.

At least things were now looking up in my own life. I had money to pay some bills. And this time I was taking on a client who was already dead.



## Chapter 2 — An Erased Past

---

I'm definitely a morning person. I love getting up early on any day when I don't have a hangover. The rain had cleared off overnight. The weather forecasters were predicting a warming trend and a few days of Indian summer. Suits me. Winter is not my favorite season.

The sun was barely a promising glow on the Eastern horizon and the faint smell of autumn was in the air when I got in my car and headed for the Daybreak Donut Shop. I'm picky about coffee and generally prefer to make my own, but I was on a mission this morning. Balancing two large, Styrofoam cups of black coffee and a sack of plain doughnuts, I climbed back into my car and headed to the cop shop. I parked next to an oversized, shiny four-wheel drive Ford pickup truck and waited for my old pal Pope Walker to end his shift.

Pope is one of those good ol' boys who grew up Southern. Tall and muscular, he was a natural athlete and played first string on the varsity football and baseball teams. I couldn't even manage to become a bench warmer on any of our high school teams. While Pope was spending time pumping iron and attending team practices, I was slacking off and partying.

Our other friends used to josh us about being a team — I was supposed to be the brains of the outfit and he was the muscle. Our less charitable peers referred to us as “the hero and the wimp.” Pope was brighter than me. He probably still is, although in recent years I've made up a lot of lost ground by becoming a prolific and omnivorous reader. One thing we had in common was girls. Driven by adolescent lust, we both had a fierce desire to get laid. Neither of us was particularly successful at it. At least I wasn't. I'm pretty sure Pope, always the gentleman, would not have said anything about it even if he had been.

After high school Pope attended our state college on an athletic scholarship with the idea of becoming a lawyer. Then along came 9/11 and his plans were put on hold while he joined the Marines and put in two tours in Afghanistan. When he came home, the law degree was water under the bridge.

“I just want to get a job and find a nice girl,” he told me at the time. “I want to start living my life.” And so he had. A year after getting on with the cops, he married Miss Mary Jo Harris, as nice a young woman as you'll find these days.

At the other end of the parking lot, an unmarked police cruiser pulled into a reserved parking space. A tall, redheaded man got out and entered the building. He was wearing a tailored suit in charcoal gray, and walked with what he apparently thought was a military bearing. His gaze swept the parking lot, but he hadn't seen me slouched down in my car seat at the back of the lot. Good thing. It was Police Lieutenant Nathan Cobb. I'm not what you would call a well-liked man, but as far as I know, Cobb is one of the few people who genuinely hate me. I think Pope's wife, Mary Jo, probably hates me, too, but she doesn't make as big a deal out of it.

It hasn't always been that way. Until our junior year in high school, Nathan had been one of our best pals. We hung out together, drank illicit beer and chased girls together. And in that regard, Cobb was the exact opposite of Pope. He claimed to have “done it” with half of the cheerleader squad, and a few other assorted females including a couple of teachers. He never

tired of relating the titillating details of what we knew to be his fictional escapades with our female classmates. Word gets around and pretty soon the girls became aware of his bragging. As a result it became impossible for him to get a date. He became insufferably frustrated and cranky. He also became a voyeur.

The layout of our school gym had the boys and girls locker rooms and showers separated by a large storeroom used as a storage area for cleaning supplies and equipment. After gym class one day I heard a “clunk” in the storeroom and stuck my head in the door. Nathan was in there with his face plastered to the wall that abutted the girls shower room. I was puzzled for a moment, and then I realized he’d apparently dug himself a peep hole in the wall. He looked up and gave me a sickly grin. I backed out and hunted up Pope.

“Well, what are we gonna do about it?” I asked Pope. “We can’t let him get away with this. I don’t think ratting him out is a good idea.”

“Ratting him out would officially be the right thing to do,” Pope had replied, “but I’m not sure it’s really the right thing to do. For sure it would embarrass the girls more than Nathan. And it probably would cause all kinds of other problems. Let’s think it over. I’ll bet we can come up with something.”

And so we did. Pope rounded up a couple of beefy linemen from the football team, and well before classes were underway the following morning, we set up an ambush in the storage room. As soon as Nathan stepped into the room, I threw a burlap sack over his head and the other guys grabbed him. Quickly gagging and hog tying him, we dragged him out of the store room and into the girls’ locker room. We quickly yanked his pants off and tied him spread eagle between the benches, which were conveniently bolted to the floor. Once he was in position, we used a bottle of permanent ink to dye his scrotum blue.

