

A MATTER OF TASTE

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Dan Magraw neatly stacked the last few file folders on the corner of his desk. For the first time in a year, he could see the mahogany surface. Carved Japanese scenes stood out in sharp relief under the tinted glass. He looked at the clean desk with pride. He was out of here! Dan glanced out the office window to see the greening mountain town of Vail, Colorado. He was looking forward to hitting the road.

His pleasant thoughts were interrupted when Justin DeWit walked into the office, holding a cardboard banker's box full of files. Dan looked at the box with horror, realizing what it could mean.

"Read my lips, Justin." Dan pointed to his lips as he spoke, "V-a-c-a-t-i-o-n..."

Justin raised one eyebrow. Dan wondered whether the new piercing hurt when he did that. Four earrings crawled up the chief investigator's left ear. The earrings matched the brand new eyebrow ring.

"Read *my* lips," replied Justin. "Change of venue."

"I'm leaving, Justin. I mean it! Do whatever you want with that box, but I'm leaving in exactly twenty minutes." Dan checked his watch to show that he meant it.

Justin placed the box on the Eagle County Assistant District Attorney's couch. "Don't worry," he replied. "You don't have to even look at it. It was just barely assigned and they haven't even set the trial. It's just . . ."

Dan's eyes narrowed. "What?" He hated biting on the bait, but couldn't seem to help himself. Justin knew him too well.

"It's just such an odd case. It doesn't seem like it should even be going to trial." Justin paused, waiting for the hook to set.

Dan found himself reaching for the first file in the box. Justin always arranged them so that the summary was right in front.

Justin suggested, "I thought you might want me to do some research while you were on vacation."

Dan looked at the file in his hand and sighed. "Give me a quick run down."

Justin smiled, settling into a modified military at-ease. "The accused is Mandy Coral. She walked into the Glenwood Springs Police Department on March 15th. She was hysterical. Claimed he was dead and she was responsible. They finally calmed her down enough to find out *who* was dead. The victim is Richard "Ricky" Redding. Local pool shark and part time con artist. Her boyfriend."

Dan leaned back against his desk. "So she confessed?"

Justin nodded. "Repeatedly. Before and after they read her rights. They didn't do anything until they found the body. It was under the Grand Avenue bridge. Curled up in a ball."

"Why?" asked Dan, suspicious.

"Poisoned. Arsenic. A massive dose." Dan raised his eyebrows. Arsenic was hardly the poison of choice anymore, not since it became a controlled substance.

"Okay." Dan said. "We have a dead body, the boyfriend of the accused, who has admitted killing him. What's odd?"

"In all of her statements, she has never said that she *killed* him. Only that she's responsible."

Dan shrugged. "Same thing."

"Normally, I would agree," replied Justin. "But she didn't know where the body was."

"Arsenic takes some time to take effect. She could poison the coffee and he wouldn't die for minutes or hours."

Justin acknowledged that with a tilt of his head. "That's point one. Point two: She also didn't know *how* he died."

"What do you mean she didn't know?"

"She didn't know whether he was stabbed, or shot, or poisoned. She just kept saying, 'you're the investigators, *you* figure it out.'"

"So? People still get to use the Fifth Amendment, Justin," said Dan. "That doesn't mean she didn't know."

"I just have a gut feeling, Dan. There's something hokey about this whole thing. Read it when you get back if you want, but I thought that since you're vacationing in Glenwood Springs anyway—"

Dan scowled, annoyed. Justin avoided his gaze, looking instead at his watch. "Well, I see my twenty minutes are up. Have a nice vacation!" He hurried from the room.

Dan glanced from the file in his hand to Justin's quickly departing back.

"No!" he said out loud, shoving the file folder back into the box.

He turned off his desk lamp, pulled on his jacket, and walked toward the door. He switched off the overhead fluorescent, but made the mistake of turning for one more look at the room. A shaft of dusted golden sunlight lit up the white box on his couch.

