

Blood on the Orchid

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to any person, living or dead, or actual events is purely incidental. It is a product of the author's imagination.

My thanks and gratitude to my wife, Barbara. She gave me the strength to complete the book, and although she will probably never read it, she's urging me to finish the next Wolfgang mystery/thriller, *National Poison*. It's getting close.

I should also thank Robert Smith, for introducing me to the world of orchids.

©2011, Ray H. Harrison

Blood on the Orchid



Ray H. Harrison

November, 2000

Chapter 1

He shook his head, expelled massive amounts of hot air through fluttering nostrils, and sprayed an equal amount of moisture onto his surroundings. She tried to duck away, and raised a bent arm in self-defense, but it was too late.

Then, huge eyes, luminous black opals, blinked as he lowered his head in apology, making it easy for Ashleigh Ray to rub his velvety nose and thank him for another good day of jumps. As usual, she lagged behind the other young equestriennes to say good night to her horse. He whinnied softly, and nuzzled the side pocket of her jacket, sniffing for the Red Delicious he knew would be there.

Taking the hint, Ashleigh reached deep in her pocket, retrieved his after-ride- treat and offered it to him in her right hand. With her left, she stroked the side of his face, and giggled at the sensation of Willing Flight's nimble lips playing across her palm, as he maneuvered the sweet fruit into his mouth.

"That's a good boy," she said, keeping her fingers bent back. "Just the apple—not my hand."

From a nearby stall, Lester Aaron watched. "You know, I don't think that horse could bed down without the apple you give him."

Willing Flight shook his ebony head up and down and stomped his right front hoof three times, as if to agree. His stomping reminded Lester of Trigger counting, and in a nano-second the thought ran through his mind that in today's environment, Roy couldn't call his horse Trigger, or his wonder-dog Bullet. The PC police wouldn't allow it.

"That makes two of us," Ashleigh said, laughing.

Then, the twelve-year old, tiny beads of perspiration still glistening above her brow, wrapped a blue, gray and red striped blanket around her shoulders for the short walk to her dormitory. At the barn door she turned and waved good night to Lester and Willing Flight, pulled the blanket to her chin and disappeared into the cool November dusk, her honey colored curls dancing in the soft breeze.

As Lester waved back, a smile warmed his leathered face, and softened his steely gray eyes. He watched Ashleigh fade into the twilight and wondered if he was about to ruin her life. She had already had it tough enough—parents killed in a car wreck, then her grandmother died—all since he arrived at the school. Even so, once he had his money, he would disappear, and her training would come to a screeching halt—at least for a while.

But Lester had faith in Howard Buchstran, his employer, and according to bits of campus gossip, Ashleigh's father. Lester found that little morsel hard to swallow, but still, you never know—though it seemed about as likely as the sun not rising in the morning. He crossed to the front of the barn, and strained to catch a glimpse of Ashleigh's retreating figure, but the night had swallowed his star rider.

He could still hear the sound of her fading footsteps though, and nodded to himself, pleased with his young horsewoman. She still possessed that delicate beauty of youth, but she also had developed an inner strength and toughness; traits he was surprised to see in one so young; traits she would need as her training progressed. Maybe, when he was gone, Buchstran would hire a real trainer for her. Lester could only hope.

He returned to his chores. Until he collected his money, he must maintain the status quo. He curried and fed Willing Flight and his stable mates, then followed Ashleigh into the night, his western boots crunching noisily along the gravel path. It had been a long day.

The frame-and-stone cottage Lester called home stood more than a mile from the stables, further up the valley, beside a path that led between the two dorms. As he trudged along, he wondered whether to join the students in the cafeteria or to dine alone in his cottage. Rest and quiet were more enticing than campus food, so he continued past the dining hall, into the silence of early evening. Besides, he could use the time to complete the second part of what he hoped would be his final escape.

He was invigorated by the cool night air as he walked along. Breathing it as refreshing as a drink of cool spring water, and it helped wash the smell of dusty hay and manure from his nostrils.

Overhead, a sprinkling of stars peeked through occasional breaks in low hanging clouds that drifted past, reducing visibility, but Lester could walk the path with his eyes closed, and sometimes did. He liked not having to worry about being mugged, or worse.

Lester tingled with an excitement he hadn't known in years. As he approached his little abode, he remembered when he began thinking and hinting that Ashleigh might be Olympic material. Not to Ashleigh, but to Leah Williams. He knew it would get back to Buchstran. Sure enough, it wasn't long before training Ashleigh for the Olympics sounded like Buchstran's own idea. The fact he was having such thoughts gave Lester pause, so he blamed it on his imminent departure. He would miss Ashleigh. That was another new experience for him.

During his seven years on campus Lester had become inured to what he called the easy life of hard work. Most of the time, he stayed on the property, but occasionally, he ventured into Highlands or Franklin, and when he got horny for something more, he drove down to Atlanta for a weekend of sex and games.

It was on one such venture, that his gambling past caught up to him and now, according to them, he was working off his debt. But Lester knew there was no such thing as working it off. When his usefulness ended, more than likely, so would his life. He would become one more statistic—one more *example*.

Once he reached the comfort of his cottage home, Lester decided to warm a can of soup to go with a grilled cheese sandwich—a quick and tasty meal, if not totally balanced. While he cooked, he reviewed an article in the *Atlanta Journal & Constitution*, explaining one of the gubernatorial candidate's reasons for not wanting to allow toxic dumping in the state. For two months now, ever since that wrong turn in Atlanta, he had been helping someone dispose of barrels of what he thought must be, if not toxic, at least, illegal waste. For nothing—no charge. Well, he had changed that.

He sent word by the crew that future deliveries would require a small storage and handling fee. Since no one else knew the location of his caves, he didn't think there would be a problem with a small charge. They might not like it, but what could they do? They needed his caves, and he certainly needed the extra cash.

He managed to finish the sandwich without burning it. He poured the soup into a cup, grabbed a beer, which he drank from the can, and he ate his meal in front of his TV.

A quiet knock interrupted Lester's nap. He listened again for the tapping, to be sure it hadn't come from the TV, then, he got up and padded softly to the door. He glanced at the clock on the VCR. It blinked forty past midnight. *Who would be knocking at this late hour?*

He opened the door. A well dressed, dark haired man in his early to mid-thirties, stood on the small porch. The man stood with his left foot forward, his right arm hidden from view. Beyond him, Lester saw the parking lights of a car, and he heard the motor idling quietly. The cool night air accentuated the tightness that crept into Lester's chest when the man spoke.

“You Lester Aaron?”

“Why? Who wants to know?” Lester said. The tension clutched at his heart and moved into his throat, making it difficult to breath.

“Some business associates sent a message for him.”

Lester could think of only one business associate, and none he wanted to hear from at that time of the night. Sensing trouble he moved quickly to close the door, but as fast as he moved, it wasn't as fast as the double barreled shotgun he saw coming up from the man's right side toward his chest.

Lester's entire world slowed to a crawl. Then the gun exploded, the burning impact taking his breath, his blood, his voice and his life. *Why, I never . . .*

Chapter 2

It truly is a small world, Wolfgang thought, as he left the orchid show and headed back to his hotel. He had not seen William Brasselwood in at least six years, and in less than one hour, not only had he seen him, Brasselwood had introduced him to one of the judges, who, in turn, had invited him to dinner.

Wolfgang gracefully, in his mind at least, tried to decline, but with the urging of Brasselwood, and the insistence of Howard Buchstran, he relented, and now had a dinner engagement. Why should they be so interested in having him to dinner? It certainly couldn't be for his knowledge of orchids. *In fact, had I gone down the other isle first, it might well have been another six years before I saw Brasselwood, if ever.*

As he crossed Peachtree, a light drizzle started to fall from the low hanging slate gray sky. The moisture clung to his locks, increasing the slight curl. He ducked his head against the misty dampness, and remembered why he was in Atlanta in the first place. He had been invited by an old school friend from a little way up the interstate in Charlotte, North Carolina.

When he reached the far curb, he removed himself from the flow of foot traffic, backed up to a wall, and massaged the small of his back with the knuckles of both fists. He made a mental note to buy new shoes, and turned north, dodging umbrella-wielding pedestrians. Suddenly, a smile animated his lean face.

He turned, and searched the crowd for his friend Gayle. She had disappeared from the orchid show, ostensibly for more film, and he hadn't seen her since. Somehow, he thought, she had something to do with their dinner invitation. But he didn't see her pearly whites or bright blues in any direction.

The phone was ringing when he stepped into his suite. *Maybe that's Gayle*, he thought, as he hurried across the room and lifted the receiver to his ear: "Hello?"

"Wolfgang?" said the voice on the other end of the line. "I've been trying to reach you all afternoon."

"Well, Trammell, ol' boy, if you were where you're supposed to be, I'd be easy to find. Where are you anyway?"

"Look, something came up, so I won't be able to get down there until tomorrow. You'll have to fend for yourself this evening, okay?"

"Oh, give me a break, Trammell. You lure me down from the peace and quiet of the mountains, the new love of my life, and now you're not even going to show up?"

"New love, huh? You been holding out on us? You didn't leave her behind, I trust."

“Of course not. She’s here somewhere, but right now, I don’t know where that is. What time will you get down here? I’m anxious for you to meet her. You two should get along famously.”

“How so?”

“You’re both always standing me up.”

“Come on, Wolf. You know I’d be there if this weren’t really important, and if you don’t behave, I’ll tell her your real name. I’m sure *you* haven’t told her, right? That should really boost your relationship.”

“You wouldn’t do that to a friend, would you?”

“Hey, Bubba, a good lawyer uses anything he can find to win a case,” Trammell said.

Wolfgang smiled. His name was not something he liked having bandied about. Mom and Dad Fenstermier had great senses of humor, so when they said they named him Barneveld Aloysius for coming along at an inopportune time, he didn’t know whether to believe them or not.

“Ah, yes, anything to win,” Wolfgang said. “I keep trying to forget that, but the strangest cases I have worked on have been those in which I was looking for some bizarre piece of evidence for some lawyer, in fact, the *only* lawyer I would do such weirdness for. For the record, next time you need a smelly cigar butt, you can find it yourself.”

Trammell sensed the smile on Wolfgang’s face, and he was almost embarrassed to be arranging a powwow to talk him into another treasure hunt for something, if not outlandish, at least bizarre. But, as he knew Wolfgang liked to say—*almost* only counts in horse shoes and hand grenades.

They had met as undergraduates, and although they traveled divergent paths, they became close friends. Artist and lawyer, but neither typical of their respective fields. Corporate for Trammell and visual for Wolfgang—but not photographic.

His favorite medium was watercolor, but he needed much more practice—practice he would probably never get. It wasn’t so much that he was lazy, as it was that it was too easy to be good at most things he tried. In the back of his mind, he always wondered if he didn’t try things he deep down knew would be really hard. He never worried about perfection, and that bothered him, but not to the point of action.

Wolfgang’s practice as a courtroom sketch artist had faded to just a speck on the horizon of his past now, although it was a major speck. But that was eight years ago. Life goes on. Friendships endure.

Since then, Wolfgang had made it his business to help people when he could—sometimes people with a mission, sometimes people with a cause, and sometimes, just because.

A metallic click of the door latch jarred Wolfgang from a light slumber as Gayle let herself into their room. He jumped from the bed, patted himself on the tummy and put on a mock body building show for Gayle, who laughed almost as hard as Wolfgang. He performed mostly to cover the embarrassment of having been caught napping in the afternoon.

“I don’t know who’s the craziest,” she said, inspecting his six-foot frame, “you for being you, or me, for being *with* you.” His lightly tanned body contrasted nicely with his blue cotton briefs, but his thirty-two inch waist still sported pesky little love handles.

“Yeah, I may be crazy, but it’s fun! And just to prove *how* crazy, I’ve accepted a dinner invitation for us this evening; but you already knew that, didn’t you?”

“Dinner? Of course not. How would I know? Besides, I don’t have anything to wear to dinner.” She stepped closer and fluffed his artificially curled hair, a term he used to describe his salt and pepper locks. Fortunately, his mustache was mostly pepper, and his eyebrows were coal black over rich, maple-brown eyes, which, most of the time, glowed soft and warm.

“Come on. You didn’t bribe a judge with the promise of a beauteous photo of his orchids?”

“I certainly did not.”

“Okay, okay. But what’s wrong with what you have on? Are you *sure* you didn’t arrange this little invite yourself? Somebody wants to buy some of your photographs, huh?”

“You kidding? I would love to sell some photos, but I didn’t make any sales today, and you know what’s wrong with what I have on—I’ve been wearing it all day for one thing, and for another, one does not wear jeans and a blouse to dinner, not this one anyway.”

“Why? It would be fun, and much more comfortable. I’m not dressing.”

“Not even a jacket?”

“Well . . .”

“For me?”

“You’re going to ruin my reputation.”

“I thought that was my line!” Gayle laughed.

He grabbed her and threw her to the bed, falling beside her and pinning her with one arm.

“You’re lucky we have to go to dinner, otherwise, I’d start to work on your reputation right now.”

“Sure. Promises, promises. What’s holding you back?”

“I thought we’d go buy you something to wear—after you tell me what you have in the bag.”

“Oh, just a birthday present for you. I thought I should go ahead and buy it while we are here, because you’ll probably take me back to your mountain and keep me prisoner ‘til Christmas.”

“Oh, no. I’ll let you out in time to do your Christmas shopping,” he said.

“Get some clothes on, and let’s go. You can pick out what I wear, okay? And it’s already time to start Christmas shopping.”

“Negative, my dear. Not ‘till Thanksgiving weekend.”

Ashleigh Ray couldn't understand why the police asked her so many questions. When did she last see Mr. Aaron? Was anyone with him? Did he seem upset? Did she see anyone outside the stables? All she could do was shake her head and cry.

Her hazel eyes were red and swollen, her nose sore from all the tissues. She looked around. Three of her friends also were being questioned. They had been riding with Ashleigh and were in shock as well, but they did not take the news as hard.

Maybe, that’s because to Ashleigh, Mr. Aaron had been more than a friend. She couldn’t say he was like family, because she hardly knew what it was like to have a family. After Grandmother Green passed away, Ashleigh became a ward of the great state of Georgia, but before she could be put into foster care, Howard Buchstran, a friend of her mother and father, one she did not remember, petitioned to have her live and study at Firefly Valley, a small private school in north Georgia. Since it would save the state money, it was an easy deal.

Once there, it didn’t take her long to discover a passion for horses, and soon afterward, Lester Aaron became acutely aware of Ashleigh. Her natural ability on horseback surprised and excited him. While not an accomplished rider himself, Lester recognized talent when he saw it, and Ashleigh Green had the talent to make him look really good. Maybe, just maybe, all the time he had spent around horses and the tracks would pay off at last.

They became fast friends, although Ashleigh didn’t understand why Lester paid so much attention to her riding. To Ashleigh, riding a horse was like breathing. It was just something you did, not something you learned. That made it easy for Lester to teach her how to control and lead that massive hunk of energy and nerves they called Willing Flight.

But now, once again, someone close disappeared from Ashleigh’s life. Now she wondered where Mr. Buchstran was. Why didn’t he come to her? She needed him. Somehow, she didn’t think anything ever could happen to him.

After showering and changing, Wolfgang and Gayle stood facing the hotel atrium as the glass enclosed elevator glided silently to the lobby floor. Gayle’s shoulder length auburn hair contrasted nicely with the yellow blouse she wore tucked into a camel skirt. She wore little makeup, but she did enhance her already sky blue eyes with contact lenses. At five feet, six inches, she still had to look up to Wolfgang—physically speaking, she was quick to remind him.

“Can you keep a secret ‘till my birthday?” he said.

“If you’re talking about the present, I certainly can.”

“Okay, you can give it to me when you meet my folks. They always show up for my birthday,” Wolfgang said as they exited the elevator.

“So. You want me to meet your parents?” she teased.

“You deserve each other.”

“I don’t think that would be such a good idea,” Gayle said, as they waited for the car.

Inside the quiet of the vintage little sports sedan, she continued: "I may learn some of your deep, dark secrets."

"Hey—I'm an open book. I have no secrets."

"Anyone who won't tell his age, who doesn't appear to work and is still single—you are single, aren't you—has secrets," she said, nudging his rib cage below his gearshift arm.

He looked at her with a mischievous smile, and gave her his best Magnum PI salute.

As Wolfgang worked the little Maserati Biturbo through crowded Atlanta streets, he wondered if he should have called a cab. Instead, he had bought a map, and enlisted Gayle's assistance as navigator. He refused to use a GPS in a car.

Eventually, they found their way to Buchstran's fashionable Buckhead address. Wolfgang leaned on the doorbell, and commented on the muted sounds announcing their arrival: "Nice chimes, huh?"

"Westminster Cathedral, I believe."

"Do tell."

The heavy, carved door swung away from them, and, much to Wolfgang's surprise, there stood Bill Brasselwood.

"Bill. The butler's night off, eh?"

"Hello, Barney," Brasselwood replied. "Actually, Mr. Buchstran did give most of the staff the evening off, but not the butler. Come on in, and thanks for coming."

"Listen, Bill," Wolfgang said, showing Gayle in and pulling Brasselwood close, "if you want us to stay, it's B.A. or Wolfgang, okay?--not *Barney*."

Brasselwood had always had a talent for the annoying sobriquet. Wolfgang stepped away and continued: "Excuse me, Gayle. This is William Brasselwood, an old school friend of mine. Bill, this is Gayle Lambe, the very special friend I told you about this afternoon." He watched the two of them for any hint of familiarity, but all he saw was a puzzled look on Gayle's face, and he knew he would probably have to explain his little ultimatum. Apparently, she really knew nothing about the invitation, or they were doing a great job of hiding the fact.

"Pleasure to meet you William," Gayle smiled, extending her hand.

"My pleasure entirely," Brasselwood said, taking her hand. "Please, call me Bill, and if you will, follow me to the library. Mr. Buchstran will join us there soon."

They entered through two heavy, hand carved oak pocket doors that disappeared silently into the walls. The hardwood floor was covered with oriental carpets, tastefully arranged about the room to cluster various settings of furniture, including a handsome mahogany desk backed up to a marble fireplace. A second fireplace, with a more intimate sitting area warmed the other end of the large room.

Except for windows and fireplaces, and the spaces above the fireplaces, the walls were devoted entirely to books. Over each mantle were groupings of photographs, all orchids, and all beautiful. In the center of each group was a photo of the same breathtaking plant. Wolfgang's meditation was interrupted by the metallic click of a doorknob being turned. He looked around in time to see the stately figure of Howard Buchstran enter the room, his somber expression brightening the moment he saw Gayle.

"Good evening Gentlemen. And welcome Ms. Lambe, I believe it is?" He took her by the hand and led her toward the sitting area at the end of the room. "I hope Mr. Brasselwood hasn't been boring you with tales of my orchids and our little show this weekend?"

"On the contrary. I find them quite fascinating, from a professional point of view. I shot a few frames at the show today. I'm a photographer, and I know the best photos rarely do their subjects justice. The flowers in these pictures must have been absolutely wonderful specimens," Gayle said, glancing up at Buchstran as she took her seat.

A look of warm appreciation moved across Buchstran's face. "You're very kind, Ms. Lambe."

"Nonsense. And please, call me Gayle."

"Very well, Ms. Lambe, Gayle it shall be. Tell me, do you photograph people, places or things?"

"Well, mostly places and things. I guess I'm what would be called a nature photographer. Which includes plants, animals, places and occasionally, people. I suppose we are the most unusual animals of all! We seem to do the craziest things for the strangest reasons."

“Very true, very true,” Buchstran said, as if going into a trance. Then, suddenly standing, he continued, “Let’s move into the dining room. Dinner is waiting.”

The dining room turned out to be more like a banquet hall. The walls were papered in a very delicate peach hue silk above the wainscoting, giving way to a white crown molding that lead to an ornate tin ceiling. A brass chandelier that must have survived Sherman hung from its center. It did not invite one to loiter beneath it. Another marble fireplace crackled softly at one end of the long room, and above the mantle was a picture of the most beautiful orchid Gayle had ever seen. She nudged Wolfgang, only to realize he was already transfixed by the sheer reality of the photograph. One could almost reach out and touch the soft petals, smell the delicate scent and feel the life coming from its leaves. It was that exquisite. Buchstran broke the spell: “Beautiful isn’t she?”

“Stunning,” Gayle whispered. She marveled at the level of skill exhibited by the photographer. Capturing such details in so dark a bloom had to be a challenge.

“A perfect ten, I would imagine,” Wolfgang said, wondering as he spoke, what the hell was going on. So it was a good picture of a nice orchid—so what? He had just seen a show full of them. What’s so special about this one?

“That’s right. She’s an international champion,” Buchstran said, not trying to hide his pride. He let his voice grow soft.

“I don’t remember seeing her at the show today,” Wolfgang said, moving closer to the print.

“That is why I wished to speak with you this evening, Mr. Fenstermier. She was not at the show, for reasons known only to myself, Mr. Brasselwood here, and a few of the school staff.”

“Mr. Buchstran. I suppose I should be flattered, but I must tell you that I know absolutely nothing about orchids. Sure—I enjoy the beauty of the various species, and I might be able to pick a winner, but I probably couldn’t pick the champion of champions—so I don’t understand your need to talk to me.”

“Come, sit. Let us eat. When I worry, I have to eat—although I must confess, that is not the *only* time I eat,” Buchstran said, rubbing his more than ample midsection.

They each took an upholstered chair around one end of the long dining table. Glasses of wine had been poured, and Buchstran offered a toast.

“To beauty and knowledge—may the two always sustain each other.”

“To beauty and knowledge,” they chimed. Interesting toast, Wolfgang thought, as he caught Gayle’s eye and smiled.

Beauty and knowledge. The words flashed an image to the front screen of his mind, an image of life and vitality, grace and poise, an image that overwhelmed him for a moment, taking him back eight years, making him tremble even now. A light hand on his left arm brought him back to reality. Every muscle in his body was taut, his breathing deep but quiet. Finally he relaxed, and placed his hand on Gayle’s.

Buchstran continued to speak: “That may sound like a strange toast, but let me explain. Looking around at these trappings of success, it may be difficult to believe that I started life with nothing—literally. Most people do, in a way. But I started without even a family, although I didn’t learn this until I was around thirteen. It was about that time my father was diagnosed with a fatal disease, usually passed from father to son. To spare me the agony of thinking I would die in my thirties or early forties, they told me I was adopted as an infant. At the same time, they decided to enter me in a small private school, in north Georgia. They sent me there because I was just entering junior high, and being overweight all my life, I was a prime target for school bullies.”

Buchstran paused, and cut into his pork tenderloin. He looked at his guests, who returned his glance, and waited for him to continue.

“That was compounded by the fact I tried to be a good student. It was the 70s, and new kinds of schools were popping up. At any rate, we students thought of ourselves as a real family. We lived together, worked together, played, and studied together. But mostly, we learned. We learned that life and beauty are everywhere—to be shared, as well as knowledge. Students became teachers, and teachers, students. But don’t misunderstand me. Life back then was not a bowl of cherries. We worked very hard to survive, students and teachers alike. We grew almost everything we ate, made most of our own clothes, and maintained the buildings and the lands, what little there were at the time. It was all part of our education.”

“It all sounds quite wonderful,” Gayle said, barely touching her dinner. At least, she had that in common with Mr. Fenstemier. When either of them was a little nervous, neither had an appetite. The strange thing was, she didn't understand the nervousness. Where was it coming from? Buchstran?

“I'm afraid nostalgia has a way of tinting things a rather rosy hue, Ms. Lambe, although it didn't really seem all that bad, even then.”

“I guess nostalgia is what separates good memories from bad ones,” Wolfgang said, “nostalgia being good memories, and the bad ones just being memories.”

“Not all memories are bad, B.A.--you know that,” Brasselwood said.

“I suppose you're right, Bill. Take this meal, for instance. It will become a memory, but I'm sure it will have overtones of nostalgia.”

“Huh?”

“Just kidding. Really, this pork is delicious. I'm not much of a meat eater, but pork is the one meat I've always really enjoyed. I mean, how can anyone be a so-called vegetarian around eastern North Carolina barbecue? I can't,” Wolfgang said, as he sliced into the tenderloin.

“This isn't barbecue,” Brasselwood said.

“Hey, it's pork. Pork fat rules.”

The atmosphere finally relaxed. Even Gayle began to enjoy her dinner, and the conversation between Wolfgang and Brasselwood turned briefly to school days—who could remember the most obscure event, or what is what-his-face doing now? That's one contest Wolfgang would always win, Brasselwood finally admitted.

Dessert and coffee were served, and even as he enjoyed the chocolate mousse, Wolfgang sensed that Buchstran was becoming more uneasy with every passing minute. Finally, he said: “It's getting late, and I have a meeting tomorrow, so we really should be getting back to the hotel.” Wolfgang knew that Buchstran was not ready for them to leave, just yet.

“Mr. Fenstemier, if you please. I would like just a few more moments of your time. Obviously, I didn't have you here just for dinner—I'm sure you realize that. Likewise, I understand that what I am about to say is going to sound a bit strange to someone unfamiliar with the propagation of orchids, much less special schools.”

“To tell you the truth, I have been wondering all afternoon why you invited me. I know it wasn't for my knowledge of orchids, and although I can be quite charming,” Wolfgang added, with a wink in Gayle's direction, “a two minute introduction doesn't give one much time to ply another with charm.”

A look of mild disbelief crossed Buchstran's face, followed quickly by a smile, which in turn, was wiped away by the gravity of what he was about to say and his concern over the response he would receive. He also felt a tinge of uneasiness confiding in some seemingly irresponsible jokester nicknamed Wolfgang.

“Mr. Fenstemier,” he said, pointing to the photographs on the wall, “that orchid, Rea, has been a prime supporter of our school. Without her, even with donations from graduates and friends, we will not be able to continue as we have in the past. Oh sure, we could continue the school, but we would not be able to keep up with all the programs we have been offering the children, these young men and women.”

“I understand your position, Mr. Buchstran, but I don't understand why you're telling *me* this.”

“Well, I'm not sure I understand either, but I have been assured you could help me.”

“Help you? How? In what way?”

“Dear me. How shall I put this? Rea has won the top award an orchid can receive, as I mentioned earlier. We have been using the proceeds from the sale of her ‘siblings,’ if you will, to help finance special programs at the school. It takes a long time to develop a new plant—the old fashioned way we've been doing it, anyway—and even though everyone knows the odds of one her offspring being as dark as Rea are very low, that slight chance keeps orchid growers trying, keeps us trying even-- ”

“Forgive my density, but things are still a little foggy.”

“Mr. Fenstemier. Rea is worth at least fifty thousand dollars, maybe more. A commercial grower on the west coast has one just like her. They're the only two known to exist in the world—two black orchids, and although I don't want to sell Rea, if the sale would help finance sending one of our children to the Olympics, I will sell her. But to sell her, I must have her. So what I would like for you to do—indeed, what I beg you to do—is find Rea. Your fee doesn't matter. I will take care of it personally, but you must help us retrieve this

orchid. She has been kidnapped, stolen, abducted—call it what you will, but someone has her, and she must be returned for the children!”

Chapter

A cold rain fell softly through the oaks and pines as Wolfgang and Gayle left the Buchstran mansion. Smiley, Buchstran's rail of a butler covered their retreat to the Maserati with a golf umbrella. Then he bade them good evening, wished them a safe return to the hotel, and disappeared back into the house.

They sat in silence a moment. Wolfgang thought about how much cleaner the air smelled after being washed by the rain. He took a deep breath and looked at Gayle. She had a puzzled look in her eyes, and the slightest hint of a smile on her lips. He never had told her what he did for a living. Actually, that was not really the proper term anyway. He remembered their arrival, earlier in the evening, and his chat with Brasselwood, but he dismissed that as being too trivial for Gayle. She'd want something she could sink those teeth into. *Well, she'll have to ask.*

Besides, it was more like what he did to fill time; what he did to contribute; what he did to alleviate, eradicate, avenge and revenge. He knew the latter two, even in the most liberal sense, were not good motives for his current enterprise, even though they definitely had to be on the list. In fact, they were the two factors most responsible for his present endeavors. Perhaps if he opened up a little and shared some of his reasoning, it would help to ease the pain, perhaps not. Truth be told, he was surprised he even had those thoughts, because to Wolfgang, the pain was no longer a factor. He no longer felt totally the blame for Lynne's death, and it had been years, not months since he had been awakened by that nightmare. Yet, Buchstran's toast to beauty and knowledge had brought memories of her flooding back to his consciousness.

Memories of their times together, and the fun they had shared. Memories of trips and games, and work and fights, and the realization that she still influenced his life, even today. And finally, those last agonizing minutes, while he held her, his tears flowing with her blood. At the end of it all, etched permanently in his memory was the image of the driver of the car that had crashed into his, a driver the courts had returned to the streets because of a minor technicality. A driver who didn't even slow down. But some day, somewhere, he would be stopped.

During the six months he had known Gayle, he really had not been "to work." As far as she knew, he was on an extended vacation, and once in a while, he would talk to his parents, or to someone, and at least get messages to them.

Wolfgang smiled. "I wish we were staying at an inn. I really don't like having to stay in hotels."

"Really?" Gayle smiled back at him, as the Biturbo came to life. "Well, why don't we go somewhere and discuss inns, hotels and lost orchids?"

"Ah, roger, that. How about the hotel? We'll have some coffee sent up, which is a nice thing about hotels, and then we can see if we can make sense out of all this," Wolfgang said. He decided to ignore the slight irritation in Gayle's voice. Besides, he wondered, what reason did she have for being irritated? Or, was paranoia creeping in?

Gayle punched the search button on the radio, and let it scan for the soft music she wanted—music for a cold, dark, and rainy night in Georgia—or if she found a soulful sax, she would let that play too. She leaned across the console, locked her arm loosely in Wolfgang's and let her head rest on his shoulder. Wolfgang responded, but kept his eyes on the road, one hand on the steering wheel, the other on the gearshift. His version of defensive-driving.

T. William Warren glared across his desk at the man delivering news he did not need or expect. "What the hell do you mean he's dead? You freaking idiot! I just wanted him to leave. Lay low for a while. Not become an issue!"

"I am more than aware of that," Adam Nichols replied, quietly. Nichols headed Warren's security staff and was responsible for the two men delivering the message to Aaron. There was no apology in his tone as he continued. "They knew he was trying to extort us for storage and handling. Apparently, they misunderstood the meaning of the message. Perhaps I should have sent someone who didn't enjoy his work quite so much."

"Damn. Is there any way we can be connected?" Warren growled, lighting a cigarette.

"I don't know. I don't think so, but of course, I'll check it out."

“You're damned right you will, and don't get *caught* checking it out, understood?”

“Of course. I'll go myself,” Nichols said, standing and staring hard at Warren.

Warren did not get up. He stubbed out the cigarette and said, “Remember you're in security, and why you're there. I cannot afford to be tied to that in any way. You might say I've given up my soul for this governorship. If something goes wrong, I have nothing to else to lose. Don't forget that, and don't misunderstand!”

“Oh, don't worry. I understand.”

Room service arrived with hot coffee just as Wolfgang emerged heavily robed from the shower. He signed the check and poured himself coffee while he waited for Gayle. How to explain what had happened this evening was occupying his thoughts, but only slightly. Gayle was very smart and just as quick. She would catch on in a flash. Fact is, she probably already had.

A fog bank rolled in from the direction of the bathroom, and Gayle materialized, hair pinned to the top of her head to keep it dry, except for the little ringlets around the nape of her neck. Little droplets of water glistened on her forehead, the tip of her nose, and the base of her neck, where the collarbones met. Wolfgang knew the small of her back was also wet. He chuckled to himself. He loved that about her. She never really dried off. She just sort of passed a big fluffy towel over that lovely body, dressed in a huge robe or gown, sometimes both, and left the bathtub gurgling bubbles. She always took baths. Never showers. And usually herbal baths that left her smelling freshly edible, with soft skin, warm as summer sand and smooth as silk.

She snuggled up to him in front of the gas-logged fireplace, wrapped her feet with her robe, and hugged her knees with both arms.

“So, Mr. Fenstemier. Why do I get the feeling that you should have asked Mr. Buchstran for a photograph of the orchid before we left? Isn't that what you normally do before dashing out to find a missing person, hmmm? Or is real life different from books and television? I never would have guessed that you and Mr. Tracy had so much in common,” she said, finally taking the cup of coffee he had been offering since she sat down.

“Tracy?”

“Dick. The cartoon.”

“I suppose you think I should wear a trench coat, smoke a pipe and perhaps carry the ol' magnifying glass?”

“The trench coat would be nice, but don't wear anything under it.” She smiled at him.

“Get out of here, you nut. You had me going there for a minute. I thought you were serious, but you were just trying to give me some lip.”

“And what's wrong with my lips?” she said, smiling and bending forward.

“Nothing is wrong with your lips,” Wolfgang said, leaning forward and meeting her soft warm mouth. She gently pushed him back onto the carpet. She reached inside his robe, her tongue exploring his more than willing mouth. Wolfgang responded eagerly, pulling her to him, and slipped his hand easily under her robe. He found nothing but Gayle, and he knew that explanations would have to wait their turn.

Afterward, with the fireplace turned up, and the coffee heated, Gayle asked, in what Wolfgang heard as a more civil tongue: “So really, what's the program with that orchid, Rea, or whatever? Do you actually think it is worth what he said it is, and why would anyone steal it? Of course, if it is worth that much money, I suppose it would be worth stealing, but how on earth did they know about you, and do you really do that sort of thing?”

“Okay. Let's see if I can field those in order. First, I don't know, it probably is, I don't know and what sort of thing are you talking about?”

“You know full well what sort of thing. Finding lost flowers, or people or whatever—private investigating it sounds like to me, or do they have a better name for it now?”

Wolfgang laughed. “You always sound so upset when you start talking about ‘it’.”

“But I don't stay upset very long,” she said.

“I'll say.” He took her hand and squeezed it. Then he saw that look coming back into her eyes, and he continued. “Look. It *is* investigations of a sort. Sometimes they're private, and sometimes, they're *not* so

private. You never asked me what I do, so I just thought you were not interested. Simple as that. Besides, you never told me what you do.”

“What? You know what I do. I’m a photographer!”

“Yeah, but the only reason I know, is you walk around with a camera hanging from your neck.”

“Well, perhaps you should walk around with that magnifying glass around your neck, or perhaps a rope.”

“Come on, take it easy,” he said, leaning forward to kiss her again.

“Oh sure, take it easy he says, with a kiss. That’s not going to work again, Pal. For all I know, you could be an assassin or just a paid peeping tom. I can’t think which would be worse!”

“Thanks a lot. Do I really look like an assassin?”

“No. I don’t know.”

“Do I have bruises around my eyes?”

“No.”

“Well, there you have it. I’m neither an assassin, nor a peeping tom. I do conduct special searches, however.”

“What do assassins look like anyway?” Gayle asked, with a hint of a smile.

“I don’t know, but I’m sure anything I’d say right now would be a cliché.”

“Funny. What is a special search? Sounds like another name for peeping- toms or private investigator types.”

“So, what’s the big deal?” he said. “What does it matter that I do what I do?”

“What does it matter? What it matters is that I care for you, Dummy! I don’t want some irate husband or boyfriend beating you up, or worse. I don’t care what you call it, what you’re doing could be dangerous—you could get hurt!”

“How dangerous can it be looking for an orchid?” he laughed.

“It can be plenty dangerous. People who steal things like that are dangerous. They’re deranged to begin with, and the things they do are not rational. They can’t be dealt with by reasonable people.”

“And who’s to say I’m reasonable?” Wolfgang chided.

“Well, I always thought you were a reasonably sane person, but perhaps I have been wrong?” The inflection on ‘wrong’ put the ball back in Wolfgang’s court, and he grasped the opportunity to go on offense.

“Well, you remember how we met? I mean, look Miss Safety is for Everyone Else. I am just as careful as you. I walk with my head up, my eyes open, and occasionally, I do a three-sixty—not because of my present vocation—but because of training and life-long curiosity. I like to know what is going on around me. And I like to know what people are doing and where they are. And, what I do is certainly no more dangerous than some of the things I have seen you do. For instance, you do remember how we met?”

“Hmmm, I remember.”

“What had you planned to do if my car had not spun to a stop before reaching you that day? You may be quick, but you’re not that quick, my Love.”

“I felt perfectly safe, because I knew you were all, or at least *most* of you, were expert drivers. You didn’t hit me, did you? No, you didn’t, and I got a great shot, sold it for enough to pay for my weekend, and met the “hero driver” at the same time.”

“Yeah? Well, this hero driver could have clipped those gorgeous legs right from under you, and that really would have been a tragedy—seriously, woman, so don’t talk to me about being careful, and how dangerous my job is. Besides, it’s not my job. It’s just something I’m doing right now. Tomorrow, I may be selling insurance or shoes, or maybe even gas. Yeah, maybe I’ll go into the oil business.”

“Well, at least it would be safe . . .”

“Yeah, safe and boring—unless I worked at one of those convenience stores. They get robbed fairly often.”

Gayle stood and straightened her robe. “You could teach in the public school system,” she said, heading for the bedroom.

“They couldn’t pay me enough.”

“Aren’t you getting tired?”

“Of course I am,” Wolfgang said, rolling over and getting to his feet.

“Then why don’t we go to bed?” Gayle said, yawning and stretching.

“Thought you’d never ask.”

“You have to be asked?”