

Haunting Investigation

a Chesterton Holte mystery

by

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Prologue

It really was a beautiful day, thought Chesterton Holte as he looked up into the endless blue of the spring sky. The little Belgian inn was worthy of a postcard: The trees were leafing out, and the Great War seemed much farther away than eighteen miles; even the four German soldiers facing him looked to be more likely to burst into song than to shoot him, their rifles like props for one of Franz Lehar's operettas rather than deadly weapons. Holte glanced at the crumpled form of the American journalist left beside the midden, and felt a stab of regret — it was unfortunate that he had become a casualty in a conflict that America was not part of, but war was like that — and was sorry that journalist had been mistaken by the soldiers for the spy they had been sent to get rid of. But weighing this one death against the nine hundred soldiers his dispatch would protect, he could not fault his decision to allow the Germans' their error: the soldiers had been looking for someone speaking English, and could not tell the slight difference between an American and a Canadian accent.

"Poor fellow," Holte said as a kind of benediction, and turned to face his executioners. He had been able to deliver his coded pages to the young man on the red bicycle, and they were now on their way to the coast; his mission was over, at the cost of only two men.

A blow struck his chest, vast and wet and too enormous to be pain. Holte felt his legs give way and then his face struck the earth, where he saw a small insect crawling up a stalk of grass. And then he no longer saw anything as he drifted away from his body, his world, into dim mists and nothingness.

3.

Ordinarily, the clarion clang of her alarm clock brought Poppy awake at six-forty. This morning it was the telephone in the upstairs hallway, its cord extending down into the entry hall; it rang at two minutes to six. She came half-awake, reached out to turn the alarm off, but recalled dimly that she had put it on her vanity, not her bed-stand, so she would have to get up in order to silence it. Blinking against the faint pre-dawn morning light that came through her heavy linen curtains, Poppy managed to get out of bed and totter across the floor to her vanity. "All right, all right," she murmured. "I'm up." Then she realized that it was the telephone, and she stumbled into the corridor and felt her way to the telephone.

"Dritchner residence," she said, yawning at the end.

"Miss Thornton? This is Carlotta Upshaw? Matthew Pike's secretary?" She paused. "Are you awake, Miss Thornton?"

"Yes?" Poppy said, catching the upward lilt from her. "What can I do for you?" She shoved the fingers of her free hand through her messy hair, wondering why the night city editor of the *Philadelphia Clarion* was having his secretary call her; he had little to do with the kinds of stories she usually did, and she had only a cursory acquaintance with Missus Upshaw, who usually arrived at the paper fifteen minutes before Poppy went home. Aside from greetings and small talk, they had never conversed.

"Mister Pike has left, but he asked me to 'phone you and ask you to come in half an hour early today. It's about an assignment?"

"What assignment?" She had a second when she thought she was still asleep — after all, last night she seemed to have a conversation with a ghost — and now this. She almost hung up and went back to bed, but she couldn't quite do that.

"I don't know. Mister Lowenthal will be expecting you." For once, this statement didn't sound like a question. "He's come in early, and wants you to do the same."

"Half an hour early. I'll be there." Then, mindful of courtesy, she added, "Thank you for calling."

The usually crisply demure Missus Upshaw gave a single crack of laughter before she hung up.

As soon as the connection was broken, Poppy stood for about thirty seconds before a sharp buzz reminder her to replace the receiver; why, she wondered, hadn't she asked what assignment was so important that it merited a special 'phone call? To receive such a summons was something new in her experience. At least, she thought, she had left a note for Missus Boudon about her early breakfast before she retired. She frowned, more at herself than the telephone, and made her way back to her bedroom, wanting to go back to sleep, but going to her vanity table. She sat down on the padded stool and stared into the tall oval mirror. "Ye gods," she exclaimed as she caught sight of her pale image in the gloom. She had almost added she looked like a ghost, but after her experience — if that's what it was, and not some lingering dream — of the night before, she couldn't bring herself to utter the word aloud. Picking up her silver-backed brush, she began to put her fine, fashionably short-cropped brown hair in order. A second glance at the mirror

reminded her that, while she was an attractive young woman, she was no beauty: her face lacked the softness to be pretty, though her skin was flawless. Her chin was firm and had a hint of a cleft, her mouth was too full to be a true cupid's bow, and her eyes — a somber grey-green — were much too keen to be pretty. Added to that, she was coltishly angular, a bit too tall and lean for current fashion. She didn't have to wrap her bosom to achieve the proper flat-chested look, for Mother Nature had been skimpy in that part of her body. "Still," she told her reflection as she did most mornings, "I'm not going to frighten horses and small children."

When she had bathed and dressed, she emerged from her room in a neat but not too fashionable business suit of dull-green wool crepe with long, shawl-cut lapels over a blouse of ecru cotton, with a narrow edging of lace at collar and cuffs. A single-strand necklace of red Baltic amber hung around her neck and a discreet gold pin ornamented her lapel. She carried a slim brief-case and a small purse of embossed leather, into which she put a pair of matching gloves. Her high-heeled shoes also matched her bag and the seams of her silk stockings were properly straight. What little makeup she wore was in discreet shades.