Justin believed that a young woman sat in county jail for no reason. Dan sighed. His moral code wouldn't let him leave. *Or at least it won't let me have a good time.*

Two hours later, Dan sat back in his chair and rubbed his chin. He understood now what Justin meant. It *was* odd. For one thing, the investigators hadn't been able to determine the *method* of delivery of the poison. The medical examiner was certain that it had been ingested; administered in powdered form, but thoroughly dissolved. There were no injection points and no granules in his stomach.

Mandy had been at work, at a local truck stop, since six a.m. The victim hadn't eaten there. Her co-workers gave her a perfect alibi; yet she confessed.

The victim was married. It didn't appear from the statement of the wife that she knew about the affair. She had been volunteering at their childrens' school on the morning in question. There was life insurance, but not enough that she wouldn't end up working to support the kids.

Although Ricky had been a pool shark, he seemed to take care of bets and business. Nobody had any grudges that the police had been able to find. He kept his family in a decent house, and his dog in kibble. He was generally well-liked, or at least tolerated. There had been a large debt owed to a local drug dealer, or *alleged* drug dealer, but it had been paid recently. The police had tried to target the dealer, named Carlos, repeatedly, without success. He, too, had an alibi. He was in jail at the time. Plus, the debt had been paid.

In short, the police had a confession with very little evidence. There was one statement from a waitress at the Mardi Gras, the bar where Mandy worked previously. She said that Ricky did most of his sharking there. It was where he'd met Mandy. The girl, Becka Holliday, claimed she overheard parts of a very angry argument between the two about a week before the murder. Mandy had accused Ricky of taking something. He'd said he'd get it back to her. Becka hadn't seen the two together since.

Dan paused and read the words again. Not give, but *get* it back to her.

Four hours later, Dan finally started his vacation. His mind was spinning on the new case. He hated that. Just once, he'd like a vacation that wasn't interrupted by work.

Dan watched the sun nestle behind the mountains as he drove to Glenwood Springs, turning the canyon walls pink and orange, before fading to black. He checked into the Hotel Colorado later than planned, after eight. Luckily, he had called ahead to have his room held. He didn't even look at the luxurious interior of the tower room. He was just grateful that the shower was hot and the bed soft.

Dreams of murder haunted Dan's sleep. He woke early. He wouldn't be able to rest until he found Ricky's killer. It wasn't Mandy Coral. Justin was right. She didn't know enough about the crime to fill a thimble.

After a quick shower, he used the room phone to leave a message on Justin's voice mail.

"Justin. Dan. Find me the name of the investigator who worked on the case over here. And get me the name of the bar where Ricky hung out. Call me at the hotel."

He remembered after he hung up that he hadn't said hello or thanks.

He went downstairs to breakfast. The hotel had a buffet for the guests. When the waitress came around to refill his cup of decaf, he said, "Excuse me, but do you know where the dead body was found last spring?"

The older woman's eyes lit up. "You mean Ricky? Oh, yeah. I know all about that. I heard that they had to move the trial to Eagle County." She brightened when she saw she had a willing audience, and bent down toward his ear.

"Now, I don't know what others say, but I know Mandy Coral! There's no way that she could have killed him. Won't even swat flies, that one."

Dan tried not to get excited. The woman knew the parties involved. This could be extremely useful. "Really? Did you ... I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

"Betty."

"Did you tell the police that, Betty?"

"They never asked," she replied. "I worked with her over at the Springs coupla years ago. Nothing recent. But she's a sweet thing. A little naive, mind you. Ricky was a smooth one. He could play her like a fish. Her and Ivory both." She stared at him for a few seconds. "You have the strangest eyes. Like a bird. The irises are the same color as the pupil. What's your ancestry?"

Dan smiled. He'd heard that many times before. "A mutt. You're not the first to ask. People call me *Hawk* . . . bird eyes over a big beak." He touched his oversized nose, that his father called Roman and his mother called *aristocratic*.

Betty waved away the comment. "Oh, your nose is fine. And I love the eyes. Very interesting and *mysterious*."