I probably should have let it go at that, but even back then I was not a very nice person. He had been producing muffled howls until I laid a cold steel screwdriver next to his family jewels and yelled “shut up! We’re going to take the gag out ’cause we don’t want you to suffocate. You make a sound after that, I’m gonna take this nice, sharp knife and lop these useless things off.”

This resulted in instant silence and we bailed out as fast as we could. The incident created a lot of hoo-ha. Police were called, reporters swarmed, and nothing came of it, except Cobb’s undying hatred of me. He’d recognized my voice but he didn’t dare say anything because he didn’t want his own secret revealed. I like to think we cured him of what could have become a very unhealthy fetish.

A sudden sharp rapping on the car window jerked me alert. The drool on my shirt proved I’d been dozing.

“Open up!” Pope said. “What the heck are you doing here?”

I cranked the car window open.

“Waiting for you; I need to pick your brain,” I said, reaching across to unlock the car door. “This shouldn’t take long.”

He opened the door and slid into the passenger seat.

“Ah, good, you brought coffee — any sinkers left in that bag, or did you eat them all?”

I passed him the bag and the remaining cup of coffee. The coffee was still steaming when he pulled the cap off.

“Good thing you aren’t in a dangerous occupation,” Pope mumbled through a mouthful of doughnut.

“Why do you say that?”

“I could have easily snuck up on you and popped you in the head while you were snoring.

Don't know why it didn't wake you up, car windows rattling like that."

"I wasn't snoring. It's just a little sinus congestion. I was aware of everything around me the whole time."

"Uh huh. Well, reason I mention it; this is dangerous territory for you. If Cobb spotted you out here with no witnesses around, he might be tempted."

"The man does seem to be holding a grudge. You'd think he'd be grateful. I'm pretty sure we saved him from a life of crime, or maybe unrequited onanism."

"Is this why you wanted to pick my brain?"

"Mostly I was hoping you could share some information with me about the Weldon murder."

"Sure, I'll tell you everything I know."

A long silence ensued. I could hear a small flock of sparrows chit-chatting in nearby bushes.

"I thought you were going to tell me everything you know," I said, finally breaking the silence.

"I just did. I don't know anything about that case that wasn't in the papers. Probably less, in fact, because I don't read the papers and I don't have time to watch TV."

"Have you no professional curiosity?"

"Nope. By the time I finish writing up all the crap I have to write at the end of my shift, I have absolutely no curiosity about anything. If you want to know about that case, you'll need to talk with Leroy."

"Leroy? You mean that big dumb jackass who confiscated my office chair?"

"Yeah, that's him. Our very own Detective Leroy Culpepper."

"What makes you think he'd tell me anything? I don't think he likes me."

"What's that got to do with it? He's a professional. I'll bet he'd extend you a certain amount of professional courtesy. Just call him and ask. Wait, there he is, getting out of his car right now."

Pope stuck his head out the window, stuck two fingers in his mouth and emitted an ear-splitting whistle that left me half deaf. Leroy looked up and started ambling our way when he saw Pope waving him over.

"What's up?" Leroy said, affably, as he climbed into the back seat. "You guys getting up a poker game or what?"

"Tony wants to know about the Weldon case," Pope said. "I figured since it's your baby you'd be the go-to guy."

"I smell doughnuts," Leroy said. "I'm starving. I got this problem — my memory don't work so well in a low grease condition. A nice hot cup of coffee and a coupla' fresh doughnuts would probably fix me right up."

"We're all out of coffee, and I think Pope hogged the last doughnut."

"Yep. Nothin' left but crumbs," Pope said, holding up the empty sack. "Here, you wanna sniff the bag? Maybe it will inspire you."

"It inspires me all right. It inspires me to keep my mouth shut until I get some doughnuts," Leroy complained.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God," I groaned, leaning my head on the steering wheel as I started the engine. "I don't remember seeing this chapter in the 'How to Become a Private Eye' manual."

"Don't you be taking the Virgin's name in vain. I used to be Catholic. My buddy Pope here still is," Leroy said.

"I'm not Catholic," Pope said.

“So, why did your folks name you Pope?”

“It’s an old family name.”

In spite of the mindless banter, I managed to learn some useful facts during the ride to Daybreak Donut Shop.

For one thing, the cops hadn’t seen any need to pull his school records. When I asked Leroy about it he’d said, “What for? Ya think one of his professors bumped him off?”

I also learned they’d fingerprinted his cadaver and run the prints through the AFIS database. The search proved negative.

