

BLACK BOX

BLACK BOX

a novel

Gary D. Cole

BLACK BOX

Published by
Trenchant Press LLC
Raleigh, North Carolina

Copyright © 2012 by Gary D. Cole.
All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without the written permission of the author.

Book design by Susan Fecho.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012930065

ISBN: 978-0-9850105-0-8

CHAPTER ONE

Ned held his breath as the sedan skimmed past the Christ Church cemetery. As children he and his sister Margo, the oldest, had puffed out their cheeks and banged their palms on the liner of their car as they were driven past the graveyard, where Ned's great-grandparents, grandparents, and mother were buried. Celia, the middle child, had refused to join in. On a whim Ned had started the superstition up again the summer he'd moved in with his father and now did it each time he drove that stretch of Sheridan Road, though he always kept one hand on the wheel.

He could have pounded both palms now, as he wasn't driving, but he kept his hands clasped in his lap. This was no time for child's play.

The Lexus slowed as it entered the Ravines, the winding gully that was home to some of the premier real estate on the North Shore. Ned had always felt a slight chill as he passed into the shadows of the Ravines, where the plunging terrain and dense trees left Sheridan in darkness whatever the time of day. Even at that hour, approaching midnight, he was conscious of an eerie blackness swallowing the car as it slipped from the amber haze of the streetlights by the public beach at Tower Road.

The house was less than a quarter mile into the Ravines. The entrance was marked by two massive stone monuments, thick with moss and ringed with ivy, that Ned had likened to giant rooks when

his grandfather had taught him chess in elementary school. Between these sentinels stood a hulking wrought iron gate that had to be unlatched by the family chauffeur when Ned first came to visit as a child but was now controlled by an automatic security system. For the first time that he could remember, the gate stood open.

The gravel crunched softly beneath the wheels of the Lexus as it swung past the entry. Ned usually found the symmetry of the elms lining either side of the driveway comforting. Tonight, however, the trees seemed sinister in the somber light of the low torch-style lamps that stood at even intervals between them.

There was usually no illumination other than these lamps until the glittering lights of the courtyard that opened majestically before the house, a quarter mile down. But tonight Ned could see through the windshield the rhythmic flashing of a police car's lights at the end of the driveway. Arcs of light, red and blue, glanced off the passing elms and a row of shrubbery bordering the drive as it widened into a semi-circle just before the courtyard.

As the sedan approached, a uniformed policeman stepped from behind the patrol car and motioned for them to stop. Beyond the officer's outstretched hand Ned spotted two other police cars flanking the rococo fountain in the center of the courtyard. The front doors of one of the cruisers were open and a man in a suit leaned against the car, speaking into a radio.

The driver lowered his window as the policeman approached the car from his side.

"Are you Ned Prince?" asked the officer.

The driver shook his head. Ned spoke up from the back seat.

BLACK BOX

“I’m Ned.”

Ned heard the gravel pressed beneath the heavy tread of the policeman’s feet passing behind the car. The officer’s impassive face tilted toward him as Ned pressed his window button.

“Could I see some identification please?”

Ned fumbled for his driver’s license. The policeman gave it a cursory glance and returned it through the open window.

“Lieutenant Nielsen is expecting you.” The officer pointed to the man in the suit.

The driver spoke to Ned.

“Do you want us to stay?”

“That’s OK. You guys have been great. As always.”

He reached over the seat with both hands to press the shoulders of the driver, a sturdy blonde man in a starched Oxford shirt, and his even blonder passenger, a slender woman in a white cotton blouse.

“Call us if you need anything, Neddy.” The woman’s hair bounced on her collar as she turned toward the back seat.

“I will. I’m sorry about the show.”

The call from Celia’s husband Art had come at the intermission of a performance of *Hamlet* Ned was reviewing at a North Side theater. Scott and Linda had been with him at the show. He had no car, so they had offered to drive him up to his father’s house. The urgency in Art’s voice, so different from his usual jollity, had made it clear there was no time to take the train.

Ned unfolded his long, limber frame from the car. The September night air held the faint warmth of a summer not quite passed. He ran

both hands through his dark, flowing hair, which swept over the collar of his shirt.

The man in the suit met Ned at the mouth of the courtyard.

“I’m Lieutenant Nielsen, Winnetka Police. Your brother-in-law mentioned you’d be coming.”

Nielsen was of middle height and compact. He had the sloping shoulders and barrel chest of a former wrestler.

“I’m afraid there’s been an incident inside the house. Could you come with me please?”

Nielsen’s tone was quiet and respectful, almost gentle. He had the deferential manner of one accustomed to dealing with those accustomed to getting their way.

Nielsen led Ned through the courtyard, also lined with gravel. The gravel seemed more dingy than Ned had remembered it as a child. Ned’s great-grandfather and grandfather had insisted on replacing the gravel at the end of each summer so that it always shone gleaming white before any awed traveler who came through the gate. Ned’s father had discontinued the tradition last summer.

Lamps of beveled amber glass fixed on ornate wrought iron stands hung on all three sides of the courtyard, casting a torchlight glow. Lights in the same style as those along the driveway encircled the stone fountain, into which Ned and his sisters had tossed pennies and made silent wishes. His father had cut the water supply to the fountain over a year ago.

The courtyard was framed along the back by the brick, beam, and stucco of the mansion’s Tudor façade, rising three stories over an imposing entry portico. To the sides stood a four-car garage on the

BLACK BOX

visitor's left and a glass-encased wing to the right, each of two stories. The servants' quarters ran over the top of the garage. Ned's favorite among the servants had been an ancient Scotswoman. She had served as his mother's nanny and had remained with the family as an honored retainer even after Elizabeth Ingram had come of age. Ned remembered many Saturday afternoons spent in Nanny's quarters sucking on the hard candy that she kept for him by the bushel and looking at old photographs of his mother.

The glass wing had originally been an enclosed porch that was remodeled by Ned's grandmother for year-round use. His mother had renovated several of the cramped storage rooms on the second floor of the wing as a suite for Ned, who had been the only child still at home when his parents took possession of the house following his grandmother's death. The airy expanse of the suite hadn't eased the stifling Ned felt on moving back in with his father after college.

Nielsen led Ned between the columns of the portico and through the massive front door, which stood open. Another uniformed officer was posted at the base of the sweeping staircase that dominated the front hall. The policeman blocked Ned's view of a Monet that hung at the foot of the stairs and was the first sight that greeted visitors as they entered the house. Ned's great-grandfather, C.W. Ingram, had acquired the Monet and a score of other Impressionist paintings in the wake of the First World War, when European aristocracy needed the cash that the Ingram family was busy minting. Ned's grandparents had donated a number of the paintings to the Art Institute, but the house still boasted one of the finer private collections in the Midwest.

Ned followed Nielsen down the hall, passing the grand sunken living room that opened to the left and the dining room, hung with tapestries, to the right. The door to the study, to the left beyond the living room, was ajar. This had been his grandfather's den, a richly paneled, map-lined man's refuge that still smelled faintly of cigar smoke. Ned's father had never used the study.

At the end of the hall, where a stately pair of French doors led on to a stone terrace overlooking Lake Michigan, they turned left into the billiard room. An imposing billiard table still stood atop an Oriental rug in the center of the room, but it was draped in a purple velour cover and had not been played on in years. Ned had challenged his father to a series of games when he had moved back home, but those had soon gone the way of the weekly family brunches Celia had proposed after Ned's return.

In the far left corner of the billiard room was a long mahogany bar, behind which stood mirrored shelves lined with spirit bottles of every description. Opposite the bar, in front of one of the room's several floor to ceiling windows that offered magnificent views of the lake, sat Ned's sister Celia, sobbing silently. As a rule she was impeccably coiffed and dressed, but now her hair lay in unkempt strands on the bunched shoulders of an old coat as she sat, huddled, with her head in her hands. Ned's brother-in-law Art stood by her side, one hand perched on her shoulder in a vain attempt at comfort. Art's doughy face, usually creased in laughter, was grim.

Nielsen left Ned and approached a doorway at the far end of the billiard room. This was the house library. As a boy Ned had been enthralled by the leather binding and ornate gold lettering of the

BLACK BOX

volumes that lined the shelves. As he became more literary he grew contemptuous of the collection, which he considered lightweight and based more on the appearance of the book than its content. He thought it no coincidence that the library was tucked in a corner of the house and rarely entered.

After his mother's death his father had taken possession of the library and had moved a plain desk and chair there to serve as his office. He also brought an old upright piano out of storage and installed it beneath the one window in the room that overlooked the lake. There was a priceless Steinway grand in the music room that opened off the living room. In the evenings when Ned was still in high school his father would often spend an hour at the piano after dinner, playing old show tunes and some jazz standards. He was a gifted pianist who was always called on to play a few tunes when he and his wife entertained, which they did often. Ned had not seen his father at the grand piano in years, except at Christmas.

Art approached Ned and wordlessly put an arm around his shoulders as he led him toward the library. Nielsen called for the officer posted in the library to take a break, then stepped aside to let Ned pass into the room.

Sheet music lay scattered on the floor at the base of the piano bench. Some pages were spattered red. Ned's father lay slumped over the top of the keyboard, his blood pooled on the black and white ivory of the keys. Art remained at the door as Ned made his way haltingly toward the piano. As he drew nearer he saw that the side of his father's head was horribly wounded and that a handgun lay atop a

page of music on the polished hardwood floor, beyond the reach of his father's outstretched fingers.

Nielsen noiselessly entered the room and waited for Ned to take in the scene. Ned had braced himself for something terrible, as a child tenses before some unannounced punishment, but he was not nearly ready for what he saw. He hadn't the breath to gasp. He stood rooted to the floor, his knees locked and shoulders hunched.

When Ned finally turned away, Nielsen, his hands clasped in front of him, waited a decent interval before speaking. He said, in a solicitous and practiced tone, "I'm sorry for your loss. Is there any reason why your father would want to take his own life?"

CHAPTER TWO

Ned eyed himself in the mirror. He was no judge of tuxedos, but it was clear his father's taste had been impeccable. The cut of the coat sloped elegantly from broad shoulders to slender waist. The pants tapered smartly to a narrow cuff just above shoelace level. The shirt featured fine ornamental stitching, without being frilly. The cummerbund was marbled in fantastic colors like the edges of the aged books in his grandfather's library. The cuff links and studs were nestled in a small purple velvet bag that had been tucked inside the jacket pocket. He found to his surprise that they were the faces of tragedy and comedy, one face for each cuff and two of each for the studs, presumably to be worn in alternate order. The overall fit was uncanny.

Only the shoes gave the lie to Ned as a man-about-town. They were his own; his father had not worn his size. The toes were badly scuffed, the black leather cracked around the laces, and the heels worn almost to the sole. Ned did what he could with a shoe-shine kit that had sat in the back of a closet since high school, but the polish was brittle. For a moment he flirted with the idea of chucking the dress shoes and sporting a pair of green Converse All Stars instead, but judged that his first day on the job was not the time to cut that sort of a dash. He would not have hesitated had he been in Chicago,

he thought, but then he would not be attending some fancy dress affair if he were.

His daily pacing had been shot to hell. His usual routine had been to sleep until at least eleven, grab a bagel and multiple cups of the blackest coffee, then lounge around his apartment with the *Tribune* sports section. He wouldn't start work on the novel until two at the earliest, later if he had a review to dash off. Late afternoons he'd find a pick-up basketball game at the gym, and evenings he could generally scare up a high school buddy or two for burgers and beers or a ball game if the Cubs were in town. He would write a few more hours after midnight, then collapse into bed around three.

That, however, was when he had an allowance from his father. Now Brooks Prince was dead, and the monthly checks had been cut off by Tucker Farr, his father's executor. Farr had been apologetic but firm. Farr told Ned that all of his father's investment accounts had been drained and that Brooks Prince had even dipped into the trust funds set up for Ned and his sisters. Under the circumstances, said Farr, it would be imprudent to continue paying an allowance to someone capable of earning his own keep.

So Ned was now a working man. The *Weekly* in Chicago had used him as a freelancer, but they already had a full-time reviewer and no room on the staff for another. Farr had mentioned that a Yale classmate of his was the publisher of the *Columbian*, Portland's alternative weekly, whose theater critic had accepted a teaching position. Ned would have to move to Oregon, of course, but Farr had said that getting out of town for a while mightn't be a bad idea. Farr had managed to keep the cause of Brooks Prince's death out of the

BLACK BOX

papers, but eventually news of the suicide was bound to leak out. Because of the place of Ned's family in Chicago society, the media glare would be intense.