They talked for a few more minutes, and he learned where the body had been found. Betty presented his check. He paid with a much larger bill, saying, "Keep the change."

Her eyes grew wide at the substantial tip. "You just let me know if you want to know anything else. I don't know lots, but I'll help where I can."

"Actually," said Dan. "Maybe you can help. Normally, in a small town, there's one person who knows everyone. Knows *everything* or, at least, has opinions."

Betty smiled. "That would be Judy."

"And Judy is?"

"Judy Bolson. She runs an antique store called 'Things Past'. You talk to her. She'll tell you stuff that I don't even *wanna* know."

Dan smiled and nodded.

The red light was blinking on Dan's room phone when the elevator opened. He strode across the room and picked up the receiver. The message directed him how to retrieve the voice mail.

"Dan, hi, this is Justin. Hey, I got the info you wanted." Dan wrote down the information and phone numbers given. Then he quickly changed to more business-like attire. Mountain business, not city. Clean black jeans, freshly shined boots, and a tailored, solid color flannel shirt. Following instructions given to him by the desk clerk, he drove to the police station.

He entered, carrying a briefcase. It contained a writing pad with what information he remembered from the file, some pens and the notes he had just written.

A Sergeant wearing a light grey uniform greeted him. "Something I can do for you, Sir?"

Dan identified himself, and asked to speak to Lt. Brian Globe or Sherman Knight, the chief investigator.

"Knight is in Aspen, and the Lieutenant's not here right now. He's at lunch." Dan checked his watch. It was 10:45!

Dan's raised eyebrows brought the response, "We have to take shifts. We're short handed today. You can probably catch him at the Mardi Gras. That's where he normally eats. They have great burgers."

Dan walked the two blocks back to the main street, and found the sign for the Mardi Gras. It peeked over the bridge, on a road that ran parallel, and slightly downhill from the main street.

The interior of the bar was cool and dimly lit. A long, slightly curved black and gold marble slab served as the bar. There was a small line waiting at the entrance. Every seat and bar stool was full. Dan glanced over the strangers until his eyes lighted on a pale grey uniform. Winding his way through the crowd, he stopped at a four-top with a single occupant. The man looked up, his mouth full of hamburger.

"Lt. Globe?" asked Dan. The man nodded, swallowed, and said, "Can I help you?"

Dan explained who he was. Burger in hand, Globe offered Dan a chair with a gesture.

Once seated, Dan explained that he had just received the case and that he was a little confused by some of the statements.

"No surprise there," said Lt. Globe. "Frankly, I was a little surprised that Sherman recommended charges be brought."

"You don't think she did it?" asked Dan.

"I don't see how she could have. She wasn't even positive he was dead. We had officers searching all over town after she walked in hysterical. When Dave radioed in that we'd found him, she seemed more scared than anything."

"Well, she had just turned herself in," offered Dan. "Maybe she decided she should have run."

Globe nodded. "That's what I thought at first. But there was that comment she made when we confronted her with the autopsy report. When I asked her where she got the arsenic, do you know what she said?"

It was one of the things that Dan had written down. He consulted his notes. "A person has to eat and drink, don't they? You can't hide from that."

"Exactly," agreed Lt. Globe. "But the transcript didn't say what she looked like when she said it. Her face went absolutely white, and she started shaking like a leaf." He dipped a homecut fry into

ketchup and popped it into his mouth. "Nope. No doubt in my mind. She's protecting someone. Or scared of someone. I'm not saying she's not involved. But I don't think she did it."

"But you don't know who did?"

"God, if I could have figured that out, no way would I have passed it over to Sherman, or at least, I would have fought to get her a deal. She's a nice kid."

"No idea how he got poisoned?"

"I had a theory about it, but it didn't pan out," replied Globe.

"Which was?" asked Dan.