After leaving a short note, explaining her early summons, on the occasional table outside her aunt's bedroom door, Poppy went to the library to collect her work from the previous night. She glanced at the curtains as if half expecting to discover the hallucination from last night still lingering in their folds. "Ghosts," she scoffed at herself. Chiding herself for foolishness, she left the library and found Maestro waiting at the top of the stairs, as if he expected an explanation from her. "Come on, cat; let's have breakfast," she said, resting her hand on the bannister as she went down to the main floor.

Missus Boudon was in the kitchen, just beginning her work for the day. She was smiling brightly in spite of the bruise on her jaw. Short, round, with her sleek dark-blonde hair done up in a French bun, she was good-looking and relentlessly cheerful. "Good morning, Miss Poppy; thank you for the note about your early day. Eliza brought it down to me after informing Missus Dritchner. Missus Flowers will be up in half an hour. Your aunt will be down shortly, to join you," she said brightly as Poppy came into the kitchen. "I've put your eggs to coddle and I'll have your toast ready in a moment."

"You might as well feed Maestro while you're at it," said Poppy, reaching for the cup of coffee the cook held out to her. "He had an active night last night."

"One sugar, a dab of cream," said Missus Boudon.

"You know the way I like it," Poppy approved, and went into the breakfast room to wait for her meal, leaving Missus Boudon to put her food in order while she attended to Maestro, who had begun to express himself vociferously. She contemplated the flower prints hung on the wall, trying not to imagine what the *Clarion* wanted of her.

"Oh, there you are," said Josephine Dritchner as she came into the breakfast room to take her place at the head of the table, Duchess trailing after her with forlorn determination. "You're ready to leave, I see." Unlike her niece, Josephine was in a pale-blue silk wrapper over her nightgown, and her badger-gray hair was in a single braid down her back. Elaborate slippers kept her feet warm. "I think it's unconscionable for you to have to be there so early. You're not a drudge, or shouldn't be."

"Good morning, Aunt Jo," said Poppy, getting up to give her aunt a kiss on the cheek.

“You didn’t have to rise early for me.”

“Yes. Well, we’ll see about that,” Josephine said a bit obscurely.

“I’m sure we will, Aunt Jo,” said Poppy, used to her aunt’s early-morning pronouncements. She sat down again and had a bit more coffee.

“You were up late last night, weren’t you?” Josephine pursued. “Past midnight, no doubt.”

“Yes. I didn’t go to bed until about one-thirty,” said Poppy, aware of what was coming.

“I don’t know what to think,” Josephine declared. “When I was young, ladies didn’t keep such hours, except after balls. You need your beauty sleep.”

“A lost cause, I’m afraid,” said Poppy, turning as Missus Boudon came in with her coddled eggs and toast. “Thank you,” she said.

“I’ll bring more coffee directly. And you, Missus Dritchner, what may I get for you this morning?”

Josephine pretended to think. “Well, it’s Wednesday, so oatmeal to start, with brown sugar and milk,” she said as if this were a novel treat instead of what she had had almost every morning for sixty-four of her sixty-nine years. “Then two rashers of bacon and a basted egg. And a pot of strong, black tea: the English tea this morning, if you please.”

“Very good, ma’am,” said Missus Boudon, who whistled for Duchess as she went back into the kitchen.

“That woman is a treasure,” said Josephine.

“She is,” Poppy agreed, unscrewing the top of the egg coddler and picking up her spoon.

The two women sat silently while Poppy ate her breakfast and Josephine opened the *Constitution*, the *Philadelphia Clarion*’s morning companion paper. It was a smaller, less modern publication than the evening newspaper of the Addison Newspaper Corporation; the *Constitution* put emphasis on business and political affairs, with six columns of type and no trace of banner-headlines.

“Oh, dear,” said Josephine as she skimmed page two. “I see that Judge Hammersmith has handed down another unpopular opinion. Not at all like Judge Flanders. Alfred used to go hunting with Judge Flanders.” Her late husband — now twelve years dead — had had a brother-in-law on the bench, and Josephine had retained her interest in such things for his sake. “Judge Flanders is more inclined to pay attention to public opinion than Judge Hammersmith has ever been.”

“Because Judge Hammersmith doesn’t answer to the public, he answers to the law and the Constitution,” said Poppy around a mouthful of buttered toast.

“So he claims,” Josephine said, clearly not accepting this explanation.

“And no doubt he’s had good reason to go against public sentiment,” Poppy couldn’t keep from adding.

“That’s his contention,” Josephine sniffed in open doubt, looking up as Missus Boudon brought her a bowl of oatmeal, a jug of milk and a small bowl of brown sugar, all on a lacquered tray.

“Tea will be ready shortly.”

“Thank you, Missus Boudon.”

Missus Boudon offered another smile. “More coffee, Miss Poppy? Something more substantial.”

“Yes, coffee, please, and a glass of tomato juice if we have any to spare.”

“We do,” said Missus Boudon with a hint of disapproval.

Before the cook could leave the breakfast room, Josephine stopped her. “Oh, that sounds lovely. Will you bring me a glass, as well?”