Ned had been powerless to resist Farr's suggestion. He had lurched around in a daze since his father's death. It wasn't that they had been close. Other than Farr, who had known Brooks Prince since grade school, and Celia, the ever dutiful daughter, no one had seemed close to his father except the squadron of Ingram family lawyers, accountants, and investment managers who hovered over his every move.

What had stunned Ned above all else about his father's death was the boldness of the act. Brooks Prince had gone through life reading from a script written by his in-laws. Though he'd been given an impressive title and a plush office at the Ingram headquarters, he had had no real job other than to serve the family interests on a host of charity boards and escort Ned's mother through a whirl of black tie balls and do-gooder dinners. He had never made his own mark in anything, except in death.

Brooks Prince had been wrapped in a cocoon of Ingram privilege that Ned despised. Ned had escaped the mansion in the Ravines as soon as he could because to him it stank of privilege. The house had been at the core of the short story collection that had garnered Ned a winning review in the *New York Times* book section and had landed him a sizable advance for the novel. But he could not write there, not in such a monument to avarice.

Ned had bristled at Farr's implication that he was a freeloader. It was true the *Weekly* paid him a pittance and that he had long since

run through the advance from the novel, which had ballooned hundreds of pages past its expected length and was more than a year overdue to his publisher. But he lived simply, flinging himself fully into the craft of writing. His apartment in Chicago was a humble one-bedroom in an up-and-coming neighborhood that had yet to up and come. He took the L all over the city and the Northwestern train on his few journeys to the North Shore. He had his vices, of course, but at least they were cheap.

But not cheap enough that he could manage without the allowance. He was dumfounded at Farr's report of Brooks Prince blowing millions of Ingram dollars on something he had managed to conceal from the phalanx of family retainers. Farr now had the usual lawyers and accountants on the case, trying to reconstruct his father's dealings, but he said the traces were few.

There were the house and the paintings and the whole lock, stock, and barrel, of course, but Farr was not about to sell these just to subsidize Ned's writing. Ned was amazed the Ingram fortune could not be tapped in some other fashion, but he acknowledged he was no man of business and in no position to dispute Farr's decision that he must make his own way. He did not want to be seen begging around Chicago for work, not in a city where he'd been his own master, so he had taken the Portland offer and left town.

His father's estate had yielded three things. The first was a late-model Lincoln Navigator that he'd sometimes borrowed when he'd needed wheels for an out-of-town expedition. The second was the tuxedo he now had on, which Celia had handed him when he was packing the SUV for the westward drive. He'd been tempted to hand

BLACK BOX

it right back, as he couldn't imagine he'd ever put it to use, but she had been on-and-off hysterical for weeks and he hadn't wanted to set her off.

The third was a frayed cardboard box that his older sister, Margo, must have hidden under the rest of his stuff inside the Navigator. He'd unloaded it with the rest of his gear, but hadn't opened it until this evening when he went searching for his dress shoes. The box turned out to be crammed full of yellowing theater programs and black-and-white cast photos featuring Brooks Prince during his student days at Northwestern University, where Ned's parents had met.

Ned's grandfather had been a huge Northwestern booster - name on a library, board of trustees, fifty-yard line seats at Dyche Stadium, the whole shooting match. Gramp used to get driven in his Rolls Royce to all the home games. Gramp wouldn't have heard of his daughter going anywhere else when she got out of New Trier, although he doubted whether she'd put up much of a fight. Thankfully Gramp had been dead several years when Ned headed off to college, or there would have been hell to pay over his choice of Swarthmore. Ned had never asked his father why he'd picked Northwestern, but suspected it was the first school he'd gotten into. Dad had been a master of the path of least resistance.

Brooks Prince had evidently been a leading man. He was center stage in most of the photos, flashing a winning grin, and top billing in all but a few of the programs. He was also credited as a songwriter in some student revues.

Ned could not imagine his father in any setting so bohemian as the theater. He had always pictured his parents in their college years as partygoers at a fraternity social: his mother, in a demure pastel sweater, a little tipsy, pulling his unready father in a cardigan and penny loafers on to the dance floor. They had been at college during the Vietnam War era, but he was sure the tie-dye and bell-bottom look had passed them by.

Ned made an imperceptible adjustment to his bowtie, ran his fingers through his hair, and headed for the door of his apartment. He had rented a unit in a condo called the Brittany. Most likely, Ned thought, it was the name that had infected the developer's daughter during a decade-long, nation-wide contagion. The project was best classed as faux-loft: high ceilings, exposed beams, hardwood floors, and brick walls. The Brittany's developer, according to the broker who'd handled Ned's rental, had pioneered the conversion of industrial buildings in Portland's fashionable Pearl District. He'd apparently honed his craft to such a point that he no longer required the inconvenience of actual old buildings to achieve the desired effect. Ned found his unit antiseptic, certainly when compared with the aromatic old one-bedroom he had sublet in Chicago, but the location was ideal and the rent manageable.

He saw through the windows flanking the elevator that the skies had brightened since he'd returned from his first day at the *Columbian*. Though he knew it was just a prelude to another round of drizzle, he'd decided to walk over to the bus and take it downtown to the Hilton rather than do battle with rush hour traffic in the Navigator.

BLACK BOX

His apartment was on the fifth floor, three units down from the elevator. A middle-aged couple in matching multi-stranded rainbow-hued sweaters was already on the elevator when he entered. They were doubtless from one of the penthouses on the upper floors. He'd found the Brittany a curious mixture of empty-nesters returning to the city from suburbia and urbanistas making their first home purchase. The ex-suburbanites did not give a man in a tux a second glance.

The reaction on the No. 9 bus heading downtown was a different matter. The assortment of stolid commuters, backpack-toting students, and weary pensioners looked at him with a bafflement befitting an alien visitation. The driver gave a slight sneer when Ned announced "Fareless Square," the downtown zone where rides were free. Ned squeezed into the standing room only scrum, placing his umbrella in front of him as a shield for the cummerbund.

The bus stopped right in front of the Hilton, a skyscraper by Portland's low-slung standards that sprawled over an entire city block. The event appeared to be a youth charity benefit, as fresh-scrubbed children in white shirts brandished directional signs and cried out scripted welcomes. Ned followed their arrows to an escalator laden with dowdy matrons and well-fed burghers descending to the grand ballroom below. He shuffled along with the pack to the registration table, where a perky volunteer gushed a greeting, presented him with the evening's program, and pointed him to Table No. Thirty-Seven.

The *Columbian* was apparently not one of the event's major patrons, as No. Thirty-Seven was stuck in a dark corner of the cavernous ballroom, at the end of the very last row of tables. No one was at the table, which was festooned with bright streamers and

reproductions of children's art. Ned was a little ashamed of his umbrella – Portlanders never seemed to carry one despite the constant rain – and hid it under one of the chairs before heading for the ballroom lobby in search of a drink.

The narrow lobby was packed with patrons chattering in small groups or queuing at one of several bars. When Ned finally reached the front of his line, it was clear from the modest array of spirits and the harried look of the bartendress that a Pimms, his favored drink, was not on the cards, so he settled for a local microbrew.

As he turned away from the bar and took his first pull on the beer, Ned saw amidst the bevy of buzzing three and foursomes a larger crowd hovering around a man who looked like a senator from central casting: erect carriage, unthinned thatch of silver hair, and majestic smile that at once conveyed both dignity and empathy. The well-wishers and hangers-on would approach, and the senator would clasp their right hands in both of his and utter some mot juste as his eyes locked on theirs. Ned had seen glancing through the program that the honoree of the evening was the honorable such-and-such and figured this must be the man.

On the outskirts of the senatorial throng was Roger Bolden, the publisher of the *Columbian*, in animated conversation with a woman whose strapless back faced Ned. Even from a distance it was clear that the round and balding Bolden was turning on the charm, his pink cheeks puckered in good-humored banter. Ned wound his way toward the publisher, who spotted him as he drew near the senator and motioned him over with an imperious wave.

BLACK BOX

“Welcome to the good and great of Portland, Dirk. They only come out at night, even if their bedtime is still ten thirty. Nothing like needy children to pack them in, particularly if Brutus Emeritus is willing to lend his name to the proceedings. As he has to every federal building in town.”

Dirk Marlowe was Ned’s pen name. He’d wanted to ensure that any success he gained as a writer was not due to family connections, so he had never written under his own name. As he had come to Portland for a writing job, he had decided to go by Marlowe.

Bolden cast an admiring eye over Ned’s outfit. His first question to Ned when they’d met at the *Columbian* office earlier that day was whether he owned a tuxedo. When Ned allowed that he did, Bolden had giggled, clapped his chubby hands, and asked him to take the place of a flu-stricken editor at the evening’s event.

“You do indeed have a tuxedo, don’t you? You have to be careful, Dirk. The powers that be here expect the scribes of the Fourth Estate to be meager and ragged, not clad in opulent garments that might upstage their own splendor. There is no danger, however, of your overshadowing this young woman, whose presence this evening graces the good and the great with the beautiful. Allow me to introduce Karin Bergren. Karin, this is our new theater critic Dirk Marlowe, who has descended from the Olympus of Chicago to teach us provincial mortals how to break a leg.”

The woman turned to face him. Ned started at her beauty. She was perhaps an inch short of six feet, though well over in stylish black heels. Her shimmering honey-blonde hair was pulled into a simple plait that followed the graceful line of her neck on to strapless

shoulders. The hue of her skin was the rich, glowing bronze that blesses amber blondes. Bolden had called her young, but she was probably close to forty. There was a ripeness to her that Ned was not accustomed to in girls his own age. A jeweled pendant hanging from a slender gold chain disappeared between full breasts that swelled above her neckline, and her black evening gown curved around sweeping hips.

She had classic Nordic features, but with hints of a sensuality that overcame the typical Scandinavian severity. The bridge of her nose was long and straight, but slightly flared and fleshy at the base. Her lips curled with a natural fullness.

“Welcome to Portland, Mr. Marlowe.”

Her smile was warm and showed a set of gleaming white teeth. She took a sip of white wine.

“It’s Dirk. Whenever I hear ‘Mr. Marlowe,’ I start looking for my father.”

“You see, Karin, he already has the informality of our fair city down to a tee. We pride ourselves on not standing on ceremony out here, Dirk. The pioneers who came down the Oregon Trail checked all their stuffy Eastern conventions at the Missouri River. Not much starch in a covered wagon, you know.”

“But I see you’ve not entirely dispensed with formalwear.”

“Well, most trailblazers took at least one set of their Sunday best. We don’t go to church much in these parts, so we had to put it to use in some fashion. And besides, muslin frocks – or shall we say sweaters and khakis – don’t display some of our city’s natural assets to their best advantage.”

BLACK BOX

Bolden tipped an imaginary cap in Karin's direction, while sneaking a glance across the lobby.

"Ah, I see an account to whom some sucking up is sadly due. We live and die with our advertisers, you know, and this one has wanted to give me a preview of dying for some time. I think I can leave you two young people alone without a chaperone. But a word of warning, Dirk: Karin is on the board of Willamette Stage and will doubtless seek to ensnare you in their web."

Bolden gave a giggle and darted off.

"I don't think I've been left alone with a critic since I joined the board. Is there some sort of code of ethics I need to follow?"

"Sexual favors and bribes in excess of \$1,000 are frowned upon. I believe anything else is fair game."

Her laugh was throaty and deep.

"So what do you think of Portland theater?"

"I'm afraid I'm a Portland theatrical virgin. This is my first day on the job, and I've yet to attend a single play here. At this stage, my mind is frighteningly open, though not for want of trying on my predecessor's part."

Milson, the departing theater critic, had briefed Ned on the local theater scene over lunch. He had bemoaned a prevailing mediocrity, though he'd singled out a few companies that he'd called burning coals in the overall ash heap.

"Milson? He hated everything."

"I would say that he yearned to love, but set the bar of his affections rather high."

“And I would say the man’s a pompous ass. He’s panned nearly every show we’ve done since I joined the board.”

“Perhaps you should leave the board.”

She grinned. “No, I understand our losing streak with him started well before me. But I may take your advice anyway. My term is up at the end of the year.”

“Are you tired of theater?”

“I could never be tired of theater. But there’s very little theater in board life. The actors have all the fun, and all we do is foot the bill. I do that drill with my children every week, but at least I have some say in what they do. Our artistic director will gladly take my check, but he would never take my advice.”

“Have you tried?”

“I did when I first came on the board. Dylan – that’s our artistic director – couldn’t have been nicer, but I could tell he wasn’t going to listen to anything I had to say. I soon learned that it was his job to choose the season and ours to applaud whatever he chose.”