“Be sure to get a couple of those glazed raspberry jelly doughnuts,” Leroy requested, as I got out of the car at the doughnut shop. “I like cream and two sugars in my coffee.”

Sitting in the car, watching Leroy trying to lick a dribble of raspberry filling off his chin, I was struck by another possible line of inquiry.

“Did Weldon ever serve in the military?” I asked.

“Nope,” came the laconic answer. It seems Leroy is a man of few words when he’s dealing with a doughnut.

“What if he’d been in the service under another identity? Wouldn’t his prints have been in AFIS?”

“Not necessarily,” Pope threw in, “They’ve only been adding military personnel to AFIS since sometime in 2000. If he served before then, prints from his military service wouldn’t be in the database.”

“What about his family?” I wanted to know, “Have you contacted them?”

“Well, we tried,” Leroy said, wiping his chin with a napkin. “Based on his resume, he’s originally from California. We found quite a few Weldons out there, but none who were related to him.”

“Or who would admit to being related to him,” I said.

“Same diff as far as we’re concerned. No matter how much he may have pissed off his relatives, it’s pretty unlikely they would bother hiring someone to bump him off after all these years.”

Leroy had a point.

“Did you check the airline flight lists to see if any recent flights were carrying someone named Weldon flying in from a Western state?”

This earned a genuine smile from Leroy — only the second one I’d ever seen. The other one had come when he had taken his first bite of jelly doughnut.

“Ya know, you might have some minor potential as a detective,” Leroy said, digging in the bag for the last doughnut. “We did that very thing, and you know what? We came up blank.”

This is why it’s always a good idea for people in my business to befriend cops. They have legal access to information that you could access only with great difficulty, and illegally at that. A friendly cop can save you a ton of legwork.

I was struck by another thought.

“Any chance he was in the federal witness protection program?”

“Pretty unlikely,” Leroy said. “Usually the feds wouldn’t tell us if he was, and it’s even more unlikely with him dead — those boys pride themselves on never losing one of their wards.”

“One thing you can be sure of,” he added, “if he was one of theirs, they’re scrambling to figure out how the bad guys found him.”

In murder cases the spouse is almost always the first suspect. Just before I dropped Leroy and Pope back at the police station, I asked if Caryn Weldon was still a “Person of Interest.”

“Nope. We checked out all the usual motives, money, illicit affairs and the like,” Leroy told me. “He was worth a lot more money to her alive than dead, and according to the gossip circuit, they were sticking to each other tighter than a fresh coat of paint on a fence.

“By the way,” he added, “who are you working for? I hope it’s not Mrs. Weldon. We all know what happens to your clients. She seems like a real nice lady and much too young to die.”

“I’m actually working for Edward Weldon.”

“Well, that’s a real break for ya,” Leroy smirked. “You won’t get any complaints from him.”

“It does take some of the pressure off. Speaking of pressure, Leroy, when do I get my office chair back?”

“Huh,” he grunted, “it’s evidence. Way justice moves these days you might get lucky and get it back before you retire. Was I you, and thank God I’m not, I’d just go get myself a new chair.”

After dropping them off, I consulted my notes. I hadn’t advanced the case much. My conversation with Pope and Leroy appeared to eliminate family members or ex-wives as the killer, but there was no way to be certain unless I was able learn whether there were any and where to find them.

His blank past really bugged me. No relatives? Even amoebas have at least one relative.

## Chapter 3 — Pandora's Key

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I was more convinced than ever that finding Weldon's long lost family could lead to unraveling the entire case. If I could get my hands on his school transcripts, maybe I could follow a trail of old addresses to find relatives the cops had missed, or even just someone who knew him back then. Based on past experience with school administrators, I knew how difficult it can be to get access to school records. It was time to call in my friend, LA Police Detective Delbert Scroggs. I looked at my watch. Los Angeles is two hours earlier than Birmingham. It was a little too early to call Del.

To kill time, I decided to interview Winston Bibb, Weldon's office manager. Weldon & Associates accounting firm is located in a storefront in old downtown Birmingham. Like most big towns, Birmingham has fairly limited downtown street parking. I had to circle the block three times before finding an open stretch of curb about a half block from Weldon's offices. I had just enough change to satisfy the parking meter for a half-hour.

Walking inside, I noted the pleasant, Mid-Century Modern furnishings. The sweet young thing staffing the reception desk gave me a professional smile, and asked how she could help me. I told her I was there to see Mr. Bibb.

"Do you have an appointment?" she asked, looking at her computer screen with a little frown.

