

Murder of the Heart

Written by Jonathan Israel

Nebulous tobacco smoke fought its way across the swanky Cabana Lounge. Jimmy "The Bones" Carletti was celebrating his parole from prison. The old gang of safe crackers, petty thieves, and small time thugs were gathered at The Bones' table. Harry "The Fingers" set the Cabana's lively theme with his fingers dancing across the piano key board. Harry was one of San Francisco's finest pick-pocket.

My wife, Casey returned from the bar with two martinis. She eased into a chair next to mine. Her baby-blue eyes were bloodshot.

"Nicky, I am famished," she slurred through rub-red lips.

"Say, how many martinis have you drunk?" I eyed her suspiciously, knowing it was her sixth. Her evening gown clung taut to her curvaceous body, divulging copious cleavage. My eyes fell appreciatively to her ample cleavage as her lips met

mine. We ordered two more martinis, plus a juicy steak for Sammy T. our burly Newfoundland. Sammy's dark eyes danced with fascination from one table to another. A fat couple seated near our table frowned disapprovingly at the burly dog sprawled at Casey's feet.

"Sir," the fat man snarled, "her tongue is slobbering on the carpet."

I chuckled lightly. "That's all right, my wife is drunk."

The fat man's mouth fell ajar. He retorted, "I meant your dog!"

A guttural burp engaged its way up Casey's throat. "My husband is Nick Malone the famous detective. He'll figure out which one of us is the dog, won't you dear?" Her ruby-reds fell to an indolent smile.

The fat man grumbled, "You people are disgusting."

Dinner arrived shortly with two more martinis when The Bones came sliding into a chair at our table. His bald egg head sat on broad shoulders with no neck.

Jimmy's cheeks spread to a wide smile. "Nick Malone. How long has it been?"

"Five years," I responded.

The Bones screwed his eyes toward the ceiling. "Yep, it's been five long years since you sent me up river. Hell, I ain't holding no grudges." The Bones beamed a wide grin. "You caught me fair and square." A furtive glance fell to Casey's cleavage. Gratification beamed from his eyes. "Say, I heard you got hitched. The Misses?"

"Casey, Jimmy "The Bones" Carletti," I introduced.

"Nicky boy, you done okay." The Bones grinned a mouthful of teeth.

Casey jested, "Nicky called me a dog."

"Nooo," said The Bones. "She's an angel."

I replied, "Casey's an animal... in bed."

The Bones' mouth popped open then slowly developed into an alluring grin. "Yes... I can just imagine," he replied, assessing the voluptuous woman.

Casey nodded with a wink, "Keep your imagination to yourself."

The Bones reared his head with laughter. His portly hand slapped the table, rattling our martinis glasses. "By God, Nicky boy, you got yourself a spirited woman."

Casey smiled appreciatively.

The Bones eyes suddenly dulled to a sharp pain. His bushy eyebrows narrowed. The tone in his voice turned serious. "Nicky, have you read today's Chronicle?" A bulky hand slid the Chronicle my way.

A portly finger directed me to the bold byline, "Billionaire Son Arrested for Murder". My perplexed eyes lifted off the newspaper to The Bones.

"Go on, finish reading," coaxed The Bones in a dry raspy voice.

"Thomas Bell, son of the late billionaire, Howard P. Bell, was arrested early this morning for the murder of his finance', Carey Randal. Ms. Randal was discovered slumped behind the steering wheel of her car with a bullet wound to the heart. Friends of the deceased said Bell and Ms. Randal had a violent argument the night of the murder. The police theorize that Bell followed his fiancé' to Seascapes Point where

he shot and killed her. Bell was released from police custody after posting a million dollar bond."

"Nicky, what I am about to tell you must remain confidential," cautioned The Bones. "Twenty-three years ago, Marian Bell and I were lovers. Marian soon got tired of my... lifestyle. Soon after Marian left me, I heard she was expecting a child. A few months later, Marian married Howard Bell, the billionaire. Nicky, Thomas is my son."