She had a way of turning out her full lower lip in a girlish pout.

“According to Milson, most people in town thought that was his job as well.”

“Oh, I’m not saying he has to cheer for everything, no matter how awful. But if people pick up the theater section and see nothing but negative reviews, they’ll just go to the movies, which is what most of them really want to do anyway.”

“So a critic has a duty to save the theater, at the price of his integrity?”

BLACK BOX

“Now you’re putting words in my mouth. But wouldn’t a critic want there to be plays to review?”

“My experience has been that theater people are strangely compelled to perform their art and will continue to do so, regardless of the obstacles placed in their path by empty bank accounts, oppressive landlords, and unflattering critics.”

“And so you critics should feel free to make life as miserable as possible for these poor deluded creatures.”

“No, we should encourage the best among them to brave the obstacles and fight on. We should steer that dwindling but hardy brand of theatergoers to what is worthy of their support and be unsparing as to what is not.”

“Is that what you did in Chicago?”

“In Chicago I did what I could. I was a freelancer, not my paper’s theater critic in chief. My editor kept my pontificating to a dull roar.”

“So you’ve come to Portland to hold court?”

“I’ve come to Portland for the money.”

“Don’t you have it backwards? I thought people left minor cities like ours to make it in major cities like yours.”

“Not struggling novelists in need of a full-time job.”

“So you’re not just a critic?”

She drew a little closer to Ned.

“I’m afraid I am also a poor deluded creature, albeit in another line of goods. Scratch most critics and beneath that brittle exterior you’ll find an artist’s soft underbelly.”

“Have you had anything published?”

“I had a nice run of beginner’s luck. Now I’m paying for my good fortune with a wicked sophomore slump.”

A roar of laughter came from the politician’s entourage. The senator himself was the only one not convulsed in hysterics, a wry chuckle apparently being the closest he came to laughing at his own jokes.

“Perhaps you’ll find inspiration here. You know we’re quite a center for writers.”

“So I understand. I’ve been trying to figure out whether it’s the weather or the coffee.”

“I’m afraid I couldn’t say. I don’t know any writers.”

“Well, now you do.”

“Yes, I suppose I do.” She smiled, almost to herself. “And what inspires you?”

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t be in such a slump.”

The lights of the lobby flickered on and off, signaling the patrons to head to their tables.

She raised her glass. “Here’s to finding inspiration in your new city. Oh, and high praise for Willamette Stage.”

Ned hoisted his microbrew bottle in answer. “I knew there had to be a catch, but I’ll drink to that all the same. Hopefully I’ll see you at a show around town, Karin.”

“I don’t get out much, I’m sorry to say. And most people under thirty call me Mrs. Bergren, Mr. Marlowe.”

She flashed a dazzling smile, turned on her heel, and with a wave of her wineglass over a bare shoulder disappeared into the ballroom.

CHAPTER THREE

Ned took a moment to collect himself. There was a low murmur as the crowd filed toward their seats. He got his bearings, took a slug of his beer, and made for the double doors at the far end of the lobby.

By the time he reached the *Columbian's* table all of the seats but one were taken. The only chair remaining had its back to the dais. Ned as unobtrusively as possible collected his umbrella from under one of the occupied chairs and slunk into the empty seat, stashing the umbrella beneath his legs.

Bolden spotted him and gave a knowing wink from across the table.

“Have you pledged rave reviews for the rest of Willamette’s season?”

“My criticism is not for sale.”

“Neither is our newspaper, but it doesn’t mean we can’t be bought.”

“The lady did not offer.”

“She honored you with her time. I would say that consideration has passed. Watch out – she may yet try to collect on the bargain.”

Bolden turned to a woman in a red dress seated to his left. A graying, curly-haired man in a black dress shirt who Ned guessed was the paper’s editor in chief was deep in conversation with a woman in

hexagonal eyeglasses to Ned's right. The man on Ned's other side, left out of the conversation, was chewing on a roll.

"Who's Bolden talking about?" he asked, his jaws still working on the remains of the roll as he spoke.

"A woman he just introduced me to in the lobby. Her name was Karin Bergren, I think. He's yanking my chain a little because she's on the board of a theater company and I'm the new theater critic." He extended his hand. "Dirk Marlowe."

"Sorry. Anthony Selvaggio." His handshake was a vise grip.

Selvaggio was about Ned's age. His stumpy frame was stuffed stiffly into what was obviously a rented tux. Ned spotted an undershirt that was just visible beneath the crack in his dress shirt collar. He was pale, with a thick mat of black hair that resisted brushing.

"That's Jerry Bergren's wife, right?"

"I don't know. She didn't say anything about a husband."

"I wouldn't either if I were her. Bergren's a liar and a con man."

Selvaggio almost spat the words out in a heavy New Jersey accent.

"You know the man?"

"Never met him. But we've been keeping an eye on him for a while. I work the business and financial beat, do a lot of investigative work."

Selvaggio spoke in an intense staccato.

"How long have you worked for the paper?"

"Three years in January. Moved out here from Trenton."

"Is that where you're from?"

BLACK BOX

“Nah. Got started out of Rutgers at the paper there. I’m from Asbury Park.”

“You must be a Springsteen fan.”

“You got that right.”

The evening’s master of ceremonies approached the lectern, which was decked with the same streamers and art that were featured on the tables, only larger. Ned took him to be a TV news anchorman. He made a few glib jokes at the expense of local personalities that were lost on Ned, then introduced the charity’s board chairman. The chairman, a lean, bald man with a lawyerly air, earnestly thanked the assemblage, then delivered a flowery tribute to the senator. He built to an obvious ovation point, and the patrons obliged by rising to their feet in ringing applause. The senator, seated at the center table in the first row, responded with a wave that was royal in its economy. Ned, who joined in standing ovations only when moved to some exalted plane, was one of the last out of his chair.

“The cult drinks the Kool-Aid,” hissed Selvaggio.

“Is it always like this?” asked Ned, as white-clad servers brought out meager salads.

“Never been to a black tie event before, so I can’t say. But if you’re asking if the entire city will put its nose up the ass of the senator at the drop of a hat, then yes.”

Selvaggio slathered his salad in thin Italian dressing.

“The senator, you see, is the high priest of the cult of the Good Person. There’s not much religion out here, at least not compared to where I come from. Fewer people go to church here than just about

any place in the US. The Catholic Church is a joke. People here don't worship God; they worship at the altar of the Good Person."

"And what's a Good Person?"

"Just look around you. They're progressive. They're tolerant. They're enlightened. They give to environmental groups, even if they drive an SUV that gets twelve miles to the gallon. They swear by mass transit, even if they never ride it. They denounce racism, even though you can count the number of blacks in their kids' schools on the fingers of two hands. Some of their best friends are gay or lesbian. They think guns are for rednecks and the military is for fascists."

His salad was gone. Selvaggio grabbed the last roll in the basket, ripped it in two, and dipped both halves in the dregs of his dressing.

"They're all about grassroots and consensus. They can't stand political machines. They think smoke-filled rooms and back-room deals are for Neanderthals in Jersey or Chicago."

"That's my city," slipped in Ned.

"Cubs or White Sox?"

"Cubs - all my life."

"You'll fit right in."

"Fit in? There's no major league baseball out here."

"You call a team that hasn't won the Series in a hundred years major league?"

"Yankees fan?"

"You got that right."

Both oil-soaked halves of the roll had vanished as well. The servers, who were working the ballroom front to back, arrived with the main course.

BLACK BOX

“So what’s wrong with being a Good Person? Other than a mild dose of hypocrisy, which you’ll find anywhere you look.”

“Wrong? I didn’t say there was anything wrong. They’re on the right side of just about every issue I give a damn about. They vote right. They give to the right causes. They eat right.”

“Then what’s this about cults and Kool-Aid?”

“Because they think they’ve somehow trumped human nature. They think because they wear Patagonia and saved the spotted owl, they’re a different species from a guy who wears a cheap suit and plays the ponies in Hoboken. They think because there are no fat guys named Louie making payoffs in thick envelopes, there’s no greed or corruption out here.”

“And I gather there is?”

“It’s subtle but, oh yeah, it’s here. You need to know where to look, though. When I first came out I thought I’d go nuts. I got my ticket out of Trenton after we rolled up a judge and his clerk in Mercer County who were taking payoffs from lawyers for case assignments. I thought I’d get out here and rack up a few crooked pols and bureaucrats in the first year easy. No dice. There’s not much in that line in Portland.

It took me a while to learn, but I started to see that if you were a certified, true blue Good Person, all sorts of nice things would fall your way. It was almost like being a made man in Jersey. It might be a sweet development deal, it might be a no-bid city contract, it might be that people looked the other way if you did something a little naughty – maybe even a lot naughty. No one would ever admit there was anything crooked going on, and some of them might not even think

there was. 'Joe's a Good Person,' they'd say. 'He's one of us. He's not some bigoted, gun-toting, Bible-thumping right-winger. He'd look out for us, and we should look out for him.' And believe me, they do."

The conversation around the rest of the table had turned general. Bolden noticed Selvaggio's buttonholing of Ned.

"Is Anthony telling you about the notches on his laptop? Don't cross that man, Dirk. He's an ex-wrestler who's perfected the 'grab him by the family jewels and don't let go' hold. It doesn't work so well on women, but then all women in this town are above reproach, aren't they, Deirdre?" He turned to the woman in red on his left.

Her answer was interrupted by the breezy anchorman, who had returned to the lectern as dessert was being served to the patrons in the front row. Ned did his best to remain awake and respectful through the evening's program, which featured a breathless video; a children's chorus, whose high-pitched paeans to peace and harmony were met with resounding applause; and yet another gushing testimonial to the senator, this time by the charity's executive director. After a period of straining his neck, Ned followed the lead of several other patrons in his area and turned his chair around to face the dais. In this position he could barely make out the arch whispers of Bolden, who provided a sotto voce running commentary on the festivities to the muffled amusement of the table.

At last the anchorman delivered his parting quip and the lights of the ballroom came up. Ned noticed as he started to turn his chair around that Karin Bergren was taking her leave. Her stride was fluid, her neck held high. The heads of a number of middle-aged men turned as she passed their tables. She stopped to press a few hands,

BLACK BOX

paused as she approached the double doors to reach for something in her purse, then turned along the back row and headed toward the *Columbian* table. Bolden spotted her as she approached.

“Karin, you honor us humble journalists here in the cheap seats.”

“I just wanted to congratulate you on your new theater critic, Roger. I don’t know how you managed to pry him away from Chicago. He’s promised to keep an open mind, which we don’t often find in a critic around here.”

Her comment drew a few knowing chuckles around the table.

“I’ll be sure to send you an invitation to Milson’s retirement party, Karin. Perhaps you’d like to audit some of his courses – he’s going into academia, you know.”

“We’ve learned quite enough from him, thank you.”

She circled around the table toward Ned.

“I hope you’ll enjoy your new job, Mr. Marlowe. Don’t let the publisher influence your artistic good sense.”

“I never interfere on the editorial side, do I, Deirdre,” said Bolden with a giggle. “If I did I would have to call myself a writer instead of a publisher and my self-image would suffer terribly.”

“Our new show opens next month. I hope to see you at the opening, Mr. Marlowe. Good night.”

She shook Ned’s hand with both of hers. He felt the outline of a small slip of paper squeezed into his palm. He quickly closed his fingers on the piece of paper as she turned and left the ballroom.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ned closed the latch of the bathroom stall and leaned his back against the door. He had ducked into the men's room to escape the crush of patrons storming the escalator. He hadn't even attempted to look at the slip of paper, as no part of the lobby offered privacy.

Ned uncurled the clenched fingers of his right hand. He could tell from the texture of the paper that it had been torn from the evening's program, which had featured a collage of the ubiquitous children's art and streamers on the cover. It was folded in half.

"Meet me at the Lowbrow Lounge in the Pearl at ten tonight. Cell 971-570-3378. Karin."

Her handwriting was all sweeping strokes and flourishes. It was evident from the ragged slope of the letters that the note had been written hurriedly and in the dark.

Ned looked at his watch. It was almost nine forty. He knew about the Pearl District from the boasts of the broker who had handled his rental, but had never heard of the Lowbrow.

He was startled by a flush from an adjoining toilet. Ned heard the ringing footfall of a patron's dress shoes across the bathroom's tiled floor. As the water of the sink hissed behind him, he wondered whether this was an invitation he should accept. He took Bolden's chaff with a grain of salt, but he was a new critic in town and did not want to be seen as playing favorites. Then he remembered those strapless shoulders and swelling neckline and any scruples faded fast.