"Matter of fact I don't," I told her, "But I think Mr. Bibb will want to see me anyway."

At that moment a door opened and a tall, lean man with a distinguished look stepped into the outer office. Judging from the gray hair at his temples and his tightly trimmed dark mustache, I pegged his age at about 50 trying to look 39. I wondered how much Grecian Formula he was using to maintain that look. My nose informed me he was an Aqua Velva man.

"You must be Winston Bibb," I said, extending my hand. After a slight pause he accepted it. I noted his handshake was dry and firm.

"Yes, how can I help you?"

I handed him one of my nicely engraved cards that reads, "Anthony Alpo, Discreet Investigations."

"I'd like to talk with you about Edward Weldon," I told him.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," he said, alternately eyeballing me and my card. "I don't mean to be unfriendly, but anything I would have to say related to Edward is private information and I doubt it's any business of yours."

"Ah, but it is. Mrs. Weldon hired me to look into his death."

Giving me a skeptical look, Bibb said, "Why don't you have a seat in my office while I make a telephone call."

I wasn't offended. I'm used to people doubting what I say. Sometimes even I have doubts about what I'm saying.

Ushering me into the office, he closed the door behind me. I selected one of the posh, leather chairs in front of his desk and sat down to wait. Looking around, I could see that Winston worked hard at making a good impression. In addition to the usual certificates on the wall, the

credenza behind his desk displayed a couple of golfing trophies and some tasteful art glass vases. The desk itself was a walnut monster that must have weighed 500 pounds. The highly polished desktop was absolutely bare of papers. An antique pen and inkwell desk set that probably was marked "Tiffany & Co." on the bottom, and a largish cigar humidor made from what looked like rosewood completed the ensemble.

Fifteen minutes later, Bibb entered the room and closed the door behind him. Seated at his desk he looked comfortable, but not relaxed.

"It would appear that Mrs. Weldon did in fact hire you. After checking your credentials I regard that as a most unfortunate occurrence," he said, fixing me with a stern look.

"You can't blame that on me, I told her it was a bad idea, but you know, some women insist on having things their way."

"Let's get on with it, then. I have a very busy schedule. What do you need from me?"

"I'm just trying to learn more about Weldon. For example, how long had you known him?"

"Since just before Christmas, 1995. I met him the day he interviewed me for employment at this office. I was just out of college and I very much needed the position, so I was exceedingly grateful for the opportunity to work in the field for which I had studied so long."

"What was your role?"

"Basically, I was a bookkeeper. I also maintained the office as well. As the business grew Ed added additional personnel until the firm grew to the level you see today."

"How many people are employed by the firm?"

"There are four accountants, including me, a receptionist and two shared secretaries. We are presently recruiting an additional CPA. As I mentioned, this is a very busy office."

"I understand Weldon was a real go-getter when it came to bringing new clients into the business."

"That he was. He was exceedingly talented in that regard."

"I also understand that is what he was doing on the day he was murdered."

"Indeed. That was his primary occupation every working day."

"Tell me about that day. Was there anything out of the ordinary routine?"

"There isn't much I can say about it. He was at his desk when I arrived at about 7 a.m. We had coffee and discussed the day's business. I may add that this was our usual routine. He told me he planned to meet with a new client that morning, and then conduct some prospecting in Tuscaloosa. 'Prospecting' was his term for cold-calling on potential clients. He expected to be out of the office all day. You know, I already went over all of this with the police. You could save both of us time by reading their reports."

"Probably not," I told him, "the cops are not overly generous with information on active murder cases. Besides, I might think of a question they missed."

The idea that I might think of something the cops missed resulted in a skeptical smile from Bibb. The cops very rarely miss a trick, and as I said before, we have some smart cops in this town. But "rarely" is a long way from "never," and even a blind hog finds an acorn now and then.

"Do you recall the name of the client he saw that morning?" I continued.

"No, just a minute, I'll consult my notes." While he fiddled with the computer hidden under a glass panel in his desktop, I looked around the room and wondered how much it would cost to spruce up my own office.

"Here we go," he said, "The man's name was Robert White."

Oh boy, Bob White; an obvious alias. At least this bird had a sense of humor.

“Did the police ask you about this?”

“No, they had no need to ask me about it, as they had taken possession of his computer and daily planner.”

Do you have any contact information for Mr. White?” I asked, already knowing what the answer would be.

“No.”

“Did Weldon ever talk about his college days; or his life growing up?”

“Not that I can remember.”

“Didn’t you think that was a bit odd?”