“Certainly,” said Missus Boudon as she went through the swinging door back into the kitchen.

“While you were up last night, did you notice anything unusual?” Josephine said rather abruptly, as if the question had only now snapped into her mind.

“Unusual how?” Poppy asked carefully.

“Oh, I don’t know. Odd. Peculiar. Uncanny.” She poured milk on her oatmeal. “Out of the ordinary.”

“Why do you ask?” Poppy felt a twinge of uncertainty now, and tried to decide how much to tell her aunt.

“Duchess was restless for an hour or so. Not in her usual way, meaning she wants a treat, or to be let out. No, this was more distressed, uneasy, fretful. I feared someone might have broken into the house. But it was nothing I could discover. What my grandmother called seeing spooks. No doubt that accounts for it.” She laughed to make it clear how ridiculous she thought this to be.

“Oh,” said Poppy, to show she was listening.

“I heard Maestro crying at one point, and I thought perhaps — ” She broke off as if she had said something rude. “It was probably some wild animal out at the dustbins, or perhaps a stray dog. Don’t you think?”

“It sounds plausible; there’re plenty of stray dogs around, and more than a few wild animals, although you wouldn’t expect them to come this far into town,” said Poppy, glad to agree to a topic more acceptable than she thought Chesterton Holte would be. “Or maybe it was a wandering raccoon. You know what nuisances they can be.”

“I gather you didn’t notice anything?” Josephine pursued.

“Nothing like that,” Poppy answered, uncomfortably aware of her evasion. “But I’m pretty preoccupied when I work.”

“I know, dear. It’s your father in you. He was like that from the time he was born: once something caught his interest, the rest of the world vanished. He spent half of my wedding reception watching tadpoles in the fishpond. Not even the promise of cake could tempt him away from the tadpoles.” She managed an uneasy smile, as she often did when talking about her youngest brother. “Esther encouraged him, of course,” she added, disapproval of her older, Suffragette sister turning her features to harsh lines.

“I remember how he worked; his concentration was prodigious,” said Poppy. “He could wrestle with details for hours.” She had been starting her junior year of high school when her father had left to cover the war in Europe, and she still recalled their last meeting with poignance.

Fortunately Missus Boudon chose that moment to return with a tray holding tea for Josephine and more coffee for Poppy, plus two glasses of tomato juice, allowing the two women to

interrupt what could rapidly become painful memories. “Tomato juice, as requested. When do you want your bacon, ma’am?”

“Ten minutes, I should think. I want to enjoy the oatmeal.” She smiled as she watched Missus Boudon leave the room.

Poppy added a little more sugar to her coffee and looked at her aunt. “I won’t be back until about eight-thirty tonight; if you don’t mind, have supper without me,” she said.

“Do you have an engagement?” Josephine asked hopefully.

“I’m meeting Mildred Fairchild at Wendover’s for an early dinner.”

“Mildred Fairchild — how nice,” Josephine approved faintly. “Please convey my regards to her and her mother.”

“I will,” said Poppy. She took a long sip of coffee and tried not to think about her freakish incident of the night before. Perhaps she’d tell Milly about it when she saw her. Then again, she thought, best not.

“I’ll let Missus Flowers know that you’ll be late. And Missus Boudon.” Josephine sighed in a display of ill-usage. “You don’t have to work, you know. Your father left you well provided-for. I still think you should consider traveling.”

“I want to work, Aunt Jo.” It was a discussion that they had had often enough to have become a ritual. “I’d be crazed with boredom if I didn’t do something more than entertain and keep house, or spend my time on trains and ships. I like being a reporter; if I had to give it up, you might as well bring on the straight-jacket.”

“Entertaining and keeping house are excellent employments for any woman’s time,” said Josephine firmly. “And travel with the apposite companion is an appropriate occupation for a lady if she no longer has a household to keep. If you feel you must work, when you returned from Europe or Asia, you could write a book.”

“They may be the best, but I’m not suited for any of those things, and well you know it. I can’t plan a menu, I don’t care about inventories. I want to be useful, not decorative. Not at all characteristics most men are looking for.” Poppy finished her coffee and wiped her mouth with her napkin, which she slipped back through its ring for use tomorrow morning, reached to the empty chair beside her to retrieve her briefcase and purse, then smoothed her skirt.

“How can you be certain, when you never give any of them a chance?” Josephine turned distressed eyes on Poppy as she rose from the table and came to kiss her aunt on the forehead. “Yes, it’s all very well for you to try to sweeten a bitter pill, but if you’re left an old maid, don’t put the blame on me. You’d think with Esther for an example, you’d understand. It’s not as if I haven’t tried to — ”

“ — make a proper lady of me. Yes, Aunt Jo, you certainly have. And I adore you for it. But I haven’t the talents. You know I don’t.” She moved past the table and to the hall door. “I’ll call you later.”

“How do you know you haven’t the talents, when you’ve made no effort to acquire them?”

This was the stalemate position they always reached; Poppy abandoned the topic. “I hope you have many good things planned today.”

“The Jeffries and I are going to see to the new planting in the back garden, if the weather holds. And I’m expecting Eustace tomorrow evening, so I have to put his room in order for him.”

