



Emerald Deception

Book 14

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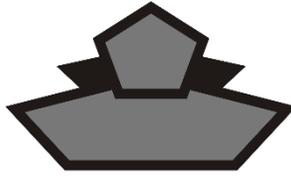
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Chapter I

Friday, May 8, 1931

“Just go without me.” Loretta Wagner rubbed her forehead. The clattering presses were finally quiet, but the smell of ink remained. It would cling to their clothing long after they’d gone home. “I’ve got a headache.”

“I hate going alone.” Marilyn Chambers slipped into her jacket and grabbed her purse. She and Loretta went to the movies on Friday evenings, after they finished their shift at Pratt Printing. For Marilyn, it was the one high point of the week, the only thing she looked forward to. “There’s always next week.”

“Sure.” They walked down the block together. Downtown, traffic streamed past. Loretta stood with her shoulders hunched and her head bowed. They waited for the bus.

A man loitered across the street from them. The creeping feeling of being watched set Marilyn’s nerves on edge. The bus stopped, blocking him from view. Marilyn helped Loretta up the stairs. They paid their fare and settled

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into an empty seat. Loretta took the side by the window and leaned against it.

A man clattered up the steps, breathing like he'd been running. He went through his pockets until he found money for the fare, then stepped down the aisle. Somewhat tall, but lanky rather than heavysset, with rumpled clothing, a battered dark gray fedora, and a shifty face. He pointedly avoided looking at Marilyn, stepped past, and took the seat directly behind them.

The back of Marilyn's neck prickled. She turned around to stare. He hardly looked over thirty, but his face was pockmarked. Thick stubble covered his chin. He grinned. It wasn't reassuring.

Loretta's stop was next, a block away from a cozy apartment building on the west side. Marilyn helped her as far as the steps, then chose a different seat near the driver. The bus bounced away from the curb and twisted through the city. Evening light glared red. Shadows crept across the road. Headlights and streetlights switched on.

Marilyn lived in a suburban neighborhood, and nearly half an hour passed before they reached it. The bus didn't take a direct route. She sat with her purse on her lap, glancing back at the shifty-faced man. When she caught him staring, he looked away quickly.

She waited until the last moment to signal for her stop. The bus screeched and bounced. The driver gave her a dirty look. She climbed down the stairs.

Her house was a block away. She set off at a quick pace. Her footsteps echoed. She clutched her purse, held her breath, and tried not to look back. It was only mid-spring, and in the evening, the temperature fell into the low forties. Exertion quickened her breathing, and the air chilled her lungs.

She couldn't resist a look. The same man from the bus followed a block behind her with easy strides. Her heart skipped, and her mouth went dry. She broke into a jog. Long shadows covered the sidewalk. The trees took on a darker aspect, the branches rustling overhead. She turned toward her house and sprinted across the sidewalk, feeling hopelessly clumsy in dress shoes while she reached into her purse and rummaged for her keys.

High blood pressure made her dizzy, and her eyes welled up with tears. Her fingers grasped metal. She pulled the keyring out and fumbled with it until she had the correct key pointed in the right direction. Gasping for air, she pushed her way into the house, slammed the door, and leaned against it.

The grandfather clock in the front hallway ticked. Shaking, she choked back sobs, dropped her purse on the little table by the closet, and slipped out of her jacket. Her breathing slowed to normal, but the knots in her stomach didn't relax.

Heavy footsteps thudded down the hall. Grant stepped into the doorway, the light shining behind him. "Why are you home so early? You were supposed to go to the movies tonight."

His jaw set, and his tone accused. He inspected her coldly, his eyes darting over her purse and jacket before settling on her.

"I . . ." She swallowed hard, trapped between the stranger outside and the one she had married. If she complained of being followed, he wouldn't believe her, and he certainly wouldn't show any sympathy. He'd only brush off her fears, mock her, and call her silly and paranoid. "Loretta wasn't feeling well, so we canceled. I came straight home, instead."

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“Huh.” He grunted and gave her a disbelieving glare, holding eye contact until she shrank back and looked away. “You’d better not be keeping secrets from me, Marilyn.”

“Grant, please . . .” Her stomach contracted and her face felt hot. She held her breath. “Why does everything have to turn into an argument?”

“These days, you never know who you can trust.” He muttered and turned away, heading for his office.

Marilyn wiped her eyes and crept past, heading for the bedroom. Grant’s voice echoed; his side of a telephone conversation, harsh and mumbled. Working quickly, she pulled a valise from under the bed and packed a few things into it, putting little thought into the selection.

Most importantly, she took a roll of money from the bottom of her jewelry box, and a few pairs of earrings she wouldn’t mind parting with if she needed more cash. Grant had money, but barely gave her any allowance. Her job wasn’t just an excuse to get out of the house; it also provided a small measure of financial freedom.

Who was keeping secrets from whom? Shortly after they’d married, while simply putting the laundry away, she’d found a woman’s diamond necklace hidden among his socks. At first, she’d assumed he’d meant it as a surprise gift for her. Nothing had prepared her for his rage.

He’d bought it cheap to sell it for a profit, he’d said. And she was never to snoop or pry among his things.