“Not particularly, he rarely talked about himself at all.”

After a few more questions covering old ground, I decided it was unlikely I would learn any additional information from Bibb. Yes, he had been hoping to acquire a partnership in the firm, but that was no basis for a motive; he was on the direct track for that in any case. In fact, Weldon’s death might work against him, since Weldon’s wife could sell the business outright — and not necessarily to him.

There seemed to be no friction points between them. According to Bibb they were simpatico on all aspects of running the business. Although they spent little time with each other socially, they were nevertheless friends.

Bibb was growing visibly impatient at the amount of his time I was using up, so I decided to end the interview for now.

“Thanks for your cooperation,” I concluded. “Just one more thing — I’d like to take a look at Weldon’s office before I go.”

“No problem. I’ll have one of the secretaries show you around. Just call the office if you need anything else,” he said, a little friendlier now that I was on my way out of his well-groomed hair.

Another pretty young woman led me down the hall to an office that was furnished nearly identically to Bibb’s office. The arty details for Weldon’s office included a very large, landscape photograph in black and white. I was fairly sure I knew who the photographer was. The credenza housed several beautiful wood carvings and some obviously antique leather-bound books. I noticed a very early two-volume edition of Adam Smith’s, “The Wealth of Nations.”

The secretary stayed to watch as I wandered around the room. I supposed Bibb was worried I’d steal the silverware. Like Bibb’s, the desktop was mostly bare. The desk drawers contained the usual office debris, with nothing bearing the stamp of Weldon’s personality in them. The only odd thing was that one of the drawers was completely empty. Most likely the cops had removed the drawer’s contents.

Idly flipping through random pages of the books, I spotted a small key buried in the gutter between the pages in one of them. My back was to the secretary, so I had no trouble palming the key without her being aware of it. I carefully looked around the room, but I didn’t see anything the key would fit. The book’s title, “The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind,” made it unlikely that someone would pick up for a casual read.

Out on the street I took a moment to closely examine the key. It appeared to be made of brass, or more likely bronze. It had the stamped number 157 and a message, “Do Not Duplicate.” Otherwise it offered no clue as to its origin. It was about half the size of a standard door key. It could have been for a storage locker at a travel terminal or a safety deposit box. A post office box was another possibility.

But why hide it? I could think of several reasons why someone might want to hide such a key, and none of them involved legitimate business.



I took Bibb's business card out of my pocket and examined it. In addition to the office street address, there was also a post office box address, but the box number didn't correspond to the key's number. It seemed unlikely that Bibb and Weldon would have different P.O. boxes for the business. Maybe it was a key for Houston Auto Sales' P.O. Box.

I decided I needed to interview Magdalena Houston.

I looked at my watch. I'd spent most of an hour fencing with Bibb. Walking back to my car, I could see someone had left a small piece of paper tucked under the windshield wiper blade. I thought it might be a discreet note from one of Bibb's hot secretaries pining for a date. I plucked it from the wiper. It was a parking ticket.

## Chapter 4 — Cupid's Ambush

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I could see the salesman's eyes light up when he saw me drive my rattletrap into Houston Auto Sales. He quickly strode to where I parked and was already standing next to the car door when I opened it. People are so seldom glad to see me coming that it warmed my heart a little. I almost hated to tell him I wasn't there to buy a car. His first name, "Ron," was embroidered below the company's logo on the left side of his neatly pressed blue dress shirt.

I broke the news to him gently and asked him to direct me to Houston's office.

"The main business office is across the street in the GM dealership," Ron said, with only a brief flash of disappointment before his friendly mask slipped back into place.

"You probably won't get to see her without an appointment; she's a busy lady," he added cheerfully.

"She has a secretarial assistant who will be glad to get you an appointment. Her name is Marty and she's a real nice-looking gal," he added with a conspiratorial wink.

"There's a lot of that going around," I told him, "something wrong with your eye?"

He gave me a puzzled look, and before he had time to think it over, I added, "Listen, Ron, is it OK to leave my car here for a while?"

"No problem," he said, handing me his card. "If you have time when you get back, maybe you'll want to look at a couple of the nice, low-mileage pre-owned cars we have in stock. We're in the middle of a big inventory clearance sale right now, and I can get you an absolutely amazing trade-in deal with rock-bottom financing."

Hope springs eternal. At least it does in the breasts of good salesmen. I looked at his card; it had the street address of the business, but no P.O. Box.