"See, I knew Ricky. He was always on the fringes of the law, so we kept our eye on him. Nothing bad, you know, but we can't afford a local fleecing the tourists. Arsenic is normally given in food. But Ricky was really paranoid. Always ate his own cooking, or his wife's, and stood guard over his drinks here in the bar. I don't know how anyone could get close enough. I still think it's the wife, or her friend, Carlos."

"Carlos was a *friend* of Ivory's?" Dan hadn't seen that in the statement.

"Old family friend. That's why he kept loaning money to Ricky. For Ivory and the kids. I never did figure out how Ricky managed to pay him off. I heard the amount owed was in the thousands, but Carlos won't say. Just that he was paid, and he had no grudge."

Dan absorbed the information and thanked the Lieutenant for his time.

The words, "Things Past" were carved into a weathered, wooden sign above the small shop. A musical bell sounded when he entered. Every possible nook and cranny was stuffed with genuine antiques and strange oddities. A fluffy grey cat purred with fervor in a warm sunbeam.

A woman with cropped white hair and sallow skin remained seated behind the counter as he entered. She looked up from a novel just long enough to say briskly, "If you need anything, yell."

"Are you Judy Bolson?" Dan asked politely, moving toward the back of the store.

She gave him a searching look that seared through skin and bone. "That's me. What can I do for you?"

Dan decided to be direct. "I understand that you know everyone and everything in town."

Pale blue eyes crinkled at the corners. She smiled, revealing a missing front tooth. "Well, I'm not one to talk..." she began.

Dan introduced himself, and her eyes lit up. "Oh, my, yes! I know all about that."

"I'd be very interested to hear what people say happened." He was very careful not to ask for her opinion, so she wouldn't feel like she was being quoted.

She played the game well. "Well, as I heard it..."

Dan smiled.

"Mandy and Ricky had been sleeping around together for months. Poor Ivory didn't know a thing. That's what happens when you don't ask any questions and take everything a man tells you as gospel." She paused, remembering the audience. "No offense."

Dan's eyes twinkled. "None taken." He asked another question.

"Was Ivory the only one jilted?"

"Lord, no! Poor Ben was completely broken up when he found out! He'd set his sights on Mandy the day he met her. Gave her a ring a month after they met. She took it, but then never would set a date. He found out later why, of course," she added meaningfully.

Ben. He'd never read the name before. "Was this Ben a local? What's his last name?"

"Mostly. Ben Morely grew up here, then left after graduation. Came back a couple of years ago. He worked at the bar with Mandy, long enough to save up to buy his own tractor-trailer rig. Then he started local hauling. Moved up to over the road. That's when he and Mandy fell apart."

Dan nodded. Things were definitely headed in the right direction. "Someone," he began, not mentioning names--or evidence, "Mentioned that Mandy and Ricky had an argument just before he died."

"Argument!?!!" She cackled loudly. "It was a knock-down, drag-out, from what I hear. Word was that Ricky stole some jewelry from Mandy's house, then pawned it. She was furious. He said that Carlos was going to kill him, but that he'd get it back for her. Can't imagine what that poor little thing had that was worth pawning."

Dan had a good idea what that might be! He returned to the hotel room, and again called Justin.

It didn't take Dan long to find the names of all of the pawn shops in the valley. There were only five or six between Glenwood and Aspen. He might not be able to open doors, but the police could. A brief telephone conversation with Lt. Globe confirmed his opinion of the man. He, too, wanted to solve the case, and was very interested with the gossip from Judy Bolson. "Maybe I need to start talking to her myself. I never got a whiff of this from anyone we interviewed."

With the police checking the pawn shops, Dan concentrated his efforts elsewhere.

The method of poisoning still bothered him. He went back to the Mardi Gras. It was afternoon. The lunchers had returned to work. Only a few regular patrons, and a few tourists, remained.

He pulled up a stool and ordered a beer. "Worked here long?" he asked the 40-ish blonde man working behind the bar.

"I hope so," he replied. "I own the place." Dan grinned. God, life was good today!

"Did you know Ricky Redding very well?"

"And you are..??"

"From the Eagle County D.A.," he replied carefully. It was enough.