Even after six months, the argument left her trembling. She’d thought he was a stock trader. That didn’t explain his irregular absences, his business calls outside of banking hours, or the gun she’d once caught him cleaning.

Blind from tears and unsure what her bag contained, she couldn’t waste any more time packing. She tiptoed to the front door, slipped back into her jacket, stuffed her

purse into her valise, and pulled the door open a crack to peer outside.

She didn't see the man who had followed her earlier, but an unfamiliar cream-colored Cadillac was parked across the street. The man in the driver's seat wore a white Stetson. It almost struck her as funny. She'd never seen one outside of cowboy films.

Cautiously, Marilyn stepped onto the sidewalk. The lanky man wasn't in sight, but he could be hiding in any of the shadows or behind the trees. Her ears buzzed with nervous tension and tears still blurred her vision. She set off at a brisk pace. There wouldn't be any more buses tonight, but a direct route toward the city center was far shorter than a circuitous bus ride. Within fifteen minutes, she expected to reach an area urban enough to find a taxi.

Every moving shadow startled her. She took quick steps and counted the number of blocks. Something moved behind her, but glancing back, she saw only the empty street. A Cadillac turned the corner ahead, catching her in the blinding glare of headlights.

The driver wore a white hat.

Inescapable panic sent her forward at a jog, but she couldn't maintain the pace for more than half a block. Running in these shoes risked turning her ankle. The car passed and turned. She slowed to a walk and glanced around, finding herself alone.

The lights seemed brighter ahead. She passed a few shops, closed for the evening, but she knew of others ahead with later hours. Within another three or four blocks, she expected to be far enough into the city to find either a payphone or a roaming taxi. After that, she didn't know where she would go. Maybe to Loretta's, although she hated to bring a friend into this kind of trouble.

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She stopped at a street corner and glanced both ways. Footsteps resumed behind her. Breathless again, she spun around. The lanky man skidded to a stop, guilty recognition on his face.

With a sharp yelp, she dashed into the street. The cream Cadillac roared around the corner. She froze in the headlights. Tires squealed. The car skidded to a stop beside her, and the driver flung the door open. He lunged out and grabbed her valise. Obstinate, she clung to the handle, digging her heels against the pavement while he dragged her off balance.

“Give me the bag!” The cowboy’s voice drawled.

He struck her in the face, but she held on. She couldn’t let go of her life savings, her only chance at freedom, everything she had. Her fingers slipped. While toppling forward, an odd thought formed. The bad guys were supposed to wear black hats. Not white. That’s how it was in all the movies.

The cowboy abruptly reeled back and swore, releasing the bag. She landed on her knees beside the car, grabbed the bag, and darted away. The lanky man grappled with the cowboy and aimed a punch, but instead took one in the face. It landed with a solid thud, and she was close enough to hear the resulting grunt.

Clinging to her valise, she sprinted. A taxi stopped at an intersection. She threw herself into the back seat and slammed the door, panting.

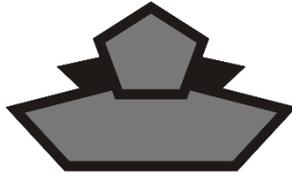
The driver turned around. “You in that big of a hurry?”

“A . . . hotel.” She tried to catch her breath. Her knees stung from falling on them, and her fingers froze to the bag’s handle. She shook too badly to pry her hands loose.

“Any hotel in particular?”

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Marilyn looked through the rear window. When the cowboy knocked down the lanky man, he sprang up again and aimed a gun. The cowboy put his hands up and backed toward his car. She sank down in her seat, sliding below the level of the window and hoping to make herself invisible. “Take me someplace where nobody will ever find me.”



Chapter II

Saturday morning, Marilyn slipped into the telephone booth in the corner of the lobby, clutching her purse. Her knees still ached from falling. The sign above the desk labeled the hotel as The Majestic, but the décor proclaimed that as a bold-faced lie. The damp air smelled like cheap cigarettes and old socks, plaster chipped off the walls in flakes, and the wrinkled carpet hadn't been cleaned since the turn of the century. She almost resented the cab driver for bringing her here, but it fit her requirements. This was the last place anyone would look.

Marilyn winced at her reflection in the dingy glass. She couldn't do much to fix either her hair or her makeup. In her hurry to leave, she'd packed three blouses and one skirt that didn't match any of them, nine pairs of underwear, no stockings, toothpaste but no toothbrush, and no comb. At least she carried lipstick in her purse.

While flipping through the musty telephone directory, she sneezed. Several pages had been torn out, and others were heavily marked. Her fingers fumbled with separating the pages. She needed to find someone to help her. Not sure

what she would say, she turned to the business directory and searched for detectives.

Lowan had a full-page advertisement that specified a fee of one hundred dollars a day, and that he didn't accept divorce cases. For a price like that, he must be the best, and divorce was secondary to her other problems. Selling her earrings would cover the fee for a few days. She dropped a nickel in the slot and dialed. It rang with no answer. No weekend hours were listed in the advertisement. She searched for a home number, but it must have appeared on one of the missing pages.

Desperate, she flipped back to the business directory and tried the next two detectives. Fritz Gallop and Marvin Kane. Gallop's phone rang endlessly, and Kane's had been disconnected. She slammed the receiver back on the hook. The cramped surroundings heightened her anxiety. She stepped out of the phone booth and tripped on the wrinkled carpet. Only half of the overhead lights worked. The proprietor, a beefy, red-faced man, glared at her from behind the desk. He rattled his newspaper and turned the page.

Self-conscious about her appearance, she slipped back to her room, threw her things into her bag, and returned her key at the desk.

"Leaving so soon?" The proprietor set the newspaper aside, crunching it loudly. His bald head glinted in the dim light. He reached for the key and snatched it from her hand.

She flinched and sprinted across the room, gripping her bag. Outside, the air felt cold despite the bright sunlight. The proprietor must have thought she was an idiot. Now, the reaction embarrassed her. She squared her shoulders and strode down the sidewalk. A few cars passed, but no taxi.

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Lowan's name haunted her. She'd seen it before. Somewhere. A strange name like that was hard to forget, and it made her think of lions. Imagining a lion working for her made her feel safer. A big, powerful lion who could roar at all her problems and make them go away.

Footsteps echoed behind her. Marilyn stopped and held her breath. The steps behind her also stopped. She gripped her bag and broke into a sweat. Her heart thudded. As long as she remained still, so did her pursuer.

She leapt forward and dashed to the busy corner ahead, waving for a taxi. A quick glance back showed the same lanky man in the rumpled jacket, his dark gray hat pulled down to shade his face. He skidded to a stop and turned around as if he was looking for an address. He wasn't more than half a block away from her. Practically within reach.

A taxi finally stopped at the curb. She slid into the back seat and slammed the door.

"Where to?" The cabby leaned around to look at her. He was a big man with a scarred face, and his smile showed a gold tooth. His cap was tilted at a rakish angle.

"Drive. Now!" Her heart thudded, and she couldn't catch her breath. She hoped she could trust him.

He smirked, but stepped on the gas.

"Pratt Printing and Engraving, a print shop downtown." Marilyn shrank back into the corner and gave the address. She remembered where she'd seen Lowan's name.

When the taxi stopped beside the building, she asked the driver to wait. She left her overnight bag in the car, but took her purse with her. The office was closed on the weekend. She had her own key, so she slipped inside and switched on the light.

Empty worktables and silent presses gave her a bout of loneliness. She shook it off and reached for the door to the

storage area. It was locked. That lock had been changed recently by the new owner, Franklin Wagner, without explanation. If she got caught here on a weekend, she'd lose her job. Even if Wagner was Loretta's uncle. Loretta hadn't been able to get any explanations out of him either.

Frustrated and shaky from the feeling of being watched, she spun around. A few boxes of presorted mailer advertisements were stacked near the back door, ready to be delivered to the post office on Monday morning. She opened the first one and ran her fingers through them, reading the names as quickly as she could.

Halfway through the box, she found an advertisement from Amercon Radios addressed to Lowan, on East Elm, and it included an apartment number. Clutching the postcard, she prayed that it was his home address rather than his office.

After putting everything back exactly as it had been, she switched out the light, locked the door, and hurried back to the cab.

"Lady, I think you're being followed." The cabbie glanced in the rear-view mirror. "Another cab stopped a block behind us, and nobody got out."

"I know." She held out the postcard. "Can you take me there?"

"Are you sure you don't want the police?" He shifted into gear and pulled into traffic, then turned north at the next intersection.

Instead of answering, she stared through the window. The downtown faded into a residential neighborhood. The cab turned several more times and reached a shady, tree-lined street. Older houses, mostly close together, but well-kept. Many featured large front porches. Mid-sized

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apartment buildings were interspersed among them, made of sparkling red brick and gleaming windows.

The other cab remained a block behind.



After a late breakfast, Lowan dozed in his favorite chair against the radiator in his living room, with a wool blanket draped over his lap. After the last several cases, he needed a weekend off. Two full days of nothing but enjoying his favorite hot tea, reading books, and taking extended naps. His last attempt at a vacation, barely two weeks ago, hadn't been as restful as he had hoped.

Three weeks ago, he'd broken two ribs. He shouldn't have been taking any cases at all until they healed, and that could require up to another month. But emergencies kept occurring, and he couldn't say no.

Next time, he would.

He'd close the office for at least a week, refuse to answer the telephone, and pretend he wasn't home. Maybe after that, he would feel a little more like himself again. Constant pain with every motion drained his energy, broke his concentration, and left him in a semi-permanent state of dull exhaustion.

He could simply retire. The royalty checks from Amercon covered his expenses more than adequately. He didn't need to work as a detective.

Frantic pounding rattled his door. A hard flinch took his breath away and made his eyes water. He winced and pushed himself up out of his chair. Dizzy again, he crossed the bare wooden floor and pulled the door open.

A young woman pushed her way inside. Her golden hair wasn't combed very well, and her dress was wrinkled. She glanced around at the empty room, wide-eyed and panting. "I'm looking for Lowan, the detective. Are . . . you?" Judging by the long pause, he wasn't what she'd been expecting.

"I am." Self-consciously aware of his pajamas, he stepped back. The room contained nothing except for his chair and a large stack of books on the floor. "If you need a detective, you can see me in my office on Monday. I never work from my apartment."

"Please." She grabbed his arm. "There's two men following me. I was attacked last night, and I don't know what to do. I can pay you. You've got to help me."



Chapter III

“How did you find this address?” Lowan gritted his teeth. He couldn’t say no to this case either, no matter how much he didn’t want it. Not when someone was in trouble and needed his help.

She held out a postcard-sized advertisement. “I work at the company where these are printed.”

Lowan took it, gave it a quick glance, and set it on one of the stacks of books beside his chair. “I fail to understand why they send me advertisements for products I invented. You were followed here?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “He’s outside now. He’s been following me since last night.”

“Do you know why?”

“No, I . . .” She shivered and trailed off, then took a breath and tried again. “Maybe I should start at the beginning. I’m Marilyn Chambers. I work at Pratt Printing, which used to be owned by my stepfather, but was sold recently. I was supposed to go out with a friend after work

last night, but she canceled, so I went home. I was followed all the way. My husband, Grant, I don't know what's gotten into him, but he was in a bad mood, so I didn't want to stay there, either. I packed a bag and went to a hotel, and on the way there, a Cadillac stopped in front of me and a man in a white Stetson tried to steal my bag. He got into an argument with the other man who had been following me, and I ran. This morning, I was followed from the hotel to the printing office, where I got your address, and then here."

"The man outside, is he the one who tried to steal your bag?"

"No, he's the other one."

"What does he look like?"

"Tall, lanky, rumpled clothes, shifty eyes, maybe thirty. He wore his hat pulled down over his face, so I couldn't see much, but I'd recognize him again."

Lowan caught a few glimpses of the image in her mind, though her imagination had blown them out of proportion. "And he prevented you from being robbed." He tried to put the fragments of her story together into an order that made sense, but there were too many missing pieces.

"I suppose so."

If the man was still outside, he couldn't confront him in his pajamas. "Wait here, please." He went to his bedroom and changed into something more professional. He tried to hurry, but moving too quickly strained his ribs. The process took far longer than he intended.

In the living room again, he found her perched on the edge of his chair, staring at his pile of books. "The man outside . . ."

"I have an idea who he might be. I will speak with him."

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“Who?” She fidgeted. “Do I have to . . .?”

“You may wait here.” Lowan left her in his apartment and stepped out into the hall. He paused to listen, sensing no one else nearby except his neighbors. Outside, a taxi waited at the curb directly in front, empty except for the driver. Another was parked farther down the block. The man inside hid behind a newspaper.

Lowan focused enough to telepathically sense the man in the back seat. His presence was familiar—and disgusting. Still, he was no threat. Lowan approached the cab and slapped his palm against the rear passenger window. The newspaper flinched and moved aside.

The door opened. Fritz Gallop climbed out. Sneering, he brushed himself off. That wouldn’t make any difference to his rumpled clothing. His hat was crooked, and he had a black mark around one eye. “Why do you always butt into my cases? Every time . . .”

“Why are you following my client?” Lowan glared and put enough emphasis behind his words to make Gallop respectfully pay attention.

“Your client?” He stepped back. “Since when? How was I supposed to know?”

“Who hired you?”

“I can’t tell you that. Client confidentiality. I have some standards—”

“Who are you working for?” Lowan touched Gallop’s mind and waited for the information to surface. The answer was clear enough, despite Gallop’s bluster. He didn’t know. “You received cash in an envelope, along with Mrs. Chambers’ description.”

“How did you find out?” Gallop rubbed his forehead. “And why do I always get such a headache whenever I’m around you?”

“Yesterday, you prevented a robbery?”

“Yeah, some guy tried to grab her purse. I put a stop to that, but by the time I got through with him, she was gone. In that neighborhood, and carrying an overnight bag, it didn’t take much figuring to guess she’d gone to Hammer’s, so I picked her up again there in the morning.”

“Could you identify the man?”

“Buster Cardwell. I thought snatching purses was a bit beneath him, but I guess not.”

“Come.” Lowan motioned for Gallop to follow. “We will speak with Mrs. Chambers about this. She noticed you easily, and you frightened her out of her wits.”

“She can’t have spotted me that easily.” Gallop followed, but stomped his feet and grumbled.

“You stand out like a gorilla at a ballet lesson.”

“I do not,” Gallop retorted. He muttered all the way down the checker-tiled hallway.

Lowan’s apartment was almost at the end. The last apartment beyond his smelled like oatmeal cookies, and even Gallop paused to sniff and drool. Lowan pushed his door open.

Inside, Gallop glanced around and sneered. “This is where you live?”

“The lack of furniture will make it easier to fumigate after you leave.” Lowan pushed the door shut.

Marilyn leapt out of the chair and yelped. “That’s him.” She backed away while her eyes darted around the room. “Is he a friend of yours?”

“Ha,” Gallop snorted. “Not by a longshot.”

“My sentiments exactly.” Lowan motioned between them. “Mrs. Chambers, allow me to introduce Fritz Gallop. He is another private detective.”

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Marilyn didn't step any closer. She clutched her purse tightly. "Why were you following me?"

"Someone paid me." Gallop took off his hat. The gesture may have been an attempt to appear friendly, but showing his greasy and unkempt dark-blond hair didn't improve his appearance. "I don't know who or why."

"Do you know why anyone might hire a detective to follow you?" Lowan asked. "Your husband, perhaps?"

"No!" She took a hesitant step closer. "At least, I've never done anything that would justify it, I swear. But Grant is insanely jealous, and he has been acting strangely lately."

"Define strange."

"He's so touchy about every little thing and he yells for any reason. He accuses me of lying to him and keeping secrets from him, and I swear I'm not. And . . ." She bit her lip. Lowan felt her anxiety double. "A few months ago, I found a woman's necklace in his things. When I asked him about it, he screamed at me. He said he bought it to sell for a profit, but I don't know about that."

"How long have you been married?"

"Less than a year." She looked down and edged a few steps closer. "What should I do?"

"The police would be my first recommendation."

"No." She sucked in her breath. "If there's nothing wrong, and I bring the police into this, Grant would be so angry. So far, nothing has actually happened—"

"Ha," Gallop interjected, rubbing his black eye. "I wouldn't call my little run-in with Buster Cardwell nothing. He usually goes in for jobs a bit bigger than purse snatching."

"My second recommendation," Lowan said to Marilyn, "is for Fritz Gallop to continue following you, with your

permission. If you feel unsafe at home, stay with a friend or at another hotel until we find the answer.”

“Someplace a little better than Hammer’s,” Gallop added. “You don’t want to get mixed up with the normal customers at a place like that. And . . .” He turned to face Lowan. “Did you just agree to work with me?”

“You know I never take divorce cases, and if this turns into one, I will step away and leave it entirely in your hands.” Lowan made strong eye contact. “In the meantime, you are capable of handling the routine footwork while I discover what is behind this problem.”

“Hey . . .” Gallop raised one eyebrow, unsure if he’d been insulted.

Lowan ignored him and faced Marilyn again. “Will I find your husband at home on a Saturday?”

“I don’t know.” She began searching through her purse. “He comes and goes at odd hours. I thought he was a stock trader, but a lot of his work seems to be outside of the bank’s business hours. I can give you our address.” She took a piece of paper out of her purse and wrote a few lines with a pencil.

“Good.” He took the paper and made sure it was readable. “In the meantime, keep me informed of your whereabouts, and stay close to Gallop. If Cardwell approaches you again, Gallop can handle him.”

“Thanks for the glowing recommendation,” Gallop said sarcastically. He turned toward the door and motioned for Marilyn to follow. “Where do you want to go?”

While she thought about her answer, Lowan gripped Gallop’s arm and lowered his voice, but spoke firmly. “You still owe me fifty dollars, and I am expecting it by Wednesday.”

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“You’ll just have to get in line.” Gallop jerked away and brushed himself off. “You’re not the only guy trying to collect, but if this case works out, you’ll have it.”



Chapter IV

Lowan's taxi stopped at the address Marilyn had given him. It was a big house in a nice neighborhood, though there weren't many defining features to set it apart from the others. Tidy flowerbeds lined the sidewalk, but the petunias looked sparse, pale, and wilted. He paused at the door and listened. Sensing someone inside, he knocked.

As spacious as the house appeared, it wouldn't have surprised him if a servant opened the door. It seemed odd that Marilyn needed to work at a print shop, likely for low pay, when her husband was financially more than comfortable. Lowan waited, sensing a presence inside moving closer.

The man who answered wore a business suit and stood with his shoulders square, evidently the master of the house.

"Are you Mr. Chambers?" Lowan watched his response, detecting impatience and underlying nervous tension as Chambers tried to make sense of the visit.

"Yes. And you are . . .?" Various possibilities flitted through Chambers' mind, ranging from traveling salesman

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or pollster to secret assassin. He stood back and kept his posture defensive.

“Did you hire a private detective to follow your wife?”

“Did I . . . what?” Chambers reeled back like he had been slapped, and his reaction left no doubt that he wasn’t responsible. “What business is that of yours?”

“She hired me to discover why she was being followed.”

“Where is Marilyn? All the time, she reads things into the situation that just aren’t there. Paranoid, I think. You know how women are.”

“She was being followed by Fritz Gallop, another private detective, but he received instructions and cash in an envelope and did not know who hired him.”

“Then, you are . . .”

“I am Lowan. Also a private detective. Mrs. Chambers came to see me this morning.”

Chambers looked down at him, cold and calculating. “Where’s my wife?”

“She was attacked last night.”

“What?” His face paled. “Is she alright?”

Chambers’ concern was genuine. Lowan could sense that clearly, but there was something more behind it. “Buster Cardwell attempted to steal her purse, but Gallop fought him off. Does Cardwell’s name mean anything to you?”

“No.” He spoke a little too quickly and gripped the edge of the door as if he wanted to slam it. “Where’s my wife?”

“She is staying with a friend, and Gallop is watching to ensure that no harm comes to her.”

“If she’s with Loretta . . .” Chambers grumbled, not quite saying what he had on his mind. His thoughts were

jumbled and tinted red, and his words sounded more possessive than caring. “Just tell her to come home. She’s better off here.”

“Where you can keep an eye on her?”

“What’s that supposed to mean—” The phone rang. Chambers glanced back. “That’s important. I have to answer it. Just tell Marilyn to come home.”

The harshness in his manner remained, but fear crept in at the edges. Strong enough to make Lowan shiver. Chambers stepped back and slammed the door.

Footsteps receded. Lowan felt Chambers’ approximate location inside, somewhere toward the back, and his presence remained marked by stronger anxiety. Moving as quickly as he could manage, Lowan stepped off the porch and hurried around the side of the house.

Near the back door, but away from the window, he stopped, set his hand on the wall, and cleared his mind. He reached telepathically farther inside, finding Chambers at the telephone in the kitchen.

Chambers’ thoughts were still muddled, and the distance prevented Lowan from seeing clearly, but he caught a few snippets of the conversation as they flashed through Chambers’ mind. Several names threaded through the conversation. Loretta, Wagner, Pratt . . .

“It’s not my fault. I think she’s with Loretta. There’s a detective called Fritz Gallop watching her, and another named Lowan pestering me, so I have to be careful. Did you . . .?”

Chambers’ anger overpowered the telepathic connection, forcing Lowan to break contact for a moment to catch his breath. He reached inside again. Chambers knew the caller’s identity—and feared him. The man was

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connected to a criminal organization that had already killed a friend of his. One way or another, he couldn't let this go.

"I know, I know. I'll head over to Loretta's place next and see if I can find her." Giving away Marilyn's location was a risk, but Chambers doubted that the caller would harm Loretta. On the other hand, appearing to cooperate might deem him trustworthy. The stakes were too high to back out.

The conversation ended. Lowan felt Chambers slam the receiver onto the hook. After another minute of jumbled thoughts and unclear actions, Chambers' presence moved toward the back door.

Lowan rushed around the corner and broke into an unsteady jog. The exertion strained his ribs and made his eyes water. He held his arm against his side and kept going. Behind him, the garage door rattled. An engine started. Out of breath, he stumbled around the next corner and braced himself against the front of the house.

A car roared past him and pulled into the street.



Gallop perched himself on a dainty pink chair in Loretta's apartment. He was alone in the living room, and he sat facing the door. Marilyn and Loretta's chatty conversation drifted from the kitchen. Waiting here was easier than doing surveillance from the hallway or the front of the building, but standing outside in a downpour would still have been preferable.

He wished he'd brought a book to read, something with enough action to keep him awake. A sampling of Loretta's reading material was stacked on an end table. Romance novels, fashion magazines, Hollywood gossip, and makeup

catalogues. The constant, high-pitched voices in the background grated on his nerves.

If the catalogue had an illustrated lingerie section, it would be the only thing worth looking at. Otherwise, innumerable mind-numbingly dull hours stretched out ahead of him.

Laughter echoed through the kitchen doorway. “I have it in my purse,” Marilyn said. She stepped into the living room and went to the narrow table near the door, where a pile of miscellaneous feminine accessories had accumulated. She grabbed her purse and reached into it. Judging by the rummaging sounds and the intensity of her search, it contained multitudes. “Do you need anything?” she asked Gallop. “We’re going to have pasta salad for dinner.”

“Oh . . . joy. My favorite.” The chair creaked when he shifted his weight, and the lacey doll-sized cushions didn’t do anything to make it comfortable. Running somewhere to buy a hamburger might only take twenty minutes, if he could find a place close enough. Real food would be worth the risk.

“What’s this?” Marilyn pulled a small velvet pouch out of her purse. “I’m sure it’s not mine.”

“What?” Gallop stood and crossed the room.

She turned around, opened the pouch, and dumped something green and palm-sized into her hand. “That’s definitely not mine. I’ve never seen it before.”

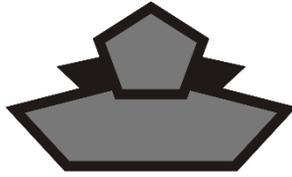
“An emerald?” He took it from her and held it up to the lamp. It felt cold and smooth, and it reflected light, but he wasn’t an expert. “This big, I’d guess it’s fake.” He handed it back.

Loretta stepped in from the kitchen. “Did you find your lipstick?”

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“No, but I found something else.” She showed the emerald. “Where do you think this came from? If it’s real, it must be worth a fortune.”

Loretta gasped and put her hand to her mouth, staring at the stone. “Is that why the man tried to steal your purse?”



Chapter V

“I’m going to have a look around outside,” Gallop said. Being trapped in pink-and-lace surroundings made him antsy, and he wanted to find some real food rather than having to face Loretta’s salad on an empty stomach.

Loretta and Marilyn glanced at him, stepped closer to each other, and discussed the emerald in high-pitched whispers. They could speculate all they wanted, but he’d still bet it was nothing but glass.

The hallway was quiet, and just as pink, frilly, and perfumed as the apartment. Flowered wallpaper, sconce lights with little lacey lampshades. The building catered to single young women, and didn’t allow male visitors after the evening hours. He wasn’t sure how the management enforced that rule, and for once, he hoped he wouldn’t have to break it.

The building didn’t have an elevator, so he walked down the two flights of steps and tiptoed along another hallway. At the last apartment near the exit, the door creaked open. A matronly woman glared out at him, looking down her nose as if she thought she knew exactly

what he'd been up to and with whom. He made a face at her. She huffed and slammed the door.

Still, it was good to know that somebody was watching out for the residents. Gallop stepped outside into the fresh air. This was a quiet, residential area on the west side, and there was very little traffic in sight. Down the block, he spotted a place on the corner with striped awnings over the windows. He could only read the fancy, slanted letters on the sign by squinting. *Percival's*. A glance through the window showed tables and chairs.

Inside, he found mostly women who would have looked at home in Loretta's building. Not a hamburger in sight.

A dark-eyed waiter with a thin moustache motioned reluctantly to a table away from any of the other patrons. "Can I help you?"

"What's the special today?" Gallop sat with his back to the wall, facing the front windows.

"We have a variety of soups and salads—"

"Sandwiches? Something with real meat and cheese, none of that egg salad stuff."

"We have ham and Swiss on rye."

"That'll do." Gallop conceded and made a dismissive motion. It wasn't as good as a hamburger, but at least it was better than textureless mystery chunks in white sauce with the consistency of dog vomit. "And make it quick."

The waiter gave him a withering look and glided toward the kitchen. The women at the corner table whispered.

A dark shadow crossed the windows and lingered. Gallop turned, catching the silhouette of a big man in a black hat. He disappeared past the edge of the window. Bright sunlight washed out the streetscape, making the view look faded and pale.

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There was nothing especially sinister about a man walking past a restaurant, and the black fedora didn't belong to Buster Cardwell, but something familiar about the silhouette set Gallop's nerves on edge. He kept his eyes on the window, almost expecting the man to return. With a second look, maybe he could identify him.

The waiter clunked a plate on the table. Startled, Gallop looked down. Two palm-sized pieces of bread enclosed a thin square of cheese and a translucent shaving of ham. It came with a sprig of parsley and a tiny paper napkin scalloped around the edges. The plate looked more like an hors d'oeuvre at a fancy tea party than a decent meal. He finished it in three bites and paid the bill, no tip. The waiter gave him a dirty look.

Gallop sauntered across the restaurant and saluted the ladies at the corner table. They covered their mouths and giggled. He stepped outside and looked both ways. Despite the sun, the breeze chilled the back of his neck. He pulled his hat down.

That joke of a sandwich only teased his appetite. He could have eaten five more like it easily and still had room for dessert. His stomach wouldn't settle.

Several cars passed. Somewhere, a yappy little dog barked. The wind picked up a little. Gallop took long strides and checked his watch as he turned the corner. He hadn't been gone for more than twenty minutes.

Something caught him by the arm and spun him around into the alley beside a brick building. His back slammed against the wall. He caught a glimpse of a black hat while grappling with a forearm pressed against his throat.

"Jasper wants his money," a deep voice snarled.

"I have until Monday," Gallop objected.

“This is just a curtesy reminder.” Badger shoved him back against the wall and leaned in close to breathe on his face. Jasper Flagg ran a casino and nightclub, and also did business as a loan shark. Badger the Bonecrusher was his bouncer, enforcer, and collection agent. “For a hundred bucks, I get to break your leg. I’m looking forward to Monday.”

“Can I get an extension?” When Gallop stopped struggling, the pressure on his neck loosened slightly. “If I give you fifty dollars now, could I get an extra week for the other half? There’s another guy I owe, and if I don’t pay him by Wednesday, O’Malley’s going to break my neck.”

“O’Malley’s your problem. I’ll take the fifty now, and for the other fifty, I still get to break your arm. That’s the only kind of extension you’ll get. *Monday.*”

Badger backed off and let Gallop reach for his wallet. Gallop turned away to hide how much he had in it. His mystery client had mailed him a hundred, enough to hire him for five days. He kept fifty in reserve and handed over the other half, then shoved his wallet back into his pocket.

“Pleasure doing business with you.” Badger counted it and grinned, showing crooked, yellow teeth. “I’ll look forward to our next meeting. Here’s to mark your calendar.”

His fist came out of nowhere and caught Gallop on the jaw. The first impact only stunned him, but when the back of his head bounced off the wall, the curtains came down and the lights went out.

Endless ringing, vague darkness, warped nightmares, the taste of blood. Gallop reached for a distant speck of light and tried to grab ahold of it, but it blinked and zipped away like a tipsy firefly, and he fell back into the jagged, lumpy darkness.

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The ringing came back into focus a second time, pulsating slightly. The firefly settled in one place and brightened into midafternoon sunlight. It glared harshly enough to make him close his eyes. He tried to push himself up, but the ground heaved under him and the gravel stung his palms. His chin hit the pavement.

Maybe he didn't need to get up that urgently. He moved his arm enough to see his watch and squinted at it until the numbers came into focus. Forty minutes had passed since he'd left Loretta's apartment.

Anything could happen in forty minutes.

Gritting his teeth, he grabbed the wall to pull himself up, found his hat, then staggered onto the sidewalk. A car was parked in front of Loretta's building. Not a Cadillac, but it hadn't been there when he'd left.

Maybe it was nothing, but he was always suspicious, and he'd been gone for far too long. He hurried to the entrance, pulled the door open, and stumbled inside. The smell of perfume made him nauseous, and the thick carpet threw off his balance, like walking uphill through dry sand.

The same matronly woman peered out at him from the first apartment.

"Did another man come in here within the last twenty minutes?" He leaned against the wall, leaving a dirty handprint on the patterned wallpaper.

"Just five minutes ago, and he looked mad. A friend of yours?" She jeered at him. "When I find out what's going on around here . . ."

He lurched away. Her voice blurred into the background. The steps seemed endless. He gripped the railing to avoid falling, but he reached the third floor eventually. Harsh shouts reached him the moment he stepped from the stairwell into the hallway.

“Marilyn, be reasonable . . .”

A man stood outside of Loretta’s apartment, forcing the door open and struggling with a woman inside. Marilyn screamed.

Thank you for reading this free

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Other Books by S. E. Grosskopf

Book 1: Lowan's Checkmate

Lowan, a private detective and telepathic alien, teams up with Detective Lieutenant Marx, an introverted underdog, to catch a clever jewel thief terrorizing Milford Falls.

Book 2: Shamrock Hunt

When a famous Celtic medallion—the prize for a charity raffle—is stolen, Lowan competes with a rival private detective to find it in time for the St. Patrick's Day parade. Meanwhile, Marx investigates the murder of a history professor and faces off with a lifelong enemy.

Book 3: Murder on Harrisonville Road

After writing a newspaper story about the crimeless village of Harrisonville, Tom Nanning is ambushed and left for dead. When Lowan investigates, he finds himself trapped in a small town with a murderer hidden among its quirky residents.

Book 4: Orchid Hunter

While Marx investigates a murder committed via April Fool's prank, which renders alibis useless, Lowan dives into the black market orchid trade to recover the main attraction stolen before the Easter flower show. Both investigations lead to a thirty-five-year-old tiger attack in the jungles of Borneo.

Book 5: The Great Flamingo Robbery

When the mangiest flamingo is stolen from the zoo, Lowan is called in to investigate. He never expected to get mixed up with a beautiful ruby thief or a South American dictator.

Book 6: The Unicorn Staff

The murder of an archeologist and the theft of a staff made from a unicorn's horn lead Lowan and Marx on a wild quest for answers.

Book 7: Lowan's Circus Tricks

Lowan's search for Eloise Meer leads him to a traveling circus in dusty Dry Creek, Kansas. But the only Eloise at the circus is a ring-tailed monkey. Hunting for clues, he joins the circus and promptly finds himself framed for murder.

Book 8: The Starmaster

The Starmaster is hunting for aliens—and he's after Lowan.

Book 9: Murder in the Script

A movie is being filmed in Milford Falls. The script might solve an old crime for which an innocent man was framed, if the real murderer doesn't stop the production first.

Book 10: Murder at Woodward Retreat

Lowan and Marx take a vacation at a cabin in the woods. But their plans are disrupted when the woman in the next cabin claims that she saw her husband kill a man.

Book 11: The Pigeon Wing Murders

A wounded carrier pigeon with a coded message, a train robbery, and a stolen racehorse add up to one of Lowan's strangest cases yet.

Book 12: The Mattison Matter

When Tom Nenning is framed for murder, Lowan must work quickly to clear his name. He finds himself enmeshed in a case of corporate espionage involving the radio company he works for, and misused city funds linked to the mayor's office.

Book 13: The Unicorn Curse

When a madman starts killing the remaining members of the *Bearance* crew with a harpoon, Lowan and Marx begin to suspect that Teddy Bear hadn't been aboard the ship when it sank. To find the truth, Lowan goes undercover at a secret million-dollar auction aboard the killer's luxury yacht.

Book 14: Emerald Deception

After an attempted purse-snatching, a frightened woman goes to Lowan for help. Two men are following her, and she wants to know why. The strange emerald found in her purse might provide a clue—until it's appraised as fake. Why does everyone want it so badly?

Book 15: The First Chase

The three members of the insurance racket are still at large, and the last case ended with three new leads. Tracking down the first one brings Lowan and Marx to an illegal greyhound track outside of the city limits, race fixing, and murder.

Book 16: The Second Course

Lowan and Marx track down the second member of the insurance racket, and he's nothing like they expected. Caught between a case of mistaken identity and a prestigious banquet at his restaurant, he agrees to tell them everything he knows—if the killer doesn't get to him first.

Book 17: The Third Conspirator

The third and final member of the insurance racket proves to be the most elusive and dangerous of them all.

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