Houston Auto Sales looked to be a going concern, with a large inventory of used cars and trucks of all sorts. Looking around the lot, I could see four salesmen besides Ron who were working with prospective buyers, and a couple of others trolling. In addition to the used car business, there were two, new car dealerships across the street, Houston GM and Mazda.

Maybe I've been in the wrong line of work. These folks clearly were making money at a rapid rate and in no danger of failing to make the rent. Then I reminded myself that, according to Caryn, it once had been on the rocks and Edward Weldon came riding to the rescue.

Walking past the shiny new Buicks and GM pickup trucks in the showroom, I was accosted twice by hungry car salesmen.

I fended them off with, "I'm being helped, thanks, Ron is assisting me."

A nicely paneled extra-wide hallway led to the service department and its waiting room. Another small hallway housed restrooms and a door at the far end marked "Private."

Houston's office offered a small, but pleasant reception area. Ron had been right; her secretarial assistant was a stunner. Unlike Bibb's bevy of beauties, she was a mature woman in her late 30s, maybe early 40s. She seemed to be very good at her job, one facet of which was to run interference between Houston and seedy looking distractions such as myself.

I was certain that Caryn would have called Houston and given her a heads-up following this

morning's conversation with Winston Bibb.

"I'm very sorry," she said, favoring me with her best professional smile. "Ms. Houston has staff meetings and a full schedule today. Perhaps I can help you with an appointment tomorrow or the day after?"

"I'm certain she will want to see me as soon as possible," I said, handing her my card and beaming my best Thomas Magnum smile in her direction.

OK, about the only thing I have in common with Magnum is my bushy mustache. Otherwise it's sort of like comparing Michelangelo's "David" with a troll doll. I've been told I have a magnetic smile, but unfortunately, it often just attracts fists.

"Could you please take my card to her and see if she is willing to squeeze me into her schedule today? My business is fairly urgent." The smile must have worked at least a little this time. She accepted the card with a doubting expression and carried it into the inner office. While she was gone I snagged one of her boss' cards. Nope, no P.O. Box.

"You can come right in," she said with a winsome smile that was much friendlier than the previous one. I wanted to tell her it made her look ten years younger than her professional smile.

I had been right about the heads-up.

Magdalena "Maggie" Houston met me at the door and walked me into her office. She looked young to be running a company this large. I pegged her age as 32 or 33. She was a petite woman. She had soft brown eyes and a complexion that suggested she might have a conquistador lurking in her gene pool. She wore her hair medium short and she was dressed in a latte-colored business suit cut from soft English wool tweed. She wore a scarf in a shade of dark red that exactly matched her lipstick. She had taken off her jacket to work on a couple of piles of paper neatly stacked on her desk. I could tell from her trim figure and the musculature of her upper arms that she worked out regularly. Houston is a classic beauty. Call me a sexist, but I thought she had nice lines no matter where you looked. I tried not be too obviously studying her lines. Some women like that, some don't. Her genuine smile was a bonus. I liked her immediately.

"Hello Mr. Alpo, I've been expecting you," she said, offering a warm and firm handshake. "Caryn called earlier and told me you probably would be paying me a visit."

"Sure enough, here I am."

"Yes, here you are. Would you like some coffee?"

I nodded an affirmative and she picked up the phone to request coffee for us. We studied each other for a moment. I could hear an old-fashioned pendulum clock on the shelf behind her ticking off the seconds.

"Does your business use a P.O. box for anything?" I ventured.

"No, why do you ask?"

"Just wondered. So, how long did you know Ed Weldon?"

"It seems like all of our lives," she said. "We both were very young when he came to work here at Houston Auto Sales back in the early 1990s. He had just graduated from college. My father hired him to keep the books. Although I was only 16 years old at the time, I'd already been working for Dad, helping out around the car lot for a couple of years. We quickly became pals."

"I'm surprised that relationship didn't blossom into a romance."

"No, we were strictly platonic. He became the big brother I'd always wanted. Do you find it hard to believe that two young people filled with raging hormones could maintain a non-sexual relationship Mr. Alpo?" Houston said, with a slight smile that reminded me of the famous Mona Lisa painting.

“Not at all,” I answered her with a rueful grin. “That’s pretty much the only kind of relationship women have ever wanted from me.”

She erupted into a hearty laugh. At that point the coffee arrived, served steaming in heavy, old fashioned restaurant style mugs with mini containers of Half-and-Half and sweeteners of various types. After a couple of sips of what was arguably the best coffee I’d tasted this year, I was thinking this was a woman a guy could get along with, then I remembered how marriage had turned out with my first two wives. I didn’t want to ruin her life even for a little while; even less so my own. Still, it was nice that she seemed to enjoy my quirky sense of humor.