A loud whistle sounded through my lips. "Does Thomas know you are his father?"

"As far as I know, Marian never told the boy about me." The Bones' raspy voice deepened to a throaty caveat. "I plan to keep it that way. Nicky, I need your help."

"Are you asking me to investigate the murder?"

"Yeah," replied The Bones. Suddenly The Bones' aging face brightened. "Whatever your fee, I am good for it."

"My fee," I responded, holding out my empty martini glass, "is a refill."

"Make it a hundred refills," The Bones said cheerfully, as he pushed his chair back and stood up.

"I'll be in touch." The Bones stole another quick glance at Casey's cleavage as he departed.

After the Bones had departed, Casey asked, "Why is he called The Bones?"

My forehead crinkled, I replied, "Jimmy has a bad habit of breaking bones if he's crossed."

Casey screwed her baby-blues my way. "Nicky, have you any lost children that I should know about?"

"Oh, there may be one or two out there," I teased.

Her elbow slammed a sharp jab into my ribs.

"More like three or four, you big lug. Nicky, isn't this exciting, a real murder case. Where do we begin?"

My brown eyes jolted wide. "We? No way---"

Casey interjected, "I won't get in the way, Scout's honor." Three fingers were raised in a Girl Scout salute.

"You were never a Girl Scout," I protested.

Casey's lips spread to a coy enticement. "Let's go home and discuss it the way married couples are supposed to--- under the blankets."

"Don't even think you are going to seduce me in allowing you to work with me on this case.

Casey pretentiously replied, "Yes dear." Her arm wrapped in mine, she yawned, "It's getting late."

Early the next morning we sat at the breakfast table in affable silence, sharing the Chronicle. Casey lowered her portion of the newspaper and said, "Nicky do you really think Thomas murdered the Randal girl?" I was about to answer, the telephone suddenly rang. "Hello," Casey answered. "What! Yes of course." She hung up the phone. A perplexed expression crossed her face. "That was The Bones. Thomas is dead. Jimmy said to meet him at the Bell residence."

We arrived at the Bell house in less than forty-five minutes. It was the typical billionaire house. A grandiose house that was perched high on a bluff, overlooking San Francisco Bay. A robust woman wearing a maid uniform answered the door. I introduced myself and asked to speak with Marian Bell.

The maid glowered at Sammy T. She was not pleased to see the dog. "Is he house broken?"

"Who, Nicky?" quipped Casey. "Not always, but I do try."

"You're a real comedian," uttered the maid, and then escorted us through a parquet foyer that led to the parlor. We were immediately greeted by an old friend, Sergeant Frank Holbrook, of homicide. The Bones was seated next to Marian Bell on a brocade sofa. Marian's face was sallow with dark circles under her eyes. Jimmy "The Bones" motioned for us to join him. After introductions, Casey settled on the sofa, next to Marian. I made myself comfortable in a chintz armchair. Marian offered refreshments. I asked for whiskey, no ice. A minute later the maid handed me a glass of whiskey. I grimaced at the ice-cubes.

"It has ice," I complained.

"Yes, I know," the maid smirked, and walked away.

As I was offering my sympathies to Marian Bell, Sergeant Holbrook asked to have a word with me in private. Holbrook was tall, thick-chest, with graying hair.

"Nicky," Holbrook said, "something about this case smells fishy."

"How did Thomas die?" I asked.

"A gunshot to the head," replied Holbrook.

My lips pursed. "Where'd it happen?"

Holbrook nodded toward the foyer stairway. "In his bedroom. Dispatch got the nine-one-one call at midnight." Holbrook thumbed through his notepad. "The boy's ex-girlfriend, a Sheila Yates was staying over in the guest room at the mother's request. The Yates woman heard the shot and ran to Thomas' room. It wasn't a pretty sight." Holbrook's piercing eyes fixed on mine. "Nicky, the night we arrested Thomas for murder, he said he and the Randal girl were going to be married. He claims he gave her an engagement ring. The ring was not found on the dead girl's body." Holbrook appeared bewildered.

"What is it you're not telling me?"

"Immediately after we arrested the boy, we searched his room for the murder weapon. The gun was not there. This morning we located the murder weapon in the boy's bedroom. It turns out the gun he killed himself with is the same one that murdered the Randal girl. Funny thing... the bullets were removed from the magazine."

"Are you sure it was suicide?"

"It appears that way. We'll know more when the pathologist completes his report."

"The night the Randal girl died, what did she and Thomas fight about?"

Holbrook sighed heavily. "The girl came from a middle class family. She felt unbecoming of Bell's billionaire lifestyle. The boy wanted to marry her... especially when he learned she was pregnant."

My eyes shifted toward the brocade sofa. The Bones clipped me a brief smile. My first thought was Jimmy had a billion reasons to get back into Marian's life. Casey signaled to me with a wave of the hand to meet her in the foyer. I immediately excused myself from Holbrook and entered the foyer.

"Nicky, did you know that Marian Bell is dieing?"

I shook my head. "She's ill?"

"Cancer. The doctors have given her six months."

A shadow of a person descending the stairs caught my attention. A young woman, I guessed to be twenty-eight, was gradually making her way toward us. She stared at me with curious eyes.

"Miss Yates?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied cautiously.

I introduced Casey and myself. We offered condolences. "I understand you spent the night here."

"Marian thought it would be best if I stayed the night for Thomas' sake."

"You and he were friends?" I asked.

"More than friends," she replied. "Thomas and I were once engaged to be married." Her square shoulders shrugged. "As it turned out, Thomas was not ready for marriage."

"Weren't he and the Randal girl engaged?"

"Oh that," she waived a vague hand. "Thomas talked about marriage to every girl he went out with." All of a sudden her scintillating eyes turned mordant. "Carey Randal was not his type."

"From what I heard, the Randal girl would have made an excellent wife."

"You heard wrong! Thomas could not resist a pretty face. Carey lacked cosmopolitan. Thomas was Armani suits with silk ties. Carey, on the other hand, was cheap polyester with gaudy prints. Eventually, Thomas would have come to his senses. Now if you will excuse me, I must attend to Mrs. Bell."

After Sheila Yates departed, I said to Casey, "Keep an eye on her; I am going to take a look around."

Casey placed a concerned hand on my shoulder. "Be careful."

I quickly made my way up the stairs. The upper floor held numerous doors that I assumed to be bedrooms. The first door I opened was the master bedroom. I closed the door, and proceeded to the next door. Yellow police tape was masked across the entrance. I moved on to next door at the far end of the corridor. Immediately I knew I was in the right room.

At the foot of the bed was a suitcase placed on top a cedar chest. The suitcase was locked. On my last birthday, Casey had given me a Swiss army knife that held a flathead screwdriver. I applied the flathead between the latches. With a little pressure the locks easily popped loose. Folded neatly inside was a variety of women's clothing: a night gown, undergarments, slacks, blouses, and a pair of black gloves. The gloves held a distinctive odor, one that I recognized from my years on the police force.

Beneath the gloves were the items that interested me most. I carefully placed the items in a handkerchief, and removed the gloves.

When I returned to the parlor, The Bones, Marian and Sheila were seated on the sofa. Sheila held Marian's hand in hers. Casey was standing next to the piano in conversation with Holbrook. Sammy T. was plopped before the fireplace. My dark-browns fixated on The Bones. I said forcefully, "Why Jimmy?" Every eye in the room shot in my direction.

"What?" The Bones appeared troublesome.

"Why did you murder Carey Randal?"

The Bones slowly stood up. "Is this a joke? If it is Nicky, it's not very funny." He half grinned.

I said to Holbrook, "Jimmy murdered the Randal girl, only he didn't pull the trigger. He had an accomplice. I said to Sheila, "You and Jimmy conspired to murder the Randal girl."

Sheila abruptly stood up and snarled, "You're crazy! Why would I want her dead?"

I replied, "Money. A billion bucks to be exact. You found out that Marian Bell was dieing. Thomas, being the sole heir would soon inherit one billon

greenbacks." I allowed a long silence to transpire. "Once Thomas had discovered Carey was pregnant there was no way he'd come back to you. Carey had to die. This is where The Bones came in. You propositioned The Bones with a fortune to murder the Carey Randal. Once you and Thomas were married, Jimmy would be financially set for life. Only..." I stepped closer toward Sheila. "Jimmy refused to kill his son's fiancé."

Sheila's mouth fell ajar. She shifted a hard glare at The Bones.

"You," I continued, "had no idea Jimmy was Thomas' biological father."

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it? Marian, is Jimmy, Thomas' biological father?"

Marian slowly nodded. She was very pale.

"Be sensible," I said. "Jimmy was not expecting Thomas to be arrested for murder. He didn't want him locked away in some dingy cell for the rest of his life, not if he was going to tap into the Bell fortune. It wasn't supposed to work that way. Thanks to you, the police received an anonymous tip leading

them to Thomas." I paused to let the info sink in. "By hiring me to find Thomas' killer, Jimmy was hoping I'd unearth some evidence that would lead them away from Thomas. He wasn't counting on me digging out the truth."

"Go on Nick," Holbrook urged. "Let's hear the rest of it."

"Jimmy supplied Sheila the gun, he loaded the bullets into the magazine and taught her how to use it. Jimmy wanted it to look like a robbery gone amiss. Once the Randal girl was dead, he instructed Sheila to get rid of the gun. Only Sheila decided to keep the gun with Jimmy's prints on the bullets. After she murdered Randal, out of jealousy, she removed the girl's engagement ring."

"Next you're going to accuse me of killing Thomas." Sheila laughed nervously.

"Thomas put two and two together. He was going to go to the police with his suspicions. You caught Thomas searching through your cedar chest where he found the gun that murdered his fiancé'. A struggle ensued. You fought for the gun. It discharged killing Thomas. You then removed the rest of the

bullets with The Bones finger prints on them.' I said to Jimmy, "She was planning to cut you out of the deal from the very beginning." Jimmy was too stunned to say anything. I opened the handkerchief that held the four bullets. "Sheila was planning to use them as insurance against you, just as you were planning to blackmail her for your portion of the money."

Jimmy turned to Sheila and growled, "You bitch!"

I held out the gloves for all to see. I said to Holbrook, "They have the smell of gunpowder."

Sheila sneered, "What kind of frame-up is this!"

What happened next surprised us all. A shinny object fell out of the gloves, landing at my feet.

Marian gasped! "That's Carey's engagement ring!"

"Don't be a sap!" I said to Sheila. Jimmy can't protect you."

Sheila looked at The Bones with venom in her eyes. "Jimmy told me he could fix everything. He said once Carey Randal was eliminated, he'd make sure Thomas married me. Her hands cupped around her face in extreme sobbing. "Jimmy was in on it from the beginning!"

"Shut-up, you crazy bitch!" shouted The Bones. He landed a hard right fist into Sheila's jaw. I did not wait. My fist found its way into The Bones' gut. The Bones dropped to his knees. Holbrook shoved him facedown on the carpet. He slapped handcuffs around The Bones' wrists.

Casey playfully threw her arms around my neck. "Nicky, you big lug, you solved the case. I knew you could do it."

As we departed the Bell house Sammy T. dashed ahead to the car. Casey wrapped an arm around my waist. "What made you suspect The Bones?"

I opened the car door. "Years ago, The Bones told me that a good hit man always discards the unspent bullets after a hit. The bullets were Sheila's insurance policy from getting her legs broken."

"So, what you are saying is, you acted purely on a wild hunch." Casey looked at me suspiciously.

My mouth developed into a Cheshire grin.

"I thought so, you big lug," she teased. "Let's go to the Cabana Lounge. I feel like getting crazy, wild and drunk."

My head reared with laughter. "You're my kind of girl, beautiful, sexy, and drunk."

"Thank you, dear."

Sammy T. barked!

THE END