There was a remote look in her eyes: Whenever she mentioned either of her surviving sons — the oldest and the youngest — she also remembered Cosmo, who had been killed in the Great War at age thirty-four, and Reginald, who at twenty-eight had died of the ‘Flu.

At the mention of her cousin, Poppy smiled. “Ye gods, I forgot he was coming. How long does he plan to stay this time?” She came back to the table.

“I don’t know, precisely. I so rarely do with Eustace. He’s supposed to attend some sort of grand function at the Moncriefs’ on Friday, but I have no idea what his other plans may be. I’m assuming he will stay for the whole of the weekend, but he hasn’t let me know.” Fondness and vexation mixed in Josephine as she spoke of her perplexing youngest son, now thirty-two. “He’s been doing very well in New York, you know. International Business Associates is thriving.”

“Yes. You’ve mentioned that once or twice,” said Poppy with a wonderfully straight face.

“He’s a very devoted son,” said Josephine with strong determination, as if she expected Poppy to argue with her.

“Yes, he is. And with such a mother as you, he should be.” She reached down for her cup and sipped the last of the coffee. “Sorry, Aunt Jo. I really have to leave, or I’ll miss the streetcar and be late into the office.”

“You could have Hawkins drive you in, or take a cab.”

“Aunt Jo, I need to know things about the streetcars and the buses, and the way most people travel about the city. Reporters don’t like to see one of their number riding about in high-style; it creates a bad impression.”

“But a lady shouldn’t have to — ”

Poppy held up her hand. “I’ve got to go. Lowenthal puts great importance in promptness, and I’ve been ordered to arrive early, and I need to be on my way.” This was as much regret as she was willing to express. “I don’t want to get on his bad side if I can help it. He would like to have an excuse to keep me on the society desk forever.” She picked up her briefcase. “Drink my tomato juice for me, if you please.” She offered her aunt an apologetic smile.

“Oh, all right,” said her aunt.

“Remember: I’ll call you after lunch.” It was her usual promise, and most of the time she kept it. “Have a pleasant morning.”

“We’ll have a dinner party while Eustace’s here; Missus Flowers and I will work out the details today, after I talk to Eustace,” Josephine called after Poppy. “You’ll be expected to attend.”

“That’s fine. Tell me when and I’ll make sure I’m here,” Poppy called back. She had paused at the coat closet to take out her raincoat and, after a moment’s consideration, her umbrella before she hurried out to the streetcar passenger kiosk to begin her journey into the heart of Philadelphia and her work at the *Philadelphia Clarion*.

4.

Cornelius Lowenthal, seated behind his cluttered desk, appeared massive; his large, square head with a choir-boy face, barrel chest, and thick arms dominated his body. This was emphasized when he rose, for it revealed his short, skinny legs in well-cut trousers. His thinning, ruddy hair was already looking storm-tossed from his mauling it with his fingers; usually it took until after the morning meeting at ten o'clock for this to happen.

"There you are, Thornton," he said, stabbing his index finger in her direction as she came through the door to his office. He glanced at the clock on the wall: it read seven fifty-three. "Just made it, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir," Poppy said, handing him her story on the Fine Books Society. "The auction information is in the third paragraph, as you stipulated. It and the next two can be used separately, if you like."

Lowenthal took the four sheets of paper and glanced through them. "I'm going to cut half of this, you know." He sat back down, his wooden office chair tipping with the force of his movement.

"Yes. I expect you will. But you said you wanted more information than you knew what to do with, and this gives you plenty," Poppy reminded him, used to his intimidating exterior and aware that he was much more bark than bite. "So there you have it. Every scrap of information I could glean in three hours over tea."

"That's what I asked for," he agreed, flipping through the pages again. "You sure about the names?"

"I checked the spellings twice. If you like, I can telephone their chairwoman and ask her to confirm them," said Poppy, her mouth a little tight.

"Nope. That won't be necessary. I'll have Miss Stotter do it, if there are any questions." He sighed. "What's your current assignment?"

"You haven't given me one; you have the most recent in front of you," Poppy reminded him. "Mister Pike's secretary said you had one for me. She called me this morning."

Lowenthal nodded and sighed again. "I do have an assignment for you — Pike and I agreed. Gafney is covering the Dales Warehouse arson investigation, Harris is on the Porto trial, and Westerman is out sick, worse luck. And anyway, he's been assigned to the Chapin Street murders. Which leaves you."

The mention of the second-rung crime reporter grabbed Poppy's attention. "Is there a story you want me to cover? More than a bicycle theft? A real crime story?"

"I don't *want* you to cover it — far from it — it's not the way we like to do it, but sometimes the press of circumstances... In this case it could be an advantage — and right now, you're my only available reporter with any crime experience who isn't already assigned," he said. "The trouble is, it involves acquaintances of yours."

"A crime involving my acquaintances?" she echoed, trying to think who this might be, and what about the crime had so rattled her editor. She decided to try the direct approach. "What kind of crime?"