BLACK BOX

He didn't have time for mass transit. There was a cabstand just around the corner from the Hilton's main entrance. Ned noticed a long line of luxury sedans and SUVs pulling out of a parking garage across the street, but there was almost no queue for the taxis. When he asked for the Lowbrow Lounge, the cabdriver, a square-faced man with an unplaceable Eastern European accent, cast a glance at his tuxedo and gave him an odd look. As the driver pulled out of the stand and switched on the cab's wipers against the drizzle, Ned remembered that he'd left his umbrella under the ballroom chair.

They drove past sleek office towers, which soon gave way to squat low-rise buildings. Scattered second and third story lights shone a hazy yellow through the mist.

They crossed Burnside, the street that he'd learned divides north and south in the city's grid. Chicago may have named one of its chief thoroughfares after an infamous Indian killer, Ned mused, but at least Sheridan had been a competent general. Suddenly, the cab was dwarfed by sprawling facades of brick and glass. Ned asked the driver whether this was the Pearl District. He received an affirmative grunt.

They stopped at an intersection that looked like an architectural rendering for an urban theme park. The amber-lit storefront of a chic restaurant faced off across the street from an upscale chain coffeehouse. The other two corners were occupied by a lighting boutique, whose magnificent fixtures dazzled through the store windows despite the lateness of the hour, and an antique store whose name, stenciled in an elaborate script with burnished gold letters, ended in "Ltd." Glistening white sidewalks were punctuated

by perfectly placed benches and street lamps. A well-dressed couple in black, positioned at the light as if to give the scale of the site, clutched the leash of a small dog.

The light changed, and the driver turned at the next block and pulled over to the curb. Ned checked his watch. It was nine fifty-eight. He paid the driver and stepped out into the soggy night.

The Lowbrow Lounge was worthy of the name. Its stature was low, a one-story structure of dubious construction towered over by the brick behemoths a block away. Its lighting was low, a dim glow that filtered through narrow storefront windows bathed in red neon. Its furnishings budget was low, as evidenced by a stack of cheap white plastic patio chairs to the right of the entry secured by a plastic-cased chain that snaked through the cracks of the seatbacks. He would not have placed a wager on the Lowbrow's provenance, but felt a converted pawnshop to be as good a bet as any.

There were two battered doors facing on to the street. Ned chose the left, as that side of the Lowbrow was less dimly lit than the other. He found himself inside a cramped vestibule that in turn offered a choice of two doors. Again he went to the left, which led him into a low-ceilinged, shag-carpeted lounge area with a mirror-backed bar set back along the near wall and rough wooden booths running along the far wall. A handful of empty tables sat just inside the door before the window. The bartender, a lean man with a shaved head hunched over the bar reading a newspaper, looked up as Ned came in and eyed him with a wry grin.

“Getting married tonight?”

Ned looked down at his tuxedo and laughed.

BLACK BOX

“Afraid not. My boss hooked me as a last-minute fill-in at some charity event.”

“And he told you the gig was here? We don’t do much in the charity ball line.”

“No, I managed to survive the ballroom at the Hilton. Someone invited me to meet her here afterwards.”

“We don’t have much of a rep as a post-gala watering hole either. Is she also dressed for a wedding?”

“Only if your brides prefer black, strapless, and low-cut.”

“I’ve been down the aisle twice and neither time with someone like that. I might still be married if I had.”

Ned did a quick scan of the booths. Two pale college students dressed in standard issue grunge work shirt and jeans were in animated conversation over empty beer glasses. A lone woman with heavy mascara nursed a Mai Tai. A biker couple sat in silence, the man’s black-booted feet stretched out alongside the booth as he slouched in his seat.

“What are you drinking until she shows up?”

“Can you manage a Turbo Pimms No. 1 Cup?”

“You bet. I probably get one Pimms order a month, though not usually on a Monday night from a man in a tux.”

“What’s your usual crowd here?”

“Not you. Unless you’re a pretender too. We get a lot of slumming yuppies pretending to be blue collar, ex-hippies pretending to be counterculture, and high school punks pretending to be drinking age. And some tough old bastards who’ve been coming to this place

for years and haven't noticed they're not part of the Pearl District marketing plan."

He cocked his thumb in the direction of the bikers.

"So you haven't been gentrified out?"

"Not hardly. The developers and the planners and the realtors have created something so totally fake down here that people have a desperate need for something real. We're authentic, almost like a museum piece except that admission is only two bucks a drink at happy hour. If I had any brains I'd get out a sledgehammer and beat the place up even more. The more we look like a dive, the better business seems to be."

"You're the owner?"

"Co-owner. My partner owns the building. One of these days a developer is going to make him an offer he can't refuse, but for now we both love the cash flow and thumbing our noses at these snotty assholes who'd love to get rid of us and put in a truffle salon."

"I'll be back. You mix a great Pimms. Most places I go think it's some sort of prescription cold medicine."

"My pleasure. Why do you drink that stuff anyway? I have to say it's not my cup of tea."

"Cause I'm pretending to be a snob."

"You're doing a helluva job. Whoa." The bartender's head jerked in the direction of the door. "Is that your date?"

Ned swiveled in his barstool. Karin stood just inside the doorway, the red neon light in the window behind her glinting off raindrops beaded on a long black raincoat with gold piping. She was stunning. She spotted Ned and came towards the bar.

BLACK BOX

“I’m so sorry. Have you been waiting long?”

“No, no. Just long enough to get the lowdown on the Pearl District.”

The bartender gave a short bow.

“It’s nice to see you, Karin. Or should I say ‘Mrs. Bergren?’ Are you still drinking Aquavit, or is that not on Jerry’s approved list?”

“It’s mostly Chardonnay these days, Mick. But why don’t you bring me an Aquavit for old times’ sake. And ‘Karin’ will do just fine.”

“You got it. Make yourself at home. You see I give you the run of the place on your once-every-fifteen-year visits.”

“You were always too good to me, Mick.”

Ned followed her to an empty booth between the college students, who stared in awed silence as she passed, and the mascara woman, who mournfully stirred her Mai Tai. The biker couple took no notice.

“I’m sorry I’m late. I meant to arrive first. The truth is, I’ve been circling the Pearl District for the past half hour.”

“You couldn’t find the place? It sounds like you were a regular.”

“Oh, I knew where the Lowbrow was. I couldn’t decide if I should come in.”

“After you’d invited me?”

“Because I’d invited you. I’m a married woman with two teenage children and a house in the West Hills. I’m not supposed to be out in seedy bars after hours with young writers.”

“So why did you invite me?”

“Because I’m a married woman with two teenage children and a house in the West Hills.”

Her full mouth eased into a slow grin.

“You’re not going to lobby me for four-star reviews?”

“I wouldn’t even try, Mr. Marlowe. I can see that you are a writer above corruption. That’s why I invited you.”

“Because I cannot be bought?”

“No.” She reached for her pocketbook and pulled out a \$50 bill as the bartender arrived with the Aquavit. “I believe this should cover Mr. Marlowe and me, Mick, unless you’ve inflated your drink prices to keep up with the cost of real estate down here.”

“That would cover a round for the entire house tonight, Karin. Should I make an announcement?”

Ned noticed as Karin’s head was turned toward the bartender how smooth and supple her skin was. There was just the hint of a wrinkle where her chin sloped down to her neck, but it hardly marred the view.

“I think I’ll keep a low profile this evening, Mick. If there’s a balance after Mr. Marlowe and I have finished, I trust you can put it to good use.”

The bartender reprised his earlier bow and returned to the bar.

“You asked why I invited you. It’s because you’re an artist.”

“Thank you. I’m flattered. But you’ve spoken to me for what, all of ten minutes? How do you know me, to quote *It’s A Wonderful Life*, from Adam’s off ox?”

“I know an artist. It’s been a very long time, but I used to be one myself – well, sort of.”

“A painter?”

“No, no. An actress.”

BLACK BOX

“Where?”

“Here. In Portland. Well, not originally. I grew up in Astoria.”

“Isn’t that a swanky hotel in New York?”

Her smile dimpled only one cheek, Ned noticed.

“It is if you’re eating Waldorf salad. No, Astoria is a wet, gray, miserable little fishing town on the Oregon coast. It has more overcast days than just about any place in America.”

“You’re a hometown booster.”

“I hated it. I couldn’t wait to get out of there. I kept hoping my father would take a job in California or Hawaii or Florida where it was warm and the sun shone all the time and all the colors were bright. But he never did. He just retired after forty years as an engineer for the county.

There was a children’s theater though, thank God. I got started when I was eleven. I tried to get my mother to take me sooner, but she thought theater was frivolous. She wanted me to be a singer, which she considered a serious art.”

Ned pulled on his Pimms. “She’s right there. Singers practice scales. Actors practice drinking.”

“You’re going to be worse than Milson.”

“You mistake my meaning. Drinking exposes you to the seamy side of life” – Ned made a gesture that embraced the whole of the Lowbrow – “which is invaluable training for theater. Scales expose you to the inside of voice studios, which is invaluable training for a serious art.”

She reached up and undid the plait of her hair, which fell in a honeyed swirl around her suntanned shoulders.

“I’ll drink to that.” They clinked glasses.

“So you conquered the stages of Astoria?”

“I had the lead in all of our high school plays. I was ready to go off to UCLA or Florida State and be a theater major. But my parents are both strict Lutherans – my whole family is Norwegian – and they wouldn’t pay for college unless I went to a Lutheran school no more than three hours from home. That didn’t leave much of a choice. I ended up at Concordia here in Portland, which didn’t even have a theater major.”

“And you got married, had two children, and lived happily ever after.”

“No, no, I dreamed my theater dreams and read the audition notices in the *Oregonian* religiously. It was about the only thing I did do religiously the whole time I was there. My junior year, I saw a notice from a new company that was holding auditions for *Hedda Gabler*. The only playwright my parents would even mention without frowning was Ibsen – because he was a son of Norway, of course. I didn’t think I had a prayer of being cast, and even if I did I had no intention of telling my parents. If they ever did find out, though, I didn’t think I’d get in much trouble for doing Ibsen. So I studied the play and put everything I had into Thea, as I was sure they had pre-cast Hedda and Thea, of course, is a blonde Norwegian girl in her twenties. I went to the audition, which was in some hole in the wall just a few blocks from here. Incredibly, I got cast.”

“I’m not amazed, although if I were Hedda I would be afraid of being upstaged.”

BLACK BOX

“You’re too kind, Mr. Marlowe. I’m not sure you’re really cut out to be a critic. So I was twenty, in the big city, and getting paid to be an actress. It was fantastic. I would finish my classes, speed through my homework, swallow my dinner in fifteen minutes, and then catch a ride to the theater. I call it a theater but it was really just an empty storefront that belonged to somebody’s relative. It was a dump when we started in there – dusty, dirty, and damp. We had cleaning parties where the whole cast pitched in to scrub the place, then we painted it all black. The utilities had been shut off for a year. We did our first few weeks of rehearsals – in January – with space heaters because they couldn’t afford the deposit to turn the gas back on.

We used to go out after rehearsal for a drink, as much just to get warm as for the alcohol. We always went to the Lowbrow. Mick was one of the bartenders here. He’s the one who suggested Aquavit; he used to call me the Norwegian ice princess. I’d never had more than a glass of wine in my life.

The show was complete chaos. Hedda and Lövborg were sleeping with each other and broke up a few weeks into rehearsal. They wouldn’t speak to each other offstage. The company had no money. It turns out they expected to raise the money for lights, sets, and costumes from advance ticket sales, but they had no one lined up to do promotion. The actress playing the maid quit two weeks before we opened because the dust and the cold were giving her asthma attacks. The director walked out during a tech rehearsal and didn’t come back for three hours. The fire marshal came in a few days before opening and wrote us up.

The whole thing should have crashed and burned, but somehow it didn't. No one had done *Hedda Gabler* here in years, and there's a huge Norwegian population in Portland, so the *Oregonian* and the *Columbian* actually gave us a decent write-up before we opened. Opening night we had a full house. Of course that meant about forty people, mostly friends and family, sitting in folding chairs on platforms, but we could still say we were sold out. The audience gave us a standing ovation, and we went out to the Lowbrow afterward to celebrate."

"What did the critics have to say?"

"They loved it. Well, not completely, but on the whole. They had a few complaints. They didn't much care for the director, and they thought Lövborg was over his head."

"Minor quibbles. What about you?"

"The *Oregonian* said I was 'appealing.' Your paper didn't say a thing about me."

"Ah, so you don't just have it in for Milson. You want revenge on the whole institution."

