



The Unicorn Staff

Book 6

S. E. Grosskopf

PREVIEW

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Chapter I

Friday, April 10, 1931

11:55 PM

“Are you sure you want to meet here?” Norman Judd glanced around. Smoke filled the dark main room of the Green Light speakeasy. Rough men occupied the tables and lined the bar. Judd was used to such surroundings. Across from him, August Fieldcrest looked noticeably out of place.

Fieldcrest projected the patrician air of a man who had spent his life in noble scholarly pursuits. He held a long package, about the size of a broomstick, wrapped in brown paper tied with twine. “This is the best place to meet. Hatch would never set foot in here, not even if Teddy Bear told him to. He doesn’t get along with O’Malley.” He nodded to the back corner of the room.

At the booth nearest the rear exit, a red-haired giant sat facing the rest of the room. His booth had been built larger than the others specifically to accommodate him. Even more than his unusual size and thick accent, O’Malley was known for his hair-trigger temper and his penchant for throwing men through brick walls. Everyone gave him a wide berth.

“Is that the staff you told me about?” Judd lowered his voice. It wasn’t necessary. No one else paid any attention to them. The buzz of general conversations covered theirs easily.

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“Don’t ask me how I pulled this off.” He leaned closer and whispered. “A genuine unicorn’s horn from the sixteenth century, passed down through several royal families. Wars have been fought over this.”

“Sure.” Judd shrugged.

“Hey, I wouldn’t lie to you. We’ve known each other too long. That’s why I need you to hold onto this for a few days—just until I figure out what to do about Teddy Bear. There isn’t anyone else I can trust.”

“Alright, but you owe me.” Judd took the odd-shaped package. It didn’t attract any attention, at least not openly. Though the management frowned upon infractions of the law more serious than alcohol, the Green Light frequently served as a neutral meeting place for exchanging various types of merchandise. Most patrons understood the value of discretion.

“Thanks.” Fieldcrest leaned back and looked away, his strained facial expression showing the depth of his problems. “I have a meeting with a reporter in the morning, and after the story I tell him. . . . It’ll blow this whole thing wide open. After that, maybe it’ll be time to bring back Amos Fish and disappear.”

“What are you gonna tell your old lady? I mean, your wife?”

“She doesn’t know anything yet. I’m not going to tell her until I’m ready.” He’d spent years diligently keeping his family separate from certain aspects of his business.

“It’d be easier to disappear without her—”

“You know I would never do that. I just need time to think, that’s all. To find someplace to go where Teddy wouldn’t look. If you can hold the staff for me until Monday . . .”

“What’s on Monday?” Maybe it wasn’t any of his business, but Judd liked to know what was going on.

“Teddy leaves town for a few weeks.”

“Ah.” Judd wrapped both hands around the package and squeezed hard enough to crinkle the paper. “And I suppose Teddy sent Hatch to look for this?”

“Absolutely. As much as it’s worth, they’ll do anything to get it back.” Fieldcrest glanced around. “I’ll leave first. Hide the staff

somewhere safe, then stop by my house later tonight. I might need your help with a few more travel plans.”

“You got it.”

Fieldcrest left. Judd finished his drink, waited another minute, then slipped across the room and through the back door. The package felt clumsy and awkward. Not particularly heavy, but too long to conceal. He didn't want to take it home. Not if Hatch was searching for it.

He wasn't about to back out on a friend, but helping Fieldcrest could easily get him killed.

Shadows closed in around him. He glanced around and kept walking. The streets were deserted. After midnight already. That made it Saturday morning, but he never believed in calling it morning until the sun rose.

Still night for a few more hours. He slunk past a row of empty shops. No good place to hide the staff. He didn't believe it was really a unicorn's horn, but Fieldcrest had never lied to him before. Maybe it wasn't important to know how much it was worth, but he wished he'd asked anyway.

No, he felt better not knowing.

The wind blew cold and hard from the north-east. Clouds blotted out the moon. Dark shadows swirled. He jogged down the empty sidewalk. A building ahead showed lights. The bus station. No buses ran this late, but the building was open all night. He darted inside, slammed the door, and paused to breathe.

A bum slept on one of the benches, using a newspaper for a blanket. Judd tiptoed past him to the lockers along the back wall. He passed several until he found a taller one open. The staff barely fit. He closed the locker quietly, took the key, and hurried through the rear exit into the darkness. Even without the staff, his nerves wouldn't settle.