He stared at the framed photographs on the wall as if to remove himself from their discussion. “It’s a hell of a thing — a hell of a thing.” He shook his head, one hand tugging at his hair, creating more havoc. “You know the Moncriefs, don’t you?”

Poppy looked startled. Where had that come from? “If you mean Madison and Louise Moncrief, they’re friends of my cousin Eustace. I know them to say hello. Why do you ask?”

“I need you to get over to their house, and quickly. I take it you know where it is,” Lowenthal said, his rather prominent blue eyes evading hers.

“Yes, I know where it is,” said Poppy bluntly. “What’s this all about?”

“Well,” said Lowenthal slowly, “it seems that Madison Moncrief has hanged himself, according to the first reports. At least he was found dead this morning by the housekeeper; they say he was in the dining room. Used the chandelier, according to the police. It’s not exactly a crime, but it takes a crime-reporter to cover it, just in case. Think you can handle it, he being someone you know, that is?”

“The chandelier?” Poppy asked, appalled; the chandelier was a treasure of Viennese crystal and brass, originally fitted for gaslight, now electrified, and the pride of Madison and Louise’s house. “Ye gods.”

“The report didn’t say, it just gave the basics. Madison Moncrief found hanged in the dining room. Missus Moncrief was asleep in bed — on some kind of medication.”

“She’s recovering from a — she lost a pregnancy a little over a week ago; she’s only been home from the hospital for a few days, and from what I’ve heard, she’s been very upset. Small wonder, considering,” said Poppy awkwardly, the whole implication of this catching up with her. “They were going to give some kind of party on Friday. I remember thinking she was awfully brave or awfully foolhardy to plan such an event so soon after her tragic loss. I can’t imagine that her physician would approve such a strenuous — ” She made herself stop babbling. “My cousin Eustace is arriving from New York to attend it.”

“It isn’t going to happen now,” said Lowenthal with certainty. “Not with Madison Moncrief dead.”

Poppy took a long, deep breath and steadied herself. “Do they know how — ? Could there have been foul play?” That seemed so much more plausible than Madison Moncrief committing suicide; foul play made his death much more acceptable. “Was there any sign of a break-in or other violence? Was there a note?”

“That’s what I want you to find out,” said Lowenthal. “I want a preliminary story by two. Get as much out of the police as they’re willing to give, and boil it down to the essentials so we have it for the metropolitan edition. We’re not going to make the first edition on this one, but the second, yes, if you hurry. You can put together something more complete tomorrow; for now, you need to get just basics from the cops. No speculation, unless it’s something shocking. For that, we can chase the paper if we have to, but I really don’t want to, not if it’s a suicide, which Wyman says it probably is, but coroners like suicides — over and done with quickly. If it turns out that’s what it is, I’ll save you three inches on page one, below the fold. If it’s murder, you’ll get four inches above the fold; our readers like murders, especially society murders.” He looked at the clock. “Seven minutes past eight. You better get going. You can draw taxi fare from petty cash on your way out. Hop to it.”

“You want me to take taxis?” she asked in astonishment.

“Time matters on this one, Thornton. Chop-chop as they say in China.” He made shooing motions with his hands.

Realizing she would learn nothing more here, Poppy said, “Yes, sir. And thanks.” The word sounded peculiar to her, under the circumstances.

“Don’t thank me yet, Thornton. Wait until you find out what happened. I hope you have a strong stomach — you’ll need it for this one.” With that for dismissal, Lowenthal leaned back, slid open the partition between his office and that of his secretary, and all but bellowed her name. “Miss Stotter! Get in here!”

Hurrying through the main room of the editorial division, Poppy heard the ubiquitous clatter of typewriters punctuated by occasional rings from the half-dozen telephones that provided service to the twenty-two desks, seventeen of which were occupied by harried reporters. Stopping at the frosted-glass door of the Accounting Department, Poppy was issued a generous four dollars for cab-fare, while she consulted her red-leather address book for her destination. Clutching her money in her hand, she went down to the street and flagged a passing cab: it was a two-year-old Dodge Brothers sedan, and the driver was so recently arrived from Scotland that his burr sounded almost like a foreign language.

“One twenty-eight Hamilton Place,” said Poppy, settling into the rear seat.

“Aye, ma’am,” said the driver — at least, that’s what Poppy decided he had said. She made allowances for his accent.

They swung around into traffic, barely missing a large wagon pulled by two hefty draft horses the color of good custard — American Creams. From there, the driver barreled past three delivery vans — two motorized, one horse-drawn — and reached the main intersection without mishap, and only three times having recourse to his horn. For the next fifteen minutes, the taxi cut and dodged his way out from the center of the city to the venerable neighborhood marked by streets named for signers of the Constitution and members of the first three Presidential administrations. Hamilton Place was a tree-lined cul-de-sac, usually quietly dignified, now bristling with vehicles. The cabbie braked energetically, pulling up behind a cluster of police cars, and put the cab in neutral. “Is this where you want to go, ma’am?” the cabbie inquired, pointing to the surrounded house, taking unusual care to make himself understood. He was uneasy about the place. “It’s a dollar thirty.”

“Yes, thank you,” said Poppy, handing him a generous dollar fifty. Accepting his appreciative salute with a nod, she got out of the car, carrying her bag and her brief-case with her, along with her umbrella. She was glad that now that she hadn’t worn a hat, for it would be one more thing to get wet if it rained. She walked quickly, but not so rapidly that she would seem rushed; it would not do to seem flustered.

The taxi reversed, double-clutched, then turned around and headed back toward busier streets.

As she hastened up the driveway to the handsome house, Poppy prepared herself to deal with the investigating police. She knew most of them considered reporters a necessary evil, and women reporters a calamity on par with major felonies; she needed to be ready to counter any resistance she might encounter.

Two uniformed officers stood in the open doorway; the younger of the two glanced at Poppy. "Sorry, ma'am. The Moncriefs aren't receiving visitors today."

Poppy had pulled out her press credentials and held them up. "P. M. Thornton of the *Philadelphia Clarion*. I understand Mister Moncrief has been found dead."

The older officer frowned at her. "A reporter, are you?" His tone made it clear that he didn't believe her.

"That's what this says," she pointed out politely but firmly. "If you'll be good enough to let me in, and tell me who's in charge of the investigation?"

"Ask for Inspector Loring," said the older officer, grudgingly moving enough to allow her to pass.

"Inspector Loring," Poppy repeated, and stepped through into the entry hall of the Moncrief house.

The building was not quite fifty years old, a fine example of carpenter Gothic, with a front and back parlor to the left of the entry-hall, and a small sitting room in front of the dining room on the right. Just at present the sitting room was filled with policemen and a pair of morgue workers, all speaking in lowered voices. Beyond them, the double pocket doors stood half-open, revealing a corner of the long, highly polished mahogany dining table, the green-marble mantle of the fireplace, a bit of the brass-and-crystal chandelier canted on one side, and another group of men standing in a semi-circle, most of them looking down as if embarrassed to stare up. There was something laid out on the carpet, the face covered. Shocked in spite of all her preparation for this sight, Poppy recognized Gregory Swindon of the *Pennsylvania Ledger* and Wilfred Bishop of the *Philadelphia Informer* standing at the fringe of the police, and she steeled herself for what was to come.

"Inspector Loring?" she said, approaching the group of men with as firm a step as she could muster. "P. M. Thornton, *Philadelphia Clarion*. What can you tell me about Madison Moncrief?" She held out her hand, curious to see who among the police would take it.

5.

A man in his late twenties or early thirties with exhausted, ancient eyes, looked around. He was wearing a dark-grey suit, white shirt, a red-and-black regimental tie, and tan overcoat. Unlike the other policemen, he was not in uniform; his suit — from what little Poppy could see of it — was rumpled and inexpertly tailored, his shirt-collar was wilted, and he needed a shave. In return, he took stock of Poppy, eyes narrowing. “The *Clarion* is it? What in the name of Beelz — Black Jack Pershing made Lowenthal send a woman on a story like this?” he asked of no one in particular.

Swindon and Bishop exchanged glances that made Poppy want to crown them both with cast-iron skillets.

“You’ll have to ask him why he chose me; I have no idea.” This was not quite the truth, but it served its purpose. “What matters is that I’m here,” she said, finally dropping her hand. Little as she wanted to admit it, she was feeling a bit queasy.

“So I see,” Inspector Loring said as if taking on a new and unwelcome burden. “I hope you aren’t the squeamish type, Miss Thornton,” he went on, deliberately stepping aside to reveal the upper half of Madison Moncrief’s body lying like a discarded marionette on the floor, a heavy rope around his neck, his tongue bruise-purple and protruding. From his nose up, his face was concealed by a linen handkerchief.

Much as she wanted to steady herself, Poppy knew that if she touched anything she would be banned from the scene of the crime, and Bishop and Swindon would find a way to spread the story among their colleagues, so she closed her eyes a moment until she was sure she could maintain her composure, then said, “Ye gods, poor Louise. This, on top of everything else — she must be beside herself.”

Loring stared hard at her for several seconds. “You sound as if you know these people. Do you?”

“Slightly,” said Poppy. “They’re fairly good friends of my cousin Eustace.” Belatedly she realized that Lowenthal might have had some reason beyond her being female to hesitate sending her on this assignment — not that she wasn’t determined to handle herself well, but she could see it might be trickier to do than she first thought.

“Oh, great,” said Swindon.

Loring considered her a few seconds more. “Perhaps you can help us. Since you know the Moncriefs.”

“I told you: I don’t know them very well. I’ve been to this house perhaps four or five times in the last three years, always with my cousin,” said Poppy, becoming cautious. “They are more acquaintances than friends.”

“That’s more than the rest of us put together — none of us know them at all,” Loring said. “At least tell me what you notice.”

“If it will help.” Poppy made herself look down at Madison again. “How horrid. He must have suffered terribly.”

“Strangling is a hard way to go,” Loring said, then pointed up at the chandelier. “He wrecked that in killing himself. It wasn’t designed to hold so much weight off-center, and as you

can tell from the rope, he used the outer rim with the gas-jets. A strange choice; if he had chosen the center of the chandelier, he would have hung there all night. He might still be there.”