"No, no. It was one of those reviews where the reviewer spends ninety percent of his time showing off his knowledge of nineteenth-century theater and about ten percent on the play he actually saw. He barely said anything about the actress playing Hedda, let alone the smaller parts."

"No offense, but I usually write that sort of review when the history of nineteenth-century theater is more interesting than the play I actually saw."

BLACK BOX

The two college students let out a whoop and exchanged high-fives. The bartender looked up briefly, then returned to his newspaper.

“I didn’t really care about the reviews. I was an actress a long way from Astoria getting paid to be in a play that people were paying money to see. That’s all that counted to me. I didn’t get paid what I was supposed to, though. At the end of the run the producers came to the cast and said they were way over budget and could only pay us half of what we had been promised. I just took what they gave me. I wasn’t doing it for the money.”

“Outside of a few sharks in New York, nobody in theater is doing it for the money. That’s why nobody makes any.”

“Is that wrong?”

“No, it couldn’t be more right. It means that artists are in charge, and you know how we artists love our poverty. It’s the surest validation of our integrity. If theater were a moneymaker, we’d have to cut businessmen in on the deal, and then they would force us to produce crap that the common man might actually want to see. Poverty enables us to keep our standards up and the great unwashed out of our theaters.”

“So cynical so young. So what would you do?”

“Not a thing. Most days I love theater just as it is. But let’s be honest and admit that contemporary theater is for the elite and that we put up barriers to entry just like any other industry. Except our barrier to entry is poverty. Fortunately, we have a steady stream of stage-struck youth who keep us afloat because, just like you, they’re not in it for the money.”

Ned stretched his legs outside the booth, loosened his tie, and ran his fingers through his hair.

“So what was your next show after *Hedda*? Did you corner the market on Ibsen blondes?”

Karin paused, looking down at the scarred table top.

“A man who was at the opening came and sat at my table at the Lowbrow after the show. He knew all about theater in Portland and said he went to New York every year for a week to see the hot shows. He bought me a few rounds of Aquavit and offered on the spot to take me on a New York theater tour. I told him I was still in college. He said we could go over spring break. I put him off, but he came to every performance and went out with us to the Lowbrow after every show. I’d never been east of the Mississippi, let alone New York, so I finally gave in.”

“Now can I say it?” asked Ned. “And then you got married, had two children, and lived happily ever after.”

She pouted. “Are you always in such a hurry to jump to the end?”

“No, I’m a writer, which usually means I’m stuck in the middle. But when the road to the ending is well marked and well paved, I’m all for taking it.”

“Is it really that obvious?”

“It’s obvious from your impressive level of personal grooming that you did not take the path of the starving artist. I surmised from your auspicious introduction of a leading man with sufficient wealth for New York theater junkets, buckets of charm, dogged persistence, and, in the bargain, a passion for theater, that he was likely to remain on stage for the duration. You already confessed that you were a

BLACK BOX

married woman with two teenage children. As to the living happily ever after part, that always has a nice ring to it, particularly when the leading lady is a ravishing Norwegian ice princess.”

She gave him a searching look. “Are you always this full of yourself?”

“Hey, you invited an artist for a drink. If you wanted a passive audience, you should have gone to the movies.”

“The week after the show closed I went to New York with Jerry. We stayed at the Plaza, went to the best restaurants, saw a Sondheim show, an Arthur Miller, a David Mamet. We had champagne after every show, then slept ‘til noon. It was fabulous – about as far away from Astoria as I could possibly imagine.”

“He swept you off your feet.”

“He did. We came back to Portland, and he sent me flowers every day. We went to every play in town. My friends at college were so jealous. He proposed that summer. My parents were thrilled. He’s Norwegian on his mother’s side, Swedish on his father’s – they made allowances for that.

We were married that fall. I didn’t much care for Concordia and didn’t see any reason to go back to school. I was an actress now, and I wanted to act. But then I got pregnant right after our honeymoon. Jerry said he didn’t want me going through the strain of rehearsals with a baby on the way. I thought he was being over-protective, but I really couldn’t argue.”

The bartender sauntered over.

“Can you manage another, Karin? If it won’t breach your marital vows, of course.”

"I'm about eighteen years out of practice, Mick, but I'm good for one more and I don't need a note from home, thank you very much. I'm sure Mr. Marlowe will join me for another round."

Ned silently inclined his head.

"Your wish is my command, milady," said the bartender.

"He didn't approve of your husband, did he?" asked Ned after the bartender retreated.

"No. When he heard about our engagement, he sent me a single black orchid with a card that said, 'Break a leg closing night.'"

"Ouch."

"I suppose he thought I'd sold out."

"Had you?"

"I didn't think so. I'd fallen in love with the man of my dreams – handsome, successful, and a huge theater fan. And I wasn't planning to stop acting."

"But circumstances got in the way."

"Which I think Mick knew would happen. He could be scary that way."

"So you took a rain check on the Lowbrow for fifteen years."

"It didn't fit with being a wife and a mother. I suppose Mick would have said it didn't fit with being the wife of Jerry Bergren and a mother to his children."

"But now it does?"

"I'm not sure why, but a few years ago I began to get cravings for the theater. I'd missed it terribly at first, of course, but being a mother filled that hole. I rarely went to a play, almost never picked up a review. Jerry still went all the time, but somehow I either wanted to

BLACK BOX

be on stage or out of the theater. I was never much good being in the audience.

I guess it's a cliché, but when my youngest became a teenager the theater started to pull me back. Even my husband picked up on it. His answer was to get me on the Willamette Stage board."

"Now there's an artistic outlet."

"Don't be mean. He meant well."

"So do all the doctors and lawyers and tinkers and tailors on those boards. I know – my father must have been on a dozen. But it's no place for an artist."

She gave a rueful smile. Ned noticed that single dimple again.

"I know that now, which is why I'm getting out. Why was your father on all those boards?"

"It was sort of his job. Family interests and all that."

"He wasn't a doctor or a lawyer, or a tinker or a tailor?"

"He was a pillar of the community."

"You said 'he was' – is he still living?"

"No. He died recently."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you. I've been thinking about him today, actually. This was his tuxedo."

"Roger was right about the cut. Your father had great taste."

"If it weren't for his dying, I wouldn't have been at the event tonight. Bolden is one cheap bastard. He wanted somebody with a tux to fill a seat at the table so the paper wouldn't have to pay to rent one."

"That's Roger. I hear he pays his writers next to nothing."

“You heard right. But at least he offered me a full-time job. I was only a part-timer in Chicago.”

“What did you do with the rest of your day?”

“Experienced life, of course. I’m a writer, for Christ’s sake. I collected the stuff of living for future use. Cubs’ games and drinks with beautiful married women in seedy bars were my chief pastimes.”

“So you do this often?”

“As often as I’m asked. Which reminds me: why was I asked?”

“I already told you: because I’m a married woman with two teenage children and a house in the West Hills. And because I wanted to drink with an artist. And because it was time to come back to the Lowbrow.”

“Damn straight.” The bartender sidled up to the booth brandishing a drink in either hand. “It’s never too late.”

“It’s past my usual bedtime, Mick. This was about the time we used to show up, right after a screaming match at the end of rehearsal. Cold, starving, and beside ourselves at the producers. And I wouldn’t have had it any other way.”

“But you do now.”

“You really know how to hurt a girl, don’t you?”

“That’s what they said in both divorce pleadings. But I’ve been true to you, Karin. Stayed at the same barstool for fifteen years, waiting for you to come through that door. Kept saying to myself, ‘We’ll always have *Hedda*.’”

“And now I’ve come back.”

“With a guy in a tux.”

BLACK BOX

“Mr. Marlowe is actually the theater critic for the *Columbian* and an accomplished writer,” said Karin.

“Is he now? Well, all critics claim to be writers, don’t they. That’s why they’re so nasty – they can’t bear to see someone else’s work get an audience.”

“Mr. Marlowe has actually been published.”

“Then what’s he doing in a town like this reviewing plays?”

“He says he came here for the money.”

“Then he’s deluded as well as resentful.”

“So he’s the perfect Lowbrow customer.”

The bartender roared. “No, Karin, you’re our perfect customer. That’s why we’ve been pining away all these years.”

“An old school barman,” said Ned as the bartender withdrew. “Wicked libations with a twist of lip.”

The Mai Tai and mascara woman was preparing to leave. She rose, unsteady, from the booth behind them and reached for a cheap plastic raincoat that hung forlornly on a tarnished brass hook on the side of the booth. As she passed them, she stumbled slightly, then righted herself with a certain dignity and, turning a raddled cheek in their direction, nodded an approving smile as if to bless their presence together.

“So where are you with your novel?”

“I don’t remember the first word. The last word seems an infinite distance away. The words in the middle are breeding at a fearsome rate.”

“What’s it about?”

“I have a strict policy of not spilling the beans until they’re fully cooked. Unless you’re an esteemed publishing house offering a hefty advance. And these beans are a salmonella and E. coli cocktail at the present moment.”

“What about your first book?”

“I’ll let it speak for itself. Last I looked, which was two days ago, there were precisely three copies on the shelf at Powell’s. I’ll write down the name for you.”

He took the scrap of paper from the breast pocket of his tux. He wrote the title in one corner, then tore it off, taking care not to rip the part that showed her cell phone number.

“Do you think a place by the ocean might help you sort out the novel?”

“It helped Scott Fitzgerald with *Tender is The Night*. That’s a good enough precedent for me. Unfortunately, Portland is not an easy commute from the Riviera.”

“There is an ocean about two hours from here, last I looked. We have a place there. I almost never use it.”

“Why not?”

“Remember that I was born and raised on the coast. It was almost always damp and gray. It still is. I don’t need to go back there to be reminded.”

“So why buy a house there?”

“My husband always wanted one. He’s from Portland, you see. Somehow you’re not a success here unless you can get rained on in your own beach house. We used to go down there a lot when the kids were younger. Now it just sits empty most of the time. There’s a big

BLACK BOX

desk right in front of a picture window overlooking the water. It would be a great retreat for a writer.”

“Is that a proposition?”

“It’s an offer to help a struggling artist.”

“That’s very gracious of you. And I don’t have to promise to submit my reviews for your approval?”

“No strings attached. Just don’t invite a bunch of theater people over and trash the place. Or if you do, make sure you invite me.”

“And don’t forget the Aquavit.”

“It wouldn’t be a theater party without it.”

They eyed each other playfully.

“You’re serious?” asked Ned.

“It’s the least I can do for dragging a prominent critic out on the town at all hours of the night. Why don’t you try it out some weekend? If it suits you, we can see about making it a regular thing.”

“I’m not sure about my schedule, but I’d imagine I’ll be reviewing most Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. I could go down on Sunday, or maybe even after a show Saturday night. I could pump out the reviews on my laptop and take a few days to work on the book. I should probably wait a bit and make sure the paper isn’t too fascist when it comes to showing up at the office. If it’s anything like the Chicago paper, they don’t really care if you disappear for a day or two as long as the work gets done.”

“Good. I’ll check our calendar over the next month or so and make sure my husband has nothing scheduled. I doubt he will.”

Ned raised his glass. “To a true patroness of literature. Thank you.”

Karin raised hers in return. “To a cure for the sophomore slump. And you’re welcome.”

She looked at her watch.

“I’d better be getting home. I called my daughter from the Hilton and told her I’d be having a drink with a theater friend. That’s almost the truth, anyway. She laughed – she said she couldn’t remember the last time I’d gone out for a drink without Jerry. He’s out of town.”

She rose and reached for her raincoat. Ned noticed the sinews of her upper arm gently flex just beneath the smooth, bronzed skin as she pulled the coat up to her shoulders. He stepped out of the booth to help her with the coat.

“How did you get over here?” she asked.

“I took a cab from the Hilton.”

“I would offer you a ride, but married women with two teenage children and a house in the West Hills are definitely not supposed to be seen together with young writers after dark.”

“Outside of the Lowbrow, you mean?”

“Anything goes inside the Lowbrow, Mr. Marlowe.”

She turned towards the door.

“Thank you for not forgetting me, Mick. Would you please call a cab for Mr. Marlowe? He’s had a big night.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Ned backed the Navigator into a parking space on a darkened side street lined with scrawny trees. To his surprise, he'd been unable to find a space on the street where the theater was and had been forced to go around the block. This was the fourth show he'd been slated to review since arriving in Portland, and the turnout in the first three had ranged from modest to pathetic.

As had the productions themselves. So far he'd had no quarrel with Milson's assessment of the local theater scene. There had been displays of undeniable talent, but it seemed to gush forth, unchanneled.