We resumed our conversation.

“What I remember most about Eddie in those early days was his unlimited energy. He was totally upfront about wanting to get his CPA license and start his own accounting business. He wanted to earn more money and he told my dad he was thinking about taking a second job. Dad was a really practical guy, so he put Eddie to work selling cars when the bookkeeping work was caught up. As it eventually worked out, I became the actual bookkeeper with Eddie keeping an eye on what I was doing.”

“Bibb mentioned that he was a good salesman.”

“Oh yes, Eddie was one of the best closers we ever had. He was making a ton of money for the business and for himself, and he was socking it away in the bank. Dad really liked Eddie. I knew he was hoping Ed would develop into a son-in-law, but that was not to be. I loved Eddie, but I loved him as a brother.”

She paused for a moment, and I thought her eyes looked a bit moist.

“The following year he got his CPA, and the year after that, he rented an office and started Weldon & Associates. It was sort of an inside joke; there were no associates at first, just Eddie working his tail off as usual. He was a great salesman and he knew it.”

“I’m assuming he quit his job here to pursue Weldon & Associates.”

“Yes, although in a way he still worked for us — we were his first client.”

“So how did it happen that he bought into your business?” I wanted to know.

“That’s a tedious and shameful story that I’m embarrassed to tell.”

“I won’t tell anyone else,” I told her.

She glanced at her watch, and then gave me an abstracted look that told me she was weighing the pros and cons of relating the story.

“You know, we should continue this conversation over some food,” she said. “I’m getting hungry and I haven’t taken time off for a nice lunch away from this office for weeks.”

“What about your staff meetings?”

She picked up her desk phone and punched the intercom button.

“Marty, something has come up. I’m having lunch out today. Please be a dear and notify the department heads that we will be rescheduling our afternoon meeting. I know they’ll grumble, but hopefully you can find a common time and day that will work for them. You have license to adjust my schedule as needed — thank you — oh, will you have one of the lot attendants bring my car around to the service entrance? Thanks.”

“Where do you have in mind for lunch, Mrs. Houston?” I asked, as we strapped ourselves into the leather seats of her shiny new Buick Enclave.

“We’re going to Harvest Restaurant at the Redmont Hotel. And it’s not ‘Mrs.’ I haven’t been married for years. My friends call me Maggie.”

“And are we friends?”

“At the moment I can’t think why not.”

“Unfortunately I can think of several really good reasons why not,” I told her. “The first is I’m investigating a murder, and while you’re not a suspect, it is possible you had some reason for having your business partner whacked.”

“Well there is that. OK, we’ll hold off being friends for a while and just settle for being friendly. Let’s drop some of the formalities. You can call me Maggie.”

“OK, call me Tony.”

While we were talking she had left the surface street and we were headed toward downtown Birmingham on Interstate 20. We dropped off the expressway onto 25th Street. After several blocks we turned right on 5th Avenue. Pulling up in front of the Redmont, we got out of the car and she handed her keys to the parking valet.

The Redmont Hotel first opened in 1925. It’s located in Birmingham’s downtown Historic District, and it’s the oldest working hotel in Alabama. It was designed in the Chicago style by a famous Atlanta Architect. I had driven past it a few times since its latest renovation, but I hadn’t been inside. The hotel’s Harvest Restaurant was a little upscale for my budget, but when duty calls I can step up to the plate.

I was surprised by the modern décor of the restaurant. The white, tufted leather booths were quite comfortable and the chandeliers were right out of the modern style ushered in by the Space Age.

“This is one of my all-time favorite places to eat,” she said, while I studied the menu. Most of the offerings leaned toward rustic Italian fare.

“What’s good?”

“All of it. My favorite is the Joyce Farms Chicken. It’s served with mushrooms, Risotto and Parmesan cheeses and topped with a really nice Salsa Verde. Their New York Strip Steak is also top notch.”

We placed our orders. She had the Joyce Farms Chicken and a glass of Chardonnay. I had the Shrimp Pasta with a bottle of Corona.

“I used to come here often for lunch with Eddie. In recent years, it was not so often and usually with Caryn as well. It’s a ten-minute walk from his office.”

“Caryn said you introduced her to Weldon.”

“Yes, this would have been in 2002, the same year he bought into Houston Auto Sales. The Country Club was holding its annual charity auction. Eddie and I were there to represent the dealership, which had donated a new car to the event. This was something my dad did every year, and I maintained the tradition after he passed.”

“Why did they not meet sooner? You had known Ed since the early 1990s and Caryn from grade school.”

“Kismet. It just never worked out that way. If they had met sooner I’m certain they would have married sooner. In any case they were married soon after they met.”

“Speaking of Ed buying into Houston Auto Sales, you were supposed to tell me about that over lunch,” I reminded her.

Just then the waiter arrived with our food.

“Let’s eat first,” she suggested.

*Drat! Was I never to hear this story?*

I finished eating first, and I watched her eat while I sipped my second beer. I don’t know why, but when most people eat, it’s a pretty utilitarian process. Watching her, I thought it one of the most sensuous things I had ever seen. She really was a beautiful, sexy woman. Maybe it was the beer, I thought. Our fingers touched as I handed her the bread basket. I suddenly felt an

electrifying wave of desire wash over me the like of which I had not felt since I was a teenager. What just happened? I asked myself. My fingers and toes were tingling. Either I'm having a stroke or I'm falling in love. Either one could prove fatal. This can't be love, I won't allow it.

She looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"Are you OK?" she said. "You look a little pale."

"I'm fine. I was struck by a thought. Fortunately it was just a glancing blow."

"Do you always do that?" she said with a wry smile.

"Do what?"

"Make self-deprecating comments to disguise your feelings," she said, reaching over and touching my hand.

"Was I doing that?"

"You know you were," she said, with a look in her eyes that warmed me all the way to my still-tingling toes.

"How was your food?" She added.

"The Shrimp Pasta was good. Not to brag, but it's not as good as a similar dish I have in my repertoire," I said, happy to be in safer territory.

"You cook?"

"It's the only thing I've ever claimed to be good at. If you like rustic Italian food, I'm your man."

"With an Italian name like Alpo, you must have learned some of that at home."

"No, I actually picked up insight from a local chef and a couple of good cookbooks."

I was tempted to tell her I had learned damned little in the several foster homes I'd bounced around in during my teen years. I learned how to get along by doing what was expected of me and keeping my mouth shut. It wasn't my foster parents' fault. I was a problem child. How I ended up without a juvenile rap sheet borders on miraculous, and is entirely due to a man named John Jenson, the pastor of a church I attended throughout most of my childhood.

"I envy you," Maggie said. "My kitchen skills are limited to making fajitas and chili. Otherwise I'm barely up to microwaving a TV dinner. The only really good meals I get are in places like this."

"I'll have to remedy that and prepare a couple of my specialties for you." The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

"Your place or mine?" She said, with a reprise of her Mona Lisa smile. "I have a perfectly good kitchen that's going to waste."

However much I might have the urge to pursue this woman, I had no business at all seeing her socially. Not only wouldn't it be prudent, it wouldn't be ethical. Besides, I didn't want any more entangling relationships. I was a two-time loser at marriage; both had been disasters. In my experience, there are less painful ways than marriage to make people hate you.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I've made an offer I can't do anything about for awhile. I'll feed you some home-cooked meals after I've wrapped up this investigation."

"I consider that a promise."

"OK, now will you please tell me how Weldon came to be your business partner?"

"My father died when I was 21 years old. I was really not up to running the business. Eddie advised me to sell it and use the money to finance a college education. I didn't want to sell it, and I refused to admit to myself that I didn't know enough about business to run it effectively. Needless to say, I made a few bad decisions in spite of Eddie's advice. There came a day when I couldn't pay for new inventory and make the payroll, too."

“And that’s when Weldon stepped in and offered to buy into the business?”

“Yes. He had the ready cash, but he had two stipulations. One was that, as far as the public is concerned, he would be a silent partner. But in private, I was required to strictly follow his advice about running the business. After several years of his lectures, I was fully competent to operate and grow the business on my own. At that point he backed away and let me off the leash.”

“And you didn’t resent that he continued to siphon off a percentage of the business profits without really doing anything for it?”

“His share was 20 percent of the net profit, and as far as I was concerned, he had earned every penny of it. Without his intervention there would have been no business,” she said, adding that it was time to get back to the office.

After a brief back and forth we agreed to go Dutch on the tab. Back at the dealership she parked near the service entrance and we got out of the car.

“Thanks for the pleasant lunch,” she said, shaking my hand and leaning over to give me a peck on the cheek. “That was a nice first date.”

“That was not a date!”

“Sez you,” she said, looking back and flashing a smile over her shoulder as she walked away. She looked very nice from that angle, too.