“You mean hanging from it?” Poppy asked, and felt questions rising within her.

“You have a vivid imagination, Thornton,” Bishop muttered.

“No, I don’t,” she replied calmly. “It just strikes me that since it was possible to hang from the strongest part of the chandelier, it’s strange that he didn’t. If I were about to hang myself, I’d do it from the sturdiest, not the weakest, support.”

“He’d probably have to move the table,” said one of the policemen.

“That’s no big problem, not if you’re going to do away with yourself,” said Loring. “He had to get up high enough to do it, but a chair would have worked as well — maybe better.”

“Also, it doesn’t seem like Madison, to ruin something as fine as the chandelier.” Poppy shook her head emphatically.

“He was going to *kill* himself,” Loring said.

“Even then, Madison Moncrief is . . . wasn’t the kind of man to make a mess, and certainly not with the chandelier. The chandelier is valuable, you see, and even if it weren’t . . . This is much too . . . untidy for him. Ye gods, the man’s an accountant at one of the most conservative firms in the state.” She hesitated, then plunged on. “I didn’t know him well, but I do know he was very meticulous, and I can’t believe he’d deliberately ruin a fine chandelier. There was no reason for him to cause so much damage. He could have hanged himself from the balustrade along the gallery in the entry hall. That’s much sturdier.” She wondered if she were saying too much, if she had failed to maintain the proper perspective on the case. She decided to be a bit more circumspect.

“Maybe he didn’t realize the chandelier wouldn’t support him,” Loring suggested.

“It was the most obvious way to do it,” said another of the policemen, not allowing Poppy the chance to respond. “People don’t think about other people, not at a time like this.”

“But that’s what I’m trying to tell you: Madison Moncrief *would* think about such things, and he wouldn’t leave this kind of destruction behind. Not with his wife asleep upstairs. Not with the housekeeper coming first thing in the morning,” said Poppy, knowing she was being narrowly watched. “He was discreet, very discreet.”

“Yeah. And he’d still have been up there when the housekeeper arrived, or his wife came looking for him, assuming he decided to hang from the center of the fixture, and not the rim. If he’d hanged himself in the basement or slit his wrists in the bath or took poison in the library and just drifted away, it would be neater, but his wife would be shocked, no matter what.” Loring saw the other reporters making notes and he raised a quizzical eyebrow at Poppy. “No notes?”

“Not so far,” she said, and forced herself to go on. “How soon after he suffocated do you think he fell?”

“Hard to say,” Loring said, and was supported by nods from the other policemen. “The blood has pooled to the low points of where he’s lying, so he probably fell pretty soon after. You can see where his shoes and legs hit the edge of the table, and his arm. It’s broken, by the way, and one ankle snapped, but that most likely happened after he died.” He pointed to the scuffs, chips, and scratches on the glossy mahogany.

Poppy nodded. “It could be much worse, I’d imagine.”

“Oh?” Loring prompted her.

“Well, yes. Think about it,” Poppy said, and glanced up at the lopsided chandelier. “The whole fixture could have come down, which would mean there would be gas in the house — a great deal of gas, if it continued to leak for half the night. The gas could have exploded, having had several hours to build up, and that would really be unlike Madison, taking a chance of harming others, especially since his wife . . .” She met Loring’s surprised gaze with a deliberately candid one of her own. “That’s assuming this isn’t a suicide, after all.”

“Un-huh,” said Loring. “And do you have any reason to think it isn’t a suicide?”

“Only that the method seems foreign to the man I knew,” said Poppy, finally taking out her notebook and opening it, and making a few scribbles in it.

“Slightly,” Loring added for her.

“Yes, slightly.”

He stepped back from the body. “We got all the measurements?” he asked the men standing with him.

“Distance from the walls, from the fireplace, from the table, from all three doors. Height of the chandelier. Dimensions of the room. Made a sketch of the positions of the furniture and distances from the body,” said the nearest man in uniform as he patted the well-worn notebook in his hand. “Approximate length and condition of the rope. We’ll get that exactly when we can start moving things about. The morgue workers will take a photograph before they move the body, when they get in here.”

“The morgue workers are here, waiting in the sitting room,” said another of the policemen. “And the hearse. They want the body so they can — ”

Loring nodded. “I’ll see to it in a couple minutes. I want to make sure we have everything covered before we let them have him. Dillon, I’ll want you to go with the body and sign off on the transfer, and collect his clothes.”

Dillon, a fairly young man in a well-pressed police uniform had just come in from the kitchen. “Aw, Inspector.”

“Just do it, Dillon,” Loring told him wearily.

Bishop spoke up, “Is there anything more, Inspector?”

“I don’t think so. Not right now. Check with the precinct this afternoon.” Loring was paying them very little attention; he frowned at the body. “Poor sod.”

“Come on, Inspector, give,” Swindon protested. “We have to file by one.”

“Call the precinct. If we have anything more to release, we’ll make sure you have it. If we haven’t, then file what you have so far,” said Loring, and turned to Poppy. “Lowenthal can’t object to that, can he?” He regarded the other two reporters. “Nor will van Meder or Constantine.”

Swindon snorted. “You think so, do you? When did you ever work for van Meder?” He nudged Bishop. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Poppy stepped back, ready to leave. “Thank you, Inspector Loring,” she said as a matter of good form. “I’ll call you at three.”

“Not you,” Loring told her. “I want you to stick around for a while. I’ve got some questions for you. About Louise Moncrief.” He pointed toward the sitting-room. “Don’t

worry. I'll give you a ride back to the *Clarion* myself if I have to."

"Oh!" Poppy was nonplused at this unexpected turn of events; she wondered what Lowenthal would expect her to do now.

"I need to find out some things from you, before I ques — interview the widow," Loring explained as he led the way into the sitting-room, pointing back into the dining room where the men with the stretcher were waiting impatiently.

"Does she know — "

Loring nodded. "She's upstairs. Her maid has called her sister, who will be here as soon as she can. I wanted to give her some time to . . . collect her thoughts. I understand that she isn't . . . quite well."

"We're done here, Inspector," one of the policemen called out.

"Okay. Stick around until the hearse goes. Make sure the house is secured before you leave." He signaled the morgue workers. "He's all yours. Make sure you check his pockets and account for any money, jewelry, or other possessions he may have on him, and see to it that Constable Dillon has a copy of your inventory when you hand over his effects. I'll find out who's visited the house in the last three days, why they were here, how long they stayed, and anything about the visitors that was unusual." He pointed to a wicker couch. "Miss Thornton. If you would?"

Slowly and carefully, Poppy sat down.

6.

Splurging on a taxi ride home, Poppy found herself in the backseat of a year-old Cadillac, her briefcase lying on the seat beside her, her purse in her lap, her umbrella propped against her leg. As she rode through the damp streets, her thoughts began to drift back to the Moncrief house and the story she had filed four minutes before the metropolitan edition deadline; she hadn't waited around to see what Lowenthal thought of it, too worried that he might spike it after all. If more important news superseded the Moncrief story, Lowenthal wouldn't hesitate to take it out. She'd wait until she saw the paper before she congratulated herself. Dinner with Mildred had eased the lingering questions about Madison Moncrief's death, but now she harkened back to three minutes to five — when she handed the two sheets to Lowenthal, she had held her breath before obeying his wave of dismissal. She wanted to figure out the significance of every nuance of gesture, every inflection of tone, and what it meant to Lowenthal to keep her on the Moncrief story. She patted her briefcase, as if to console the carbon copy of her article inside.

"It was a good story, if a bit terse," said a voice beside her in the dark of the passenger compartment.

Poppy almost jumped. "Ye gods! Don't do that!"

"Read your mind?" Holte asked.

"Sorry, ma'am. The road's a bit uneven here," the cabby said.

"Yes. Yes, of course," said Poppy, looking about. She closed the glass partition between her and the driver, then stared into the space beside her. "What's going on here?" she whispered irately.

"I'm haunting you," said Chesterton Holte in a conversational voice. He had almost appeared on the seat beside her, but seemed to be a hovering shape, not a presence. "Remember?"

"Shhh," she admonished him.

"He can't hear me," he reassured her, lowering his voice to match hers. "Only you can. He can't see me, either."

"So if I talk to you, he's going to think I'm crazy," Poppy muttered.

"Ghosts aren't perceptible to most people," Holte reminded her.

"Just me, animals, some birds, and the occasional baby," said Poppy very softly. "And one drunken sailor."

"That's right," Holte concurred.

Poppy resisted the urge to shout at him, and instead said very softly, "Other than haunting me, what are you doing here? Do you only come out at night?"

"Hardly," said Holte, continuing after a slight pause. "I've been following you all day. Part of my haunting."

"All day," Poppy repeated, reviewing her day in her thoughts, her frown deepening.

"From when you went down to breakfast until now." He was like an exhaled breath on a frosty night: a white smudge in the darkness of the taxi's interior.

"Ye gods," Poppy said, aghast at what Holte must have witnessed. "All day." She

lowered her voice again. “Why?”

“I told you last night: I owe your family something for what happened to your father.” His tone became thoughtful. “At the time, I thought it was justified, a reality of the Great War — unfortunate but unavoidable. But after I died, I came to realize that it was another senseless loss in a sea of senseless losses, and that I had deprived your family of someone who should not have left you so abruptly.” He made a coughing sound. “So now that I grasp the . . . ah . . . error of my ways, I feel compelled to make up for the misfortune of his absence in your life. And it strikes me that your current assignment provides me a good opportunity to make a start.”

Poppy briefly asked herself if all of this could be an illusion, but she set that aside for the time being: she had some questions she wanted answered. “What do you mean?” she whispered; she would make up her mind about Holte’s reality some other time.

“Your story on the Moncrief killing was interesting. You had all the basic facts, and you presented them clearly, to the extent that you know them.”

“Thank you,” she said at her most acerbic.

Impervious to her tone, he went on, “You missed one point, however.”

“Oh?” Her tone offered him no encouragement.

“It’s an important point,” he said.

She couldn’t resist asking him, “And what would that be?”

“The point,” said Holte, “that Madison Moncrief was murdered.”