His greatest frustration had been the under-powering of the plays, a failure to crank the work to a dramatic voltage that would buzz the audience to life. The venues had all been black boxes, confining cubes of darkened space where actors offered up their lines on a flat floor before a cramped audience crammed into platform seating. But a black box, Ned knew, could literally captivate an audience. Caged in a colorless cocoon, robbed of the ability to distance themselves from the spectacle unfolding before them, they were at the mercy of the theater master who could assault them into sensory submission. Sound could carom off walls or gurgle through the seats, light could blaze the players to a terrifying clarity or fade them to a murky obscurity. Most of all, actors at such close quarters could, without

hamming or bellowing, graft themselves on to the skin of the audience, then push through their pores to tap the veins beneath.

These productions had failed to use the theatrical means at their disposal. It was not a matter of budget. Ned had seen plays mounted on the most threadbare of shoestrings in Chicago that had boxed the audience into a claustrophobic delirium of wonder the roomy palaces of the big time companies could not hope to match. The plays he had seen here had instead called attention to the companies' empty pockets. The mind wandered and in wandering remarked upon the peeling paint, the unraveling insulation, and the fraying curtains. In the hands of these struggling troupes, the black box had become not a chamber of intimate intensity but a seedy testament to a poverty both economic and artistic.

Ned had thus far spared the rod in his reviews. He wanted to plumb the baseline of theater in Portland before denouncing new lows or, for that matter, proclaiming new highs. His measured criticism had drawn gentle jesting in the *Columbian* newsroom. Bolden had stopped by his cubicle the day after his first review had come out and asked, with a giggle, if Milson had taken his whetstone with him. Selvaggio, a white T-shirt peeking out from beneath the collar of his patterned flannel shirt, said that he thought Chicagoans were supposed to be tough, if you didn't count the three million Cub fans. He hadn't smiled when he said it.

He and Selvaggio had gone to lunch that day at a New York-style pizzeria a few blocks from the office. They had jostled good-naturedly over the merits of thick and thin crusts. After they had returned to the office, the reporter had probed Ned about Karin. They

BLACK BOX

were on to something about her husband, he'd said, and wondered if Ned had picked up anything useful at the gala. They'd talked mostly about theater and writing, Ned had said, and Jerry Bergren's name had barely come up. Out of a certain chivalry, he hadn't told Selvaggio about the Lowbrow. His job was reviewing theater, he'd said to himself. Let the hard news guys lay their own traps.

The next day, Karin had called Ned at the office. In a matter of fact voice she had not used at the Lowbrow, she'd said how much she had enjoyed meeting him at the gala and wished him well in his new duties. She also asked if there were another number that Willamette Stage could reach him on in case they needed to make contact when he was out of the office. At first baffled by her tone, Ned had finally caught on and had given her his cell phone number. He'd thanked her for her good wishes and offered his in return for a successful season.

She had called him on his cell phone that evening. With a laugh, she had apologized for the precaution, but said she never trusted office phone systems, particularly not when Roger Bolden was nearby. She had checked the family calendar and found that the following weekend looked good for Ned to use the beach house. Her husband was playing golf in Astoria, and the kids were going skiing with friends and spending the night in a cabin on Mt. Hood. There was a new Willamette Stage play opening, and she was staying in town for opening night.

Ned had given a wry chuckle. He was scheduled to review the Willamette Stage play the Saturday night of that opening weekend. It was to be his first major Portland review. There was no point in

keeping the assignment from her, as she would be reading about it soon enough. He'd made a clean breast of it.

"I knew they'd give you the review. They don't send the freelancers to our shows."

"And am I to gather it is pure coincidence you're offering me the beach house that weekend?"

"The thought of a conflict never entered my mind."

"I'm sure it didn't."

"You accept then?"

"Well, I can't very well ask Bolden what the paper's theater board member beach house policy is. It might be something of a giveaway."

"Is that a 'yes'?"

"I suppose it is. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll leave the keys and directions at the front desk of the MAC Club. For obvious reasons I don't want to come by your office."

"The MAC Club?"

"The Multnomah Athletic Club. The center of the West Hills universe. You've not been?"

"I've not been asked. I guess they don't roll out the red carpet for the new theater critic of the local alternative weekly."

"We'll see about that. After you write the Great American Novel, of course. Enjoy the show, Mr. Marlowe."

"Thank you, Mrs. Lincoln. I'm sure I will."

The Willamette Stage performance was tomorrow night. In the meantime, he had this evening's opening of *A Doll's House* to review. He did not have high hopes. In *Nora*, Ibsen had written a female lead

BLACK BOX

with unlimited potential for scenery-chewing. And in the press packet that had been sent to him by Vox Unum, the theater company producing the play, he'd seen that the company's artistic director was not only playing Nora, she was directing as well. He recalled the old adage about a lawyer who defends himself having a fool for a client. It seemed the worst sort of vanity project.

Still, Milson had said that Vox Unum was among the companies that bore watching. And judging from the mass of patrons streaming toward the theater as he turned the corner, they had a following. The performance was in the SoHo Theater, which Vox Unum shared with the venue's namesake company.

Ned found little that was Soho-like in the theater's surroundings. The overall sensibility was of a light industrial district turning its back on its past but not prepared for a clean break. Windowless tilt-up concrete buildings predominated on the theater side of the street, while across the way a glossy shower and bath fixtures showroom and a stylish clothing boutique signaled a surge in redevelopment. Still, there was an authenticity to the area that was a far cry from the faux urbanism of the Pearl District.

The streetlights were spaced far apart and left dark pools between dirty washes of light along the street below, making the bright glass storefront of the theater all the more inviting. Despite the damp edge of the early November evening, a clutch of hardy smokers huddled on the walkway that sloped gently down to the right of way in front of the theater.

Ned glanced at his watch as he pulled open one of the double doors that led into the lobby. It was seven forty-five, fifteen minutes

before curtain. He was making a point in his first circuit through the local theaters of arriving early, at least by his standards in Chicago. He knew how it threw the box office into a tizzy when the reviewer didn't arrive until the last minute. He'd decided to make this modest gesture during his honeymoon period. He was curious in any case to get a sense of the venues and the make-up of their audience. In Chicago, he knew each theater's crowd and made sure to minimize the moments he stood idle in the lobby or sat bored in his seat waiting for the play to begin.

Like the neighborhood outside, the SoHo was on the verge of shedding its industrial skin. The high ceilings, whitewashed walls, and storefront glass of the long, narrow lobby formed an airy contrast to the gritty unfinished cement floor. Jagged expressionist paintings hung on pockmarked concrete.

Ned took his place in the queue in front of a red marbled box office counter manned by a harried ticket manager. On the walls surrounding the counter was an array of framed posters, presumably of prior productions, that were cocked at odd angles. When Ned identified himself as Dirk Marlowe, the box office manager reached for an envelope marked with his name and handed it to him with a smile that was obliging but not servile.

"Welcome to Portland, Mr. Marlowe."

"Thank you. And it's Dirk. Whenever I hear 'Mr. Marlowe,' I start looking around for my father."

"Dirk it is. We've reserved a seat for you. The usher will show you where it is. Enjoy the show."

BLACK BOX

The box office manager stepped around the end of the counter and gestured toward a slight older woman taking tickets at the double doors into the theater, as if to say “This is the guy.” It took several waves to get her attention. She nodded nervously in response.

Arcs of pre-show conversation collided with the lobby walls. The concrete construction made for live sound. He took in the several clusters of patrons chatting in front of the menacing canvases. He found it difficult to typecast the audience by age, attitude, or wardrobe, other than to observe a prevailing informality. There was no sign of either a tie or a dress.

Ned wound his way past a chic young couple in black earnestly engaged with a donnish-looking man in comfortable middle age and a companion Ned guessed was his graduate student lover. Ranged behind them against the wall were two older husband and wife pairs, each tall, erect, and clad in well-knitted sweaters. Ned judged them to be emissaries from the local Scandinavian heritage society, come to pay homage to the great Norwegian playwright.

The usher blinked anxiously as Ned approached the doors to the theater. She pointed to a seat in the center of the middle row on which an orange laminated “Reserved” tent sign was perched and in a creaky voice identified that as his place. She, too, encouraged him to enjoy the show.

Ned passed into a dim vestibule. He felt the hard surface of the concrete lobby beneath his feet give way to more forgiving plywood. Before him, a single black curtain draped on a length of metal pipe set over the passageway into the theater had been pulled aside and lashed to the wall to allow the audience to pass freely.

Ned entered the theater and was struck by its intimacy. Three ascending rows of blue cloth seats were configured in a gentle horseshoe around the floor-level performance space. The patron seated farthest away could not have been more than fifteen feet from the stage. Each turn of the horseshoe was bisected by aisle stairs leading up to a curtained doorway. Ned wondered whether each gave on to passages running behind the audience flanks. He took the near aisle and, with murmured apologies to those already seated in his row, negotiated the narrow channel to his seat.

The towering ceilings of the lobby carried over into the theater. A tightly spaced lighting grid caged nearly the full expanse of the ceiling, interrupted only by two massive support beams that, to Ned's surprise, had been left in their natural wood tone rather than painted black. The lighting booth was embedded in the wall above the curtained doorway to his right. Behind its dark glass windows Ned saw the board operator, hunched in a headset over his cue sheet below a hooded amber light.

The looming back wall behind Ned was painted a flat black, as were the low walls over each side of the audience. Above these side walls, fenced in by black railings, were catwalks leading to the lighting booth on Ned's right and to nothing he could discern on his left. He saw that the ceiling height and the catwalks offered a resourceful director a number of staging options.

The stage wall was covered from floor to almost ceiling in an elaborately patterned wallpaper. The style of the paper recalled William Morris. In the center of the stage wall were French doors done in a light Scandinavian-style aspen or birch. The performance

BLACK BOX

space was set as a Victorian-era drawing room, with heavy furnishings in mahogany and walnut, voluminous upholstery, and densely woven Oriental rugs. Christmas holiday decorations adorned the room.

Music wafted softly over the audience. Classical was not Ned's musical forte, but he thought the theme echoed one of Grieg's *Peer Gynt* suites. The houselights bathed the set in a dusky glow.

The front cover of the program given to him by the jittery usher featured a glossy color background in the same ornamental pattern as the stage wallpaper. Ned placed the program inside his reviewer's packet. He did not read programs prior to writing his reviews, if at all.

The chic couple in black and the well set up don and his graduate consort filed in, still in conversation, and took seats in the front row that they had saved with long coats. The usher drew the curtain behind them. The music stirred briefly, then faded out.

Ned had seen *A Doll's House* once before. The actress playing Nora – the sheltered banker's wife harboring a dark secret from her bourgeois husband that could provoke a scandal and shatter their marriage – had resorted to melodrama, careening around the stage, convulsed in spasms of angst. This emotive excess diluted one of the most wrenching final scenes in the canon of Western theater: Nora's decision to leave her husband in spite of a concession from the play's villain that will leave their reputations intact. When the husband in the previous production heard the door slam behind Nora, Ned had silently congratulated him on being rid of an incurable over-actress.

But Vox Unum's actress distilled with a breathtaking purity the child-like essence of the part. In her hands, Nora was a spoiled little girl, alternately naughty and nice, playing dress-up to bewitch the

grown-ups around her. She displayed the literal thoughtlessness of children at play with impulsive abandon.

Most crucially, she grasped that Nora's fear of discovery is the terror of a child left alone in the dark, not the bodice-heaving agony of a damsel in distress. The actress was possessed of a mortal dread befitting a child beset by bogeymen. As the forces of darkness bore down upon her, ghostly fingers constricting her windpipe were almost palpable.

The lights of the theater transformed the black box into a true dollhouse, initially spacious and festive, then remorselessly drawing inward to become a chamber of confinement for Nora. The bright beams of the first several scenes slowly lost their luster, shrouded in malignant shadow.

The gloom abated for a while when the husband, unaware of the peril facing them, assured his wife he would take on his shoulders the weight that was crushing her. Nora's frame stretched and lightened, just like a child's on hearing an adult say that everything was going to be all right.

But the great marvel of the performance was Nora's transfiguration in the play's final act. She became a woman. It was as if the spirit of the child had been expelled from her body when she learned that her husband would not make good on his promise. He would not take on their burden, but would instead consign her to a stifling servitude. Her figure grew fuller, her face heavier, as the child-like adoration she had for him was shattered by the recognition of his weakness.