By the time he approached Fieldcrest's house on West Lincoln, almost two hours had passed. West Lincoln was one of those neighborhoods in the Patterson Heights subdivision with manicured lawns and immaculate rose gardens. Big, expensive houses with big, expensive cars parked in the driveways. He'd bet

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most of the people who lived here had servants and ate steak or lobster every day.

As hard as Judd hustled to make ends meet, he couldn't understand having that kind of money. He and Fieldcrest had grown up in the same dilapidated boarding house near the waterfront. Judd still lived there, and he'd never eaten steak in his life.

A car rolled past. The headlights cut through the darkness briefly, then shut off when it stopped at the curb near Fieldcrest's house. The engine stayed running. A man got out and walked down the sidewalk.

Judd recognized Hatch's wide shoulders. He scampered into the darker shadows beside a hedge and held his breath to watch.

Hatch pounded on the door and waited. The door creaked open. A gunshot split the night. Footsteps pounded back to the car. The engine roared. Tires squealed.

The lights in the house snapped on, shining through the windows and across the lawn. A woman screamed.



Chapter II

Loud ringing cut through the silence and knocked Detective Lieutenant Marx out of bed. Flailing around, he slapped his alarm clock off the bedside table. It clattered to the floor. The ringing didn't stop. Another moment passed before he identified the sound as the telephone. He picked himself up and stumbled through the darkness, then pawed at the wall until he found the light switch. Sudden brilliance left him rubbing his eyes.

The phone still rang.

He stubbed his toe on the doorframe, then limped through the living room and into the kitchen. The ringing got louder. Half asleep, he jerked the receiver off the hook and tried to remember how to speak coherent English. "Marx."

"Lieutenant?" The voice sounded official, and not the least bit sleepy. "This is Sergeant Flannigan. We've got a homicide on West Lincoln. I sent a car to pick you up."

"Thanks." The automatic response sounded ridiculous. He wasn't sure what he should be grateful for. Blinking, he rubbed his face and tried to get his eyesight to focus. "What time is it?"

"Two-thirty."

"Ugh." He mumbled and hung up, then went to get dressed. Noises came from the next apartment. Muffled voices. Fogged with sleep, it dawned on him that the apartment beside his had been empty for almost a month. Ever since old Mrs. Anderson died.

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Maybe new neighbors had moved in. He hadn't met them yet. Now wasn't a good time for introductions.

He closed and locked his apartment door quietly, tiptoed down the hallway, and made it outside as a patrol car squeaked to a stop. Marx slid into the passenger seat.

A bleary-eyed Officer Mackay stared at him. "Good . . . morning?"

"Morning." Marx came to terms with the fact that it was Saturday. After solving the last case, he was supposed to have a day off. He'd been planning to take a trip to the zoo. He hadn't deliberately done anything fun for as long as he could remember. No time for that now. Not when he was on call every minute of the day and night.

"Sergeant Flannigan gave me the address." Mackay squinted into the darkness and pulled away from the curb. There wasn't any traffic.

Twenty minutes later, they stopped in front of a modestly large house. Another patrol car was already parked at the curb. Light shone from the open front door. Marx picked his way across the shadowy lawn.

Officer Brody met him at the door. "August Fieldcrest." He pointed at the floor. A man in pajamas and a robe lay partially across the threshold. "The wife's hysterical and the maid doesn't know a thing. From what I can tell, the doorbell rang a little after two o'clock and he got up to answer it. Then there was a gunshot."

"Robbery?" Marx stepped over the body. The front room was large and filled with odd curios. African shields, a mounted stag's head, Chinese pottery, ornately carved medieval-European chairs, a lion hide on the floor with the head still intact. He was no expert, but the house looked like a cross between a museum and a curio shop.

Brody shook his head. "The wife and the maid both got here seconds later. Whoever killed him took off right away. Nothing missing, as far as the maid knows. The wife hasn't been able to say much."

Marx sighed and tried to shake some sense into his sleep-deprived brain. He followed the sound of wailing through the house and into the kitchen. Two women sat at the table. One, middle-aged and wild-haired, sobbed into a handkerchief. The other, younger, wore a maid's plain dress, a white apron, and an expression approaching boredom. Officer Hanlon stood beside them, looking like he would rather be anywhere else. The older woman glanced up at Marx and began sobbing all over again.

"Your name?" Marx started with the maid. He took out his notebook.

"Patience Mott." She sat with her legs crossed and answered in an efficient manner.

"How long have you worked here?"

"Two months."

"Do you have any idea why someone might have done this?"

"I only clean the house. I never mixed in the Fieldcrests' personal affairs."

"Did you hear the shot?"

"No. My quarters are on the opposite side of the house. All I heard was Mrs. Fieldcrest screaming. When I saw what happened, I took her into the kitchen and called the police."

"Alright, thank you." Marx gritted his teeth and turned. He started with a simple question, hoping to ease her gently into the interrogation. "Mrs. Fieldcrest, what's your first name?"

"Hazel."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"I . . ." She dabbed at her eyes and refused to look up. Her hands trembled. "There was a loud knock on the door. August went to answer, and . . ." She set off on another wave of screechy wailing. Officer Hanlon stepped back and grimaced, like he wanted to cover his ears.

Marx shuddered and turned back to the maid. "Is there anyone we should call? Someone to come sit with her? A sister or a friend or something?"

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“There’s Mr. Fieldcrest’s sister, Theodora. Also, their son Fredrick Fieldcrest and his wife Barbara. The numbers should be in a book by the telephone.”

“I’ll do it,” Hanlon volunteered. He hurried out of the room with a quick glance back, obviously anxious to get away from the noise. Marx wasn’t about to argue. Giving death notifications was his least favorite part of the job, and dealing with hysterical witnesses was a close second.

Marx waited. Sobbing filled the awkward silence. He had no knack for making small-talk, and neither the maid nor Mrs. Fieldcrest invited him to try. He shoved his notebook back into his pocket and fidgeted, looking down and shuffling his shoe on the floor. He should have had more questions to ask. Lack of sleep didn’t help.

Minutes later, Hanlon returned. “I couldn’t get ahold of the sister, but the son’s on his way over.”

“Good.” Marx motioned for Hanlon to stay. He went back to the living room and found a photographer from technical setting up his camera. Officer Mackay chatted with Brody off to the side. Through the open doorway, Marx watched the coroner’s van cruise past.

He waited until the camera clicked again, then stepped over the body and out onto the lawn. The cold air cleared his head somewhat. Farther down the block, the coroner’s van turned around and came back. It stopped in the driveway. Doors slammed. Men strolled past, carrying a stretcher. They chatted and made jokes. Just an ordinary night’s work.

So much to do. Marx leaned against the porch railing. He still had to question the neighbors about whether they saw or heard anything. And search the house. Maybe something in Fieldcrest’s personal effects would provide a clue to a dissatisfied customer or disgruntled former employee.

He made a mental note to ask the maid what Fieldcrest had done for a living. His line of work, whatever it was, had provided him with a nice big house and an abundance of expensive knickknacks. And, of course, the possibility of inheritance was

always a motive to be ruled out. Marx doubted the wife could have done it. Nobody could fake hysteria that well. That left the son. Maybe the sister. Possibly other relatives. Everything spun through his head in jumbled fragments.

Maybe he should go home first and try to finish the night's sleep. If he could get any sleep after this, he would come back later when he could think straight. He wouldn't be able to talk to Mrs. Fieldcrest until she recovered from the shock anyway. Hanlon, Brody, and Mackay could handle questioning the neighbors.

It should have been his day off. His last day off, Wednesday, didn't count for anything. He'd spent it at home nursing a concussion. Too much of a headache to do anything but sit around the apartment. That seemed to be how most of his days off went. He had no idea when he'd get another one.

Shadows moved. Marx jerked and spun around, reaching for his gun. A man crept around the edge of the house, keeping in the darkness and avoiding the windows. The prowler gave a low whistle, like a signal.

Marx gripped his gun. "Hold it right there. Hands where I can see them. What are you doing here?"

"Hey, you know me, Lieutenant." The other man stopped with his hands up. "What kind of a welcome is that, when I'm trying to help you?"

"Who are you?" Marx moved toward him, but the darkness obscured everything except vague outlines.

"Norman Judd."

"Judd?" Marx put his gun in its holster and stepped closer, matching Judd's confidential tone. Marx had overlooked a bit of petty smuggling once, when Judd had helped him put away a murderer. A few other useful tips had come his way since. "What are you doing here? Did you see anything?"

"Just a dark-colored car that went tearing out of here a moment before some dame started screaming her head off. It was too dark to read the plates."

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“So, nothing.” He had the impression that Judd wasn’t telling the whole truth, but wasn’t going to push too hard. “What time was that?”

“A little after two. There’s something you can do for me.”

“Hey, that’s not how this works.”

Judd reached into his pocket and took out something small. “Here.”

Marx held out his hand and received a key. It looked like one for a locker at the bus station.

“Just hold onto that for me until Monday. I’m working on figuring out something too. If I can make it make sense, I’ll tell you all about it.” He backed away.

“Who killed August Fieldcrest?”

“Look up a guy named Amos Fish.” Judd put his hands up, showing his empty palms. “That’s all I’ve got to say. Monday.”

While Judd disappeared into the shadows, Marx fumbled in the dark to slip the key onto his own key ring.



Chapter III

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Rita Nenning looked through the side window of the taxi. When her brother Tom, a newspaper reporter, had invited her along on an interview with a famous archeologist and world traveler recently returned from a wildly publicized tour of Europe, she jumped at the chance. It sounded exciting enough to make getting up early on a weekend worthwhile.

The house, a single-family residence large enough to qualify as a small mansion, had an ominous presence about it. Rita wondered why. Nothing appeared out of place, no spiderwebs or black cats. The whole neighborhood felt eerily quiet. A police car occupied the driveway.

“This is the address.” Tom checked his notes again. He helped Rita out of the cab and told the driver to wait.

They walked up to the front door. Rita rang the bell. When the door finally opened, a tired-looking policeman in uniform glared out at them.

“I have an appointment with Mr. Fieldcrest,” Tom said. He wore his press card in his hatband, which usually cleared up the need for further explanations.

“No appointments today, and no reporters.” The officer started to close the door.

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Tom stuck his foot against the doorframe. "What's going on? Should I come back later? Mr. Fieldcrest requested this interview. How about asking him if—"

"He's not talking to anybody, ever. Don't bother coming back."

"He's dead? What happened?"

"We're investigating. Now get your foot out of the door before I haul you in for obstruction. I hate reporters."

"Alright." Tom stepped back. The door slammed shut. "Well . . ."

"Gosh." Rita followed him back to the cab. "What next?"

"I've got work to do." Tom's tone transformed into one of expectant curiosity.

Rita recognized his grin. He may have been denied one story, but he'd been presented with a bigger one.

"This is news." He flipped through his notebook and started scribbling, then glanced around at the surrounding houses. "Somebody's got to know something."

"Maybe Uncle Lowan could help find out what happened." Rita worked as a secretary for a private detective. They weren't related, but she had adopted him as an honorary uncle. He had no other family in Milford Falls and didn't seem to mind treating her more like a niece than an employee.

"I'll take you to the office if you want, but I've got other things to do."

"He won't be in the office on a Saturday. Maybe I can catch him at home."

"Where's he live?"

"East Elm Street." Rita gave the address to the taxi driver. Fifteen minutes later, the cab dropped her off in front of Lowan's apartment building.

Tom gave new instructions to the driver, and the cab sped away. Rita hopped up the steps and went inside. Lowan's apartment was the second to last at the end of the hall. The aroma of warm oatmeal cookies wafted from the apartment beyond his.

Suddenly hungry, Rita knocked on Lowan's door.

He answered within seconds, as if he'd been on the way to open it already. "Rita. What happened?"

"I went with Tom to interview Mr. August Fieldcrest, the archeologist, for a newspaper story, but when we got to his house, the police said he was dead. I was wondering if you could help find out what happened."

Lowan sighed and stepped back inside to get his hat and coat. He put them on slowly, then turned around. Strange blue light flickered in his eyes. "I was about to step out for breakfast. Would you like to come?"

"I sure would." She walked down the hallway with him, guessing that his answer to her question wasn't the one she wanted to hear. "About Mr. Fieldcrest . . ."

A cab stopped in front of them. Lowan helped her into the back seat, then went around to the other side and gave instructions to the driver. He turned to speak with Rita. "It is not my case. The police are capable of conducting investigations without my help. If the Fieldcrest family decides to hire me, then I would have a reason to explore the matter."

"So, Tom's story . . ."

"It is not enough to warrant my involvement. If he wants to find out what happened, he will have to use the methods available to him as a newspaper reporter. He has managed for many years without my help."

"Yes, but . . ." She repressed a grumble and tried to think of a more persuasive angle. Tom and Lowan hadn't gotten along very well in the past—they hadn't spoken to each other for years—but there had been some hopeful signs of reconciliation a few weeks ago. She hated feeling caught between them, especially since they both refused to explain the reason for their disagreement.

"This has nothing to do with Thomas," Lowan said gently. His eyes turned that strange shade of blue again, as if he was looking through her rather than at her. "I have no grounds to become involved unless either the family hires me, or the police call me in as a consultant. I may have worked with Lieutenant Marx several

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times recently, but suppose he is not in charge of this case? There are other detectives and not all of them will agree to outside help.”

“I see.” She looked down and fidgeted with her purse, plotting a way to contact the Fieldcrest family and suggest Lowan’s services.

The taxi stopped at a restaurant. Not Lou’s Diner, across from the police station, where they occasionally went to meet with Marx. This was a larger restaurant somewhere on the west side. Rita followed him out of the cab. “How’d you hear about this place?”

“Jane Maplewood recommended it.” He held the door for her. Jane was his neighbor farther down the hall who had a penchant for baking cookies. A lonely widow, she often found or invented excuses to demand his attention, which he didn’t appear to appreciate, though he was too polite to reject her outright.

A prim waitress showed them to a table. Rita looked over the menu. Waffles with a variety of fruit toppings, crepes, dainty pastries, exotic omelets, eggs benedict, other French-sounding things she didn’t know how to pronounce. Prices slightly higher than she was used to seeing, but the restaurant seemed to have plenty of business anyway. And as long as Lowan invited her, she inferred that he was buying. When the waitress returned, Rita kept her order within the same price range as his.

The waitress brought their drinks. Lowan preferred tea to coffee. He wrapped his hands around the steaming mug. “Do you have any other plans for the day?”

“Not really.” She reached for her glass of water. “Joe asked me yesterday if I wanted to go to the zoo with him today. When I told him I was busy with Tom, he looked like I punched him in the stomach. I didn’t know it meant that much to him. If I had his home number, I’d call and ask if he still wanted to go.”

“I can reach him at home—”

They both looked up as a loud argument began across the room. A young man rose from his chair to confront an unsavory-looking character who tried to join him. “Have some respect. Her husband just died.”

A woman his own age and another a generation older shared the table. They all looked red-eyed and somewhat rumped, as if they'd had a very long night.

“All I'm saying is—”

The man at the table swung his fist. Just a warning, which the ruffian avoided. Any hotter and the two of them would come to serious blows. Nervous waitresses milled around at a distance. The cook peered out from the kitchen.

Lowan jumped up and crossed the room, bearing down on the unwelcome intruder. “You have been asked to leave.” The intensity in his voice made everyone flinch.

The rough character turned to face Lowan, then shrank back under his harsh blue glare. “It's none of your business—”

“*Out!*” Lowan took another step forward. The air seemed to turn cold around him. A nervous hush spread across the whole restaurant.

Shaking with terror, the ruffian backed away, spun around, and dashed out. The waitresses followed him, watching his retreat through the open doorway.

“Thanks, I guess.” The other man sank back into his chair. “With a voice like that, you must be a drill sergeant. Or a dog trainer.”

“I am a private detective.” Lowan spoke far more gently and put one of his business cards on the table. “May I ask what this was about?”

“I'm Fredrick Fieldcrest. This is my wife, Barbara, and my mother, Hazel. My father hasn't even been dead for twelve hours yet, and that dreadful creature followed us in here to tell horrible lies about him.”

“If I can be of any assistance . . .”

“Thanks.” He took the card and studied it, then handed it to his wife. “For now, we're letting the police handle things, but we'll discuss it.”

“Which detective was in charge of the case?”

“Detective Lieutenant Marx. Do you know him?”

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“Yes, he is a good friend of mine. He is dedicated to his work and will do everything within his power to resolve the matter quickly.” Lowan stepped back. “I am terribly sorry for your loss.”

When he rejoined Rita across the room, she couldn't help grinning.

“Rita.” Lowan looked across the table at her, signaling gentle disapproval as he reached for his tea. “This meeting was an extraordinary coincidence, but there is no guarantee that the Fieldcrest family will hire me. Even if they do, it would be unethical for me to give the details of their case to a newspaper reporter without their permission.”

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