"Yeah, I heard they moved the case. I can't tell you anything I haven't told the police," he replied. "Ricky was a regular. Worked the pool table in the back. Made a living. Not great, but he paid his tab."

"You run tabs?" It was an old-fashioned concept that Dan was surprised still existed.

"Ricky was always good for it. I don't do it for just anyone."

"I heard he always ate home cooking. What did he buy to put on a tab?"

"Strega," replied the barkeep.

"Excuse me?" asked Dan.

"Liquore Strega," he said, then turned, unlocked a lower cabinet and removed a tall, slender bottle with a fake parchment label. "Special order stuff. Imported and expensive. He was the only one who drank it. Nasty tasting stuff. A matter of taste, I guess. I had to charge him almost double call, but he never complained."

Dan's mind started spinning fast. "Nobody else drank it, you say?"

"A couple of brave souls tried it once, me included. It tastes worse than bootwash. Supposed to be some sort of aphrodisiac. Don't know if that's why he liked it, but he had two or three shots every time he came in."

Dan examined the bottle without touching it. "Looks new," he commented.

"Only opened it a day before Ricky died. I'm probably stuck with the rest. Haven't had an order since. Strong enough to choke a horse. Even smells bad." He opened the cork and allowed Dan to take a deep sniff, which made him almost choke. "Want a taste? You'll see how bad it is."

"NO!!" Dan exclaimed suddenly, causing heads to turn on each side of him. "And don't let anyone else touch it, either. I'll be right back!" He started to leave the bar, and then stopped. "By the way, when did Ben Morley stop working here?"

"God, almost a year ago. Yeah, probably last June. Why?"

Dan shook his finger in the air as the pieces fit together. "Never mind. Just don't let anyone touch that bottle!"

It wasn't long before Ben Morley was in custody. Justin faxed Morley's fingerprints, taken from his police file in Denver for aggravated assault and domestic abuse. His fingerprints, and the bar owner's, were the only ones on the nearly full bottle of Liquore Strega. The contents were loaded with arsenic. The lab said a single shot would be lethal. When Dan smelled it, he had known for sure.

He watched through the two-way mirror as Ben Morley was questioned. Ben wouldn't talk, at first, but when Mandy found that he was in jail, she admitted that Ben told her he had killed Ricky,

and that she was next. Confronted with Mandy's testimony, he folded.

"Where did you get the arsenic?" asked Lt. Globe, sitting in the room with Sherman Knight and Justin.

"Is that what it was!?! Cool! I always loved that movie."

The men looked at each other in confusion. "What movie?"

"Arsenic and Old Lace. I loved those two old ladies. It's what gave me the idea. They used elderberry wine, but that stuff he drank was ten times stronger. I knew he'd never smell or taste it."

"You didn't know it was arsenic? Where did you get it?" asked Justin.

"Old mine up the mountain. I make extra money by finding stuff and selling it to antique stores. Lanterns, tin cups, stuff like that."

"Why did you use it? What made you think it was poison?" asked Lt. Globe.

"You ever read stories about those old miners?" he asked the trio. "They used mercury to separate gold. Dipped their hands right in it. They made their own dynamite. They used lead like we use plastic wrap. This white powder was in a jar with a skull and crossbones. Anything those guys thought was bad news had to be kick-ass!"

The diamond engagement ring given to Mandy--and hocked by Ricky, had been stolen from the pawn shop after Mandy's indictment. They found it in Ben Morley's room.

Morley was proud of himself. Happy they'd had to work to figure it out. He was pleased that Mandy had almost been convicted for it.

"She should be," he said strongly. "She was responsible. If she'd have kept her pants zipped, none of this woulda happened. I woulda married her." He sighed. "But now . . . I'll have to take care of her. A person has to eat and drink."

The three detectives looked at the accused with horror.

Dan shook his head. A poisoned bottle on an open shelf in a public bar. A brazen admission of murderous intent. Depraved... and stupid. *At least Ben won't hurt anyone else for a long while.*