BLACK BOX

The actress playing Nora was a doll personified. Pale, with flaxen hair gathered elaborately and huge, luminous blue eyes, she was an exquisite plaything. Her fragility cried out for protection from the cruel world outside the cloister of her home. As she took her accustomed positions in the family drawing room during the early scenes of the play, it was if she had been placed in each spot by her husband, who liked to pose her just so. When she practiced the tarantella, a Spanish peasant dance that enraptured the guests at a fancy dress ball the couple attends offstage, it was if someone had pulled a string, triggering one of a doll's handful of pre-programmed tricks.

At intermission, Ned did not wander about the lobby, as was his usual practice. He had to admit that he generally enjoyed sipping his coffee and taking in the furtive glances from the theater's house staff as they tried to gauge his reaction. But this evening he stayed in his seat and pulled the program from his press packet, on a quest for information about this mesmerizing actress.

There was little to be had. She was not given to the numbing recitation of previous credits or breathless acknowledgment of fellow cast members and family that marred so many program bios.

Her name was Robin Story. She had co-founded Vox Unum several years before and served as its Artistic Director. This was the first production where she had both directed and performed. This was her first encounter with the work of Henrik Ibsen. She had graduated with a degree in theater from Portland State University. That was it.

As the slam of the door reverberated across the theater and the house went dark, Ned shot up from his seat, his hands pounding

together in driving rhythm. The audience rose with him as one. Light flooded the stage as the cast members strode in from the wings, arraying themselves across the set. There was no hierarchy to the curtain call. The actors came in not according to some size-of-part-based sequence, but all together. Nora and her husband were not even positioned in the center of the stage. The cast took three bows in unison, one to the audience in the center section and one to each wing. They then departed as an ensemble and did not return, despite the cascades of applause that swept across the theater, unleashing a roar pierced by several shrill whistles.

The ovation died away to a preternatural silence as the stunned audience remained standing. Then a furious buzzing erupted as the house lights came on. Each audience member seemed locked in disbelieving dialogue with his neighbor. Other than a few stray patrons, no one made for the theater exit, where the meager usher had drawn the curtain.

Ned stood alone in the middle of his row, patrons engaged at full tilt on either side of him. He looked out over the set, now once again an unremarkable bourgeois drawing room. His face felt flushed. He stooped to collect the press packet from beneath his seat.

His mind was racing and yet strangely blank. Ordinarily his review would have started to compose itself as the curtain call came to a close. But not tonight. Instead he shuttered rapid-fire through images of Nora at each stage of her performance. He was transfixed, to a degree that he found almost embarrassing.

He was tempted to join, at random, in one of the conversations seething around him. But he decided he did not want to temper his

BLACK BOX

exaltation by sharing it with strangers. Clutching his packet, he excused his way through to the aisle, then wove around several other audience clusters to the vestibule. A tasteful basket, vaguely Scandinavian in design, had been placed atop a side table covered with a black cloth. A card showing in simple calligraphy the symbol for recycling was fixed to the basket handle.

Blinking as he entered the whitewashed lobby, he made a beeline for a drinking fountain he spotted below the most jarring of the expressionist paintings. His thirst was great. He never loitered in a lobby after a performance he was reviewing, but this evening he could not bring himself to leave. He saw the door to the men's bathroom in a small alcove off the lobby and went in to splash some cold water on his face. The bathroom's harsh fluorescent light gave him an unsettling pallor as he stared at himself in the mirror against the dingy backdrop of the concrete wall behind him. He had not really looked at himself in a mirror since his gala evening in a tux. He felt somehow smaller now.

He went back into the lobby and pretended to inspect the paintings. He knew what he really wanted was to see Nora again. Audience members were gradually relocating to the lobby, still joined in earnest conversation. Then he saw one of the actors, the would-be villain, stroll triumphantly through the double doors, to be greeted by admiring friends. After several minutes of congratulations, he heard the actor tell his entourage that the cast would be gathering for drinks at McMenamins Tavern.

Ned made a point of not patronizing bars where casts were known to socialize after a performance he was reviewing. Even if the

review were likely to be positive, his presence there could make for awkward encounters that were best avoided. It was not an especial concern of his, but he knew that the actors would spend the rest of the evening gazing anxiously in the direction of his table, wondering what might be running through his mind instead of enjoying the party.

Ned recalled seeing an ad for McMenamins in the *Doll's House* program. He pulled the program from his packet and thumbed to the page with the ad. The tavern was only one street over from the one where he had parked.

Ned headed toward the doors of the glass storefront. Opposite the box office counter he noticed a half moon-shaped table, also draped in black, on which racks holding season brochures for Vox Unum and SoHo Productions were neatly perched. He reached to grab both brochures. As he did, he heard a voice behind him.

“Please take as many as you like, Dirk.”

It was the box office manager, beaming at him from behind the counter.

Ned turned around as he placed the brochures inside his packet.

“Thank you.”

“Thanks for coming. I hope you enjoyed the show.”

Ned paused. He never tipped his hand before a review was published.

“I did. Very much. Good night.”

The box office manager gave a slight shudder. A rejoicing smile creased his face.

“It's been a great night.”

BLACK BOX

Ned nodded, then pushed his way through the double doors into a chill drizzle outside. He'd left his umbrella in the car. He thought of going back to the Navigator and heading home. He went down the short walkway to the sidewalk, then pulled up the collar of his coat and turned in the direction of McMenamins.

CHAPTER SIX

Ned cast furtive glances toward the tavern door as the Vox Unum party streamed in. He cursed silently as he saw that Nora was not among them.

McMenamins was dark and dense. Black upholstered booths lined the windows overlooking the street on either side of the entry door. An imposing bar stretched along one wall of the tavern, then jogged toward the center of the room. Opposite the curve of the bar was a pool table, its rich green felt lit by a colored glass fixture overhead. Flanking the pool table was an array of broad tables and long benches in matching battered oak. Beyond these against the far wall were a few cramped wooden booths, less inviting than those by the entry.

Ned had guessed that the Vox Unum cast would claim one of the free-standing tables. He had snagged a booth in the far corner that would give him a discreet view of the theater party. The walls around his booth were hung with Summer of Love-era concert posters from the '60s, baroque psychedelic memorials to unfamiliar bands: Moby Grape, Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band, Quicksilver Messenger Service. The collection was incongruous in what otherwise seemed a standard issue neighborhood tavern.

BLACK BOX

He had correctly anticipated where the cast would gather. The party pulled together two of the wooden tables. This seemed a familiar ritual, carried out with much good-natured banter.

Ned took several slugs from a weak Gibson, his standby when a bar offered no Pimms, and opened his press packet. While he had no burning desire to revisit the program, he was not accustomed to drinking alone in bars and needed something to occupy his eyes while he waited for Nora to arrive.

He re-read Robin Story's bio. There was as little subtext as there was text. Its understatement only whetted his appetite to engage her, somehow.

He scanned the bios of the other cast members, who had all been solid though clearly playing in Nora's shadow. He was struck by the near exclusive listing of Vox Unum acting credits. He was accustomed to actors showing how in demand they were around town.

Ned found himself suddenly hungry. He'd grabbed a quick pasta dinner with Selvaggio after work, but that might have been yesterday. He looked over the menu, which offered unexceptional fare leavened by traces of clever naming. He decided to bypass the Communication Breakdown Burger and the Stormin' Norman in favor a hummus plate. He tried to signal the attention of his harried waitress.

Instead his gesture caught the eye of a woman who was approaching the Vox Unum gathering. At first Ned did not recognize her. She was certainly not part of the *Doll's House* cast. He assumed she was just one of the many hangers on who take part in an opening night post-show celebration, but as he looked closer he saw that she had played a lead in the show he'd reviewed last week.

Her production had suffered from serious depth problems. This actress had surpassed the rest of the cast, and his review of her had been quite favorable – in contrast to his damning-with-faint-praise treatment of the others in the company. What stood out from her performance was a certain fearlessness.

She had noticed him. Although she circled around the theater crowd, dispensing the ritual hugs and kisses, he saw over the top of the *Doll's House* program that she stole several glances in his direction. After a few minutes among the celebrants, she broke away and came toward his booth.

“Aren’t you Dirk Marlowe?”

“I confess it. And you’re Elena Devlin?”

“You remembered.”

“I’d be lying if I said I never forget an actress’s face, but having seen yours just last week it still sticks in my mind. Particularly as the drinks here are not strong enough to make me forget much.”

She laughed a deep smoker’s laugh.

“Thanks for the review. It was very nice.”

“No thanks required. I called it as I saw it.”

“I thought you were fair, much fairer than that prick Milson would have been. It’s a good show, but it should have been a lot better. We lost some actors just before rehearsals started. They got offered bigger parts in other shows and split.”

“An old story.”

“I know, but it hadn’t happened to me for a few years.”

“If I may ask, how did you know who I was? I’ve only been doing reviews here for a few weeks now.”

BLACK BOX

She gave a throaty chuckle.

“I keep a sharp look-out. The house manager pointed you out to the stage manager, who came backstage and told me who you were.”

“I thought you actors didn’t want to know if a critic was in the house.”

Her face flashed contempt.

“There’s a lot of superstition in this business, but not with me. I’m the only one the stage manager told, because she knew I wanted to know. I always want to know. I’m not into acting with my head in the sand. I want to know who’s doing my review, and where they’re sitting. And what they fucking had for dinner – pardon my French.”

“It was pasta, in my case. You make it sound like opposition research.”

“If you’d been acting in front of that asshole Milson all these years, that’s how you’d see it too.” Her tone softened. “Is it OK if I join you? Or are you expecting someone?”

Ned hesitated slightly.

“No. I’d be delighted.”

She was dark and heavily made up, with a bold red lipstick that broadcast the sensuousness of her lips. Her face had a squarish shape that Ned associated with Eastern Europeans. Her eyes, set wide apart, were a speckled gray that gave her a feline quality at odds with her thick neck and jaw. Her hair was black and coarse.

“Can I get you a drink? Or are you the only teetotaling actress ever to take the stage?”

Another hearty laugh.

“Not hardly. The party’s just beginning. I’ll take a vodka gimlet. If you can find someone to serve you.”

Ned renewed his efforts to attract the waitress’s attention. She finally acknowledged him with a weary look.

“They seem to be stretched a little thin.”

“They always are. It’s part of the charm of the place.”

“It sounds like you’re a regular.”

“I was. Not any more, though.”

“What brought you back?”

“I wanted to be here for Robin. This is a big night for her. I knew our show would get out before hers, so I decided to come on over. Show the flag, you know.”

“That’s a rare gesture of solidarity in the theater community.”

“She’s an old friend. We worked together in a bunch of shows, then I joined Vox Unum right after she started it.”

“But you’re not with them any longer?”

“Nope. I’m a free agent. Open to the highest bidder. Not that that’s anything much around here,” she sneered.

Ned noticed a stirring among the theater party. His pulse quickened as he saw Nora approaching the tables, alone. Conversation in the group stopped among those who had spotted her, and they began to clap. Within seconds the whole of the rear section of the tavern exploded in applause as the gathering rose to its feet. Ned and Elena Devlin joined them.

Nora smiled. It was a smile more of quiet satisfaction than of triumph. She took a seat on the far end of one of the benches, well away from the center of the party where the two tables had been

BLACK BOX

joined. As she sat she brushed her fine blonde hair away from her face. It lay simple and straight atop her shoulders, a far cry from her character's elaborate hairdo on stage.

The applause continued for half a minute, then the group took their seats again. The buzz of celebration quickly resumed around the tables.

"That's quite a tribute," said Ned as he sat down.

"She's amazing. You saw the show. How was she?"

"I don't like to give my reviews away."

"Then don't go drinking in bars with the cast."

"Touché," said Ned. "She was magnificent. One of the finest performances I've ever seen. On any stage, anywhere."

The actress bowed her head for a moment, then looked up at Ned.

"I should be jealous, but I'm not. Well, not most of the time, anyway. She works so damned hard, and she gives up so much."

"Gives up what?"

"Her life, basically. Vox Unum is everything to her. It's all she really cares about. As long as I've known her she dreamed of having a company totally dedicated to ensemble. Actors who know each other so well that, as she says, their hearts beat together, they breathe together, they blink together. All for one, and one for all. You know how hard that is to pull off in this business?"

"Almost impossible."

"Something always gets in the way. It's like a rock band when the lead singer or the guy who writes all the songs ditches the group and goes solo. Too much ego. But not with Robin. She has more talent

than anyone else in that company by far, but she never puts herself above the group. Ever. To her it's all about the craft."

"She must have had other offers."

"Christ yes. Just after she started the company they were shooting a Hollywood movie up here. The director came to one of her shows and flipped out. Came backstage after the show and offered to pull every string he had to get her into the movies. She listened to him and then very politely told him to get lost. I was there, heard the whole thing. I would have jumped the guy and offered to fuck his brains out on the spot. But not Robin.

