

Murder Most Academic: The 2nd Harley Broder Mystery

CHAPTER 1

"So here's the stiff dangling from an exposed beam, tongue stuck out like a wienie from a bun, eyes bulging. In walks his wife, cool, like she's getting the morning paper. Flips him a look, peels back the panty hose the guy's wearing, looks at the label and says..." Here Millie almost choked on her oyster loaf. "She says, S'Mooths. Not mine. No Nonsense."

"No nonsense?"

"Panty hose. The wife's hose of choice. You were married. Don't you know anything about women?"

"If I did, I guess I'd still be married. I've seen the TV ads. That help?"

Millie chewed reflectively. "Personally, I would have pegged her for Hanes or Soft 'N' Silky. Something more expensive.

"Messina's idea to call her—that dumbass—said he wanted to see her 'reaction.' Paid more attention to her ass. Totally against protocol. Pulled her out of bed, but she'd taken time to put on make-up."

Paul Messina is Millie's detective partner.

"Anyway, by then the coroner's arrived, we've got pictures in case we need them, so we cut the guy down. He's like a loose-jointed mannequin, rigor hadn't totally kicked in. We had to move chairs and the stool he was unlucky enough to kick over just to lay him out."

"Not suicide?"

Millie made a face like she'd bit into dill pickles in her oyster loaf. "Naw, he was getting his rocks off. Happens more often than you'd think

"Usually with younger guys though. 'Borrow' some girl's hose and panties, preferably before they hit the washer, dress up, throw a rope over something and around their neck, dangle over a chair while they stroke off..." Millie's fingers and thumb described a circle and stroked. "Men are such sick, disgusting perverts."

"Thanks."

"Only Kramer got careless, kicked over the stool in his ecstasy, passed out before he could grab the rope. Anoxia. No oxygen to the brain." She wiped a finger on one of Mandina's napkins and tapped the thick black hair she wears like a helmet.

"No chance somebody did him?"

"Come on. An English professor? I gather he wasn't real liked. His wife wasn't shedding any tears. But murder? Naw."

Millie Boudreaux is a detective in the NOPD homicide division and in her three-year stint she's seen enough broken, lacerated and bullet-punctured bodies to know the look of murder. The one that got to her, she'd told me, her first homicide case, was an 11-year old black kid with frozen brown eyes and a neat round hole in the middle of his forehead.

Leroy was found on his back near the St. Anthony project in a weedy lot sporting garbage and a No Dumping sign. Millie said he looked so small crumpled up in the grass, and his arms and legs so skinny. For days after she'd gone about doing her job but didn't feel right, like the world had shifted on her.

By the time a 22-year old single mother of two and project drug pusher was arrested for the killing, the shifted world was beginning to look like the real one. The boy had been holding out on some of the crack and she'd made an example of him for the other runners. Millie said she carried two Leroy's in her head: the punk who'd sell death on the installment plan to any customer and the castoff little body in the midst of garbage and trash and waving grass.

And now the dangling corpse of a balding English professor wearing panty hose evoked only grotesque humor.

"So who's your client?"

I have a business card that says Harley Broder, Discreet Private Investigations and gives my Uptown office address and phone number. It doesn't explain how a failed academic came to be in a business not generally associated with subtlety and sophistication.

"I don't have a client yet, and besides, it says 'Discreet' on my card. On the other hand, she said she didn't care who knew she intended to hire me and it would probably give me an entre..."

"Entre? She talks like that?"

"On the phone, she does."

"So who is it?"

"Mignon Peltier Kramer. Mrs. Kramer."

"Ms. No Nonsense? You're kidding. No, you never kid. You thick-necked, heartland Teutonic types have all the humor of a chunk of sod."

"I have a terrific sense of humor. I just tend toward the ironic and witty. That's why I get all the Uptown trade. Why do I keep liking you, Millie?"

"My lovely eyes and I'm your access to police information."

Millie is as black as chicory coffee and has wide nostrils, full lips and dark curly hair cut close, like a helmet. But she also has one dark brown and one pale blue eye.

Heterochromia. Looking into them makes even hardened persons of interest characters get nervous; they feel like two people are watching out of the same face. Her eyes explain a lot about Millie. I think the reason she likes me—yes, she does like me—is I didn't look away or flinch the first time I looked into her eyes. That was in the Camp Street Washeteria when she told me my washer was trying to leave the premises because my load was unbalanced. I peeled off some jeans and she was right. But looking her straight in the eyes—that's not the only reason.

"What's Mrs. Professor want?"

"Something to do with her husband's death, she said. I'm supposed to meet her in an hour."

"What time is it? Jeez, I gotta run. 'J'conise' be home soon. I'll add the loaf and beer to my bribing-a-cop file."

"Thanks, Mill."

Millie hefted her oversized purse and strode out.

Claiborne University occupies a dozen or so prime acres opposite Audubon Park. The joggers and warm weather sunbathers can look across at the stone imitation-Oxford façade and feel confident that higher education is solidly in place in New Orleans. I swung into the parking area and told the bored guard I was supposed to meet with Professor Kramer's wife in Oldham Hall. He gave me a temporary slip to put on the dash and said if I was going to be here more often, I'd have to fill out some forms at campus security. Oldham is one of the original campus buildings, high ceilings and darkened varnished woodwork and echoing hallways. Students with bookbags and blank expressions passed by on the stairs. Kramer's office was on the third floor, overlooking I presumed the crisscrossing sidewalks and liveoaks and magnolias glimpsed through hall windows. My knock on the cypress door brought a brisk, "Come in."

High ceilings, book-lined walls giving way grudgingly to window casements, a massive teak desk still littered with papers, books, desk calendar, green-shaded lamp, pens. Professor Kramer had not been a neat and orderly man—at least not outwardly. A three-legged stool about two feet high stood against one of the bookcases, inviting human feet to climb and bring a dusty tome down from a high shelf.

Seated in the leather nail-studded wingback by the desk was a slim, petite woman dressed in blouse and skirt that stated in a muted way "expensive" and "tasteful." Her dark eyes regarded me frankly and with a kind of ingrained wry amusement. Her hair color would be what the boxes in the drugstore called "dark blonde" and probably owed that color to the bottle inside, or rather to a more expensive one in a beauty salon. Her legs were good and she knew it, capping them with high black spike heels. Mrs. Kramer was in dark colors, but nothing else said "grieving widow."

She extended a hand without rising.

"Thank you for meeting me in my husband's--I guess I should say my late husband's office, Mr. Broder. I thought you'd get more of a feel for Simon that way." She took a Benson and Hedges out of the purse on the desk. "Do you mind if I smoke? So many people nowadays are offended... I assume, healthy-looking as you are, you don't...?"

"No, but please feel free."

"Thank you. Please, sit down."

I sat in the only other seat available, Kramer's swivel desk chair, as Mignon pulled a clean ashtray out of the bottom drawer of the desk and a gold lighter out of her purse. I said something about condolences and Mignon made a short dry sound of amusement.

"You didn't know my husband, so you don't realize it should be the other way around."

Congratulations, Mignon, you're finally shut of the old bastard." She watched my reaction, which I hoped was neutral. "Simon was twenty years older than me, a womanizer who refused to have his behavior changed by the threat of AIDS, a mean and nasty and petty man—in short, his soul would fit in a box of matches, the small kind. You wouldn't even have to take the matches out. If there is a hell, he's probably got his own department right now.

"Which of course brings us to your unspoken question: Why did I contact you? Simon was many things, Mr. Broder, but he was not a pervert. He couldn't have died in the grotesque manner the police say he did."

"Have you told the investigating officers?"

"Of course I have. And their response was utterly predictable. It's not uncommon, the police hush these things up all the time to save the family embarrassment, the wife is the last one to know. After all, what husband is going to parade around in some other woman's panty hose and half strangle himself for sexual gratification in front of his wife?"

"I understand why you find it hard to believe your husband could do this, but was there any physical evidence? Signs of a struggle?"

"No. Nothing." She sighed out smoke. "That I don't understand. Simon would have clawed desperately to hang on to the last shred of life. He was afraid of dying, for the excellent reason he'd have to face the souls of those he'd wronged. He took mega-vitamins, any of those health fad things that came along. No, Simon would not have gone quietly into that good night."

"But like you said, there aren't any signs of raging against anything. I'm sorry, Mrs. Kramer, but I don't see how I can help you."

"I think you can. I want you to talk to the department members, stir things up, see if you can come up with something that will make the police at least listen.

"This place is like a rock. On the outside it looks simple and clean and pure. But lift it up and you'll find there are ugly, bloodless things that use it as cover." Her voice had the tight, clipped sound of anger. "I want some light here."

"But won't that just make it come out? The police said they'd report your husband's death as an accident."

Again that sound of amused disgust. "Janet, the department secretary, found Simon's body. She was there when the police gave their 'theory' of what happened. They might just as well have put it on cable television. Everyone at Claiborne knows now and half the city will in a matter of days. I don't care what they put in the paper."

I watched her round the ash on her cigarette for a moment.

"Okay, let's say that's true. Why call me? There are lots of big agencies."

"I made very careful inquiries, Mr. Broder. You're educated and you're competent. You have a very interesting background. You're not awed by academicians and you're not afraid to go into dangerous places if you have to. And you don't give up. I think you're exactly what I need."

Red flags should have gone up. When I had asked my soon-to-be ex-wife what she wanted, what she really wanted, she had said, "Excitement, adventure, something different." At the time, though I didn't yet know it, she was having an affair with a middle-management personnel official with one of the big oil companies in town. The kind whose idea of excitement is filing a report with the San Francisco main office. And I had said, then you should stick with me, because even though I may not be around to collect social security, my life should be all those things. And she had said, heavy on the sarcasm, Oh yeah, you're just what I need.

But I didn't see anything colored red. And when I named a fee a hefty amount over my usual, plus expenses, Mignon replied by taking out a checkbook. I told her I had another small job to finish up, but after that I should be able to devote most of my time to looking into her husband's death. That I'd give her periodic written reports on what I found. She said she'd prefer oral reports. She wasn't much of a reader. I said if I found anything at all indicating her husband had been murdered, I'd turn it over immediately to NOPD. If she didn't agree, I'd give her the check back and she could find someone else.

She agreed. She gave me a key to Kramer's office and said she was going to tell department members I was helping her close out her late husband's affairs. She'd be moving his books and belongings out slowly--no one needed the office immediately anyway—so there'd be an excuse to hang around. Besides, she wanted all of them to think there was more to my being there than a strong back to lift boxes of books. That I shouldn't hesitate to tell people I was a private investigator working for her, if I felt it would help. She'd leave Simon's desk as it was in case anything should turn up. I asked if anyone else had a key to the office.

"There's a master key in the secretary's office. Anybody in the English department can walk right in."

"Then I'd like to take what's in the desk to my office and look at it there."

She hesitated only a second. "All right. Anything else?"

I looked around. "Where are the file cabinets?"

"Dean Scheider took one look at the crowds going in and out and told maintenance to put them in another room, under lock and key. Confidential files, etc. I think he looked through the desk for anything personal as well. Ask Jason or Thornie—that's Jason Albright or Victor Thornhill—where everything is now."

"How about a department directory? That'll help keep the names straight."

Mignon handed me a pamphlet with the Claiborne University seal on the front.

"Any other groups or activities Dr. Kramer was particularly involved in?"

"University committees. He wasn't much on social clubs or anything."

"Work and work-related social life? That's about it?"

"Yes. No. No, there was one other thing. Something he'd got into lately."

"Which is...?"

"The Palm Leaf poetry group. That's a ragtag bunch that meets for poetry readings once a week at the Palm Leaf. A bar on Oak. I always thought Simon didn't fit there. He never

wrote poetry. He didn't even like it. Certainly not the trash they scribble. But for the last six months or so, he never missed a session." She shrugged. "Maybe he was hitting on one of the women."

I made notes. "Anything else?"

"No. Nothing that comes to mind."

I gave her a card. "If I'm not in, leave a message on the machine. Anything that strikes you as odd or unusual, jot it down. I'll be in touch. I'll clean out the desk today, then I'll check through the stuff when I clear up the insurance case I'm working on."

She took the card. "One more thing, Mr. Broder. I want you to see something."

Kramer's was a corner office, with windows on each side. Where the walls would have met, the original architects, with more time and money and cheaper, better labor available, had designed a tower. It was a chopped off circle with curved windows overlooking the campus. Mignon told me to look up. Two four-by-six ceiling joists had been left exposed in the conical cap of the tower. From one of them, Mignon said, Simon Kramer had been found hanging. And all the blinds on the tower windows had been pulled up.