She gets calls all the time for commercials. The way she looks, that blonde innocence thing, they drool all over her. Her mother started her in modeling when she was like five, and she worked all the time. When her dad got laid off, that modeling money saved their bacon. But she hated it, and now she turns them all down. She says it compromises her art."

"Where's she from?"

"Some piss-ant mill town down the Valley near Salem. Her dad was a saw mechanic or something. The whole place went down the tubes with the spotted owl thing. They ended up shutting the mill down."

"How did she get into theater?"

"How do we all get into it? They had a theater in high school. She didn't want to be a cheerleader, so she went out for drama. Same with me. She loved it, and I guess she had a great teacher who told her to stick with it. He helped get her into Portland State. She worked her way through school doing modeling and commercials."

BLACK BOX

“Is that where you met?”

“Nah. I never made it to a four-year school. I did two years at community college, and that was more than enough school for me. We met on a show. They put it on in some dump over in Northeast. We both saw a notice in the paper and got cast out of a cattle call. The company folded right after we closed. Never got paid. The only good thing that came out of it was Robin. We did some more shows together, and she directed me once.”

The waitress, pudgy and tongue-pierced, finally made it to the booth. She looked spent, and the bandana masking her hair was coming loose.

“Sorry. Busy night. What can I get you?”

“The lady will have a vodka gimlet. I’ll have another Gibson, but easy on the ice, please. And I’ll take one of your hummus plates. Do you need anything to eat?”

The actress waved him off. The waitress trundled away.

“How was she as a director?”

“Jesus was she prepared. The show was *The Monogamist* – you know it?”

“Sure. Christopher Kyle. Baby Boomer couple falls out, sleeps with Generation Xers, with unfortunate results.”

“Right. The wife’s a professor who’s just written a book about Emily Dickinson. Robin actually read most of Dickinson’s poems just to get a better feel for the part.”

“Damn. How was the show?”

“Great, all things considered. The Emily Dickinson actress dropped out two weeks before rehearsals started. Surprise – more

money on another show. It didn't faze Robin. She was ready to do the part herself, if she had to. We told her that was crazy."

"No crazier than what she did tonight."

"She's been working up to the acting/directing thing for a long time. It's not showing off. She wanted to see just how deep she could go into a script. Total immersion, you know."

"They do it in film. But there the director gets to see himself as an actor every day in the rushes. It's hard to get that distance when you're on stage. Particularly when you're playing Nora, who's always on. But however she managed it, it worked. Flawlessly."

They both looked in the direction of Nora. The celebration swirled around her. She was listening intently to the actor seated to her left, her eyes locked into his.

"How did the company get that space? It's one of the better black boxes I've seen."

"SoHo built the theater. They only do three shows a year, so they were looking for another company to share the space. Robin knew them from *The Monogamist*. They partner with people on shows. You put in a proposal, and if they pick you they give you the space, put up the money, and do the publicity and the box office. You basically do the rest. They chose Robin as their partner on *The Monogamist*. We did it in a storefront in the Pearl District before they built the theater. When she heard they were looking for someone to share the new space, she went for it.

We couldn't believe it. Vox Unum had only been around for six months. We'd only done one show. Signing a lease seemed crazy.

BLACK BOX

We had these endless company meetings because we wouldn't do anything unless we all agreed.

Finally Robin came back and said she'd lined up enough money to cover our rent. She said she was so sure it would work out that she would sign the lease personally, which SoHo wanted because our company had no track record. We all trusted her totally, so when she said that we decided to do it."

"That was one hell of a gamble," said Ned. "But it looks like it's paid off."

"Big time. In a few years we went from nothing to a couple hundred subscribers. The reviewers always see our shows opening weekend, not two or three weeks into the run like some of the smaller companies. Even Milson came to our openings, that sonofabitch. So did you."

"Milson told me the company was capable of great intensity and bore watching. That was enough for me to make the opening."

"That's what he said, uh? He wasn't always so nice."

"I don't mean to pry, but I notice that when you talk about Vox Unum you still use 'we' and 'us.' What made you leave?"

The actress cast another look toward Nora. The square lines of her jaw hardened, but her eyes seemed mournful.

"I'm getting out of Portland. As soon as I can raise the money I'm going to LA. By next summer, I hope.

I'm so sick of the scene here. You can't make a living as an actress, not even if you're lucky and get some commercials. I wait tables up at Kornblatt's. They're great and a lot of actors work there, but it just wears you down. I'm always tired when I show up for

rehearsal at night. My feet hurt, and I just want to go home and take a bath.

I know that's what a struggling actress is supposed to do. I know you have to pay your dues. But it's never going to get better. You're never going to get your big break. The most you can hope for is that some of those stuck-up pricks over at the big companies finally pay attention to you and cast you enough times so that you can get your union card. But once you get that, you've pretty much priced yourself out of the market, so you can't work unless you've fucked somebody up in Seattle and can get in some shows up there.

So you probably give up your union card, but then you're back to working with the smaller companies. Sometimes the rest of the cast is OK, but a lot of the time there's people who make you cringe when they open their mouth. Nobody knows how to run the company, so there are always fights and people leaving. Everyone wants to act and direct. Nobody wants to do PR, so you're lucky if you draw fifty people, even on a Saturday night. And the theater's usually a mess, and you freeze your ass off in the winter and sweat like a pig in the summer.

You barely have enough money to pay your rent, and you're tired all the time. So you keep going until you can't take it any more and you give up and get married and have kids and forget about theater, or you end up some sad old actress with no life and nothing in the bank and no insurance if you get sick. And a scrapbook full of reviews from assholes like Milson telling you what a miserable piece of acting shit you really were.

BLACK BOX

So I'm going to LA. I'm going to some place where there's a pot of fucking gold at the end of the rainbow. I don't care if my odds of making it are a hundred-to-one or a thousand-to-one or ten million-to-one, I'm going where at least I've got a shot of leaving this all behind. I don't care if the town is full of backstabbers and phonies and perverts. We get all that here, without the money."

She spoke furiously but in a near whisper so as not to be overheard. Her hands, which had been gesturing wildly, dropped to the table.

"I'm sorry. You asked why I left the company. I left because I needed to act for me. I wanted to get noticed for me, because that's the only way I was going to get out of here. There are agents and casting directors and even some actors from LA who live up here and have connections. They come to the theater sometimes and you hear stories about people getting noticed.

Vox Unum was all about ensemble. It was great – amazing really. But it was all about the company, get rid of your ego, no stars. It was hours every week of movement exercises, breathing exercises, trusting exercises – all so we would be like one cosmic actor, so no one would stand out. God, it was intense. It was a fucking cult.

But it worked. We did great stuff. But let's face it. Vox Unum was all about Robin. She was Snow White, and we were just a bunch of fucking dwarves. Not because she put herself above us. She never did. But she's such an incredible actress. Unreal. So she could do all this ensemble stuff, but she was still going to be the star. It's like when you put a great dancer in the chorus line. She's doing the same

moves as everyone else, but she doesn't really belong there, you know?

So I had to get out. It was an amazing little company, a miracle really, but it was taking me nowhere. It was incredible art, but art's not a team sport."

The disheveled waitress spun into view. She unloaded the drinks and the hummus plate, then bolted. Ned raised his Gibson.

"To your future success, in Tinseltown or wherever your rainbow may lead you. Your departure will be the Portland stage's loss."

"I'll drink to that."

She tipped back the gimlet glass and drank with gusto. Ned raised his eyebrows, pursing his lips in mock disapproval.

"Sorry about that. I'm Serbian. We don't sip our drinks."

"Serbian? Devlin?"

"Stage name. My real name is Elena Divac. I got tired of trying to spell it for everyone. And I look so much like an East European peasant anyway that I don't need my name to finish off the typecast. I've got to get to LA before my hips start to look like my mother's."

With a raspy laugh she reached for a piece of pita and dipped it in the hummus. Ned steered the conversation back to the only topic on his mind.

"So how did Robin take your leaving the company?"

"I was terrified to tell her, even though we'd been friends for so long. But really because we'd been friends for so long. I knew what the company meant to her, and I'd be telling her I didn't want to be part of her dream.

BLACK BOX

I finally worked up the nerve after we closed our last show last season. I came up to her just as we'd finished strike. Everybody in the company helps with strike. She saw the look on my face and she knew.

'You're leaving,' she said.

She'd seen right through me. She said she could tell for months that my heart wasn't in it. She could see it in my work, even though I hadn't noticed any difference. I told her that I had to get out of Portland and go to LA, that I had to go for it.

I tell you, I felt like Judas with Jesus fucking Christ. She wasn't angry at all. She told me that she understood and that I had to do what was best for me. She said she would do anything she could to help. She thanked me for everything I'd done for the company. She gave me a big hug and said we'd always be friends."

"And you still are?"

"We still are. It's not the same though. But it's not her, it's me. I don't think she's changed toward me at all. But whenever I see her now, I feel like I have something to make up to her.

I guess that's why I'm here tonight. I don't usually go to other casts' parties, especially not opening night. It's their show, not mine, and they're all psyched about something that's got nothing to do with me. But I knew how big a deal this show was to Robin, so I wanted to show her I cared. So, of course, here I am talking to a critic.

I should get over there. Hey, how was Rachel Talbert, you know, the one who played Mrs. Linde? I'm pretty sure that would have been my part."

She rose from the booth, cradling her drink in her hands.

“She was fine. She didn’t stand out, but I suppose that was the point.”

She had already turned away from the booth toward the celebration. His response barely registered.

Ned tried to sound casual.

“Hey, ask Robin over if you’d like. I’d love to meet her.”

“OK,” she said over her shoulder.

Ned watched her as she circled around the joined tables and came up behind Nora, who was still deep in conversation with the actor to her left. Elena placed a hand on Nora’s shoulder. She turned and with apparent delight sprang from her seat and gave Elena a big hug.

Ned took a pull on his Gibson, which was just as watery as the one before, and slathered a few pita pieces with the punchless hummus. He took up the *Doll’s House* program again, but his focus was on Nora. She had engaged with Elena as she had with the actor next to her, wrapping them both in a warp of intimate conversation removed from the tumult of the party.

Elena soon gestured toward Ned. Nora looked in his direction, and he pretended to be consumed by the program. She nodded, and the two of them began a circuit around the tables. Unlike Elena, Nora carried no drink glass. Ned felt his stomach muscles tense as they approached his booth. He caught himself chewing on his lower lip.

“Robin, this is Dirk Marlowe from the *Columbian*. You probably heard he’s the new Milson. Except that he actually enjoys theater. Especially tonight, he told me. I had to beat it out of him, though – he said he doesn’t like to give his reviews away.”

BLACK BOX

Ned stood up in his booth, though the narrow space between the table and bench made the footing awkward. Elena had stolen his thunder. He had intended to pay tribute to Nora, but at a moment and in a manner of his choosing.

Nora's eyes locked in on his. He might have been the only person in the tavern.

"Welcome to Portland, Dirk."

Her voice was warm. It was a voice he had to hear more of.

She wore no make-up, but needed none. Her skin was unlined and unblemished. She had the pallor typical of flaxen blondes. The huge, shining eyes that had given her such a doll-like appearance on stage were not the product of artful lighting or eyeliner. They were of a startling turquoise and so liquid as if to be on the verge of tears.

She was slight, even fragile. She wore a baggy, faded pullover and loose-fitting jeans that seemed to engulf her.

"Thank you," said Ned, trying to recover his composure. "I'm glad to be here."

"I heard you came from Chicago. A great theater city."

"Yes," he managed.

"A place where you can be devoted to your craft."

"I agree."

"I'm afraid I've never been there. Too busy trying to learn everything I can here."

Ned saw an opening. But as he was shaping a compliment, Elena broke in.

"And teaching all of us." She made a gesture embracing the whole of the Vox Unum party.

“I’m sure I learned more from you, Elena, than whatever you were able to pick up from me. We’re an ensemble, Dirk. We both teach and learn from each other. I’m sure there must be many companies like ours in Chicago.”

“Sure. It’s hard though.”

“It’s never easy being an artist. But I would imagine keeping an ensemble together is more difficult in Chicago. More opportunities, more distractions. I’m afraid our horizons are more limited in Portland, but in some ways that’s good. Not for everyone though.” She gave Elena’s hand a squeeze.

“Yeah, not if you’re interested in minor things like making a living.”

Elena’s tone was biting, but she placed a hand on Nora’s shoulder as she spoke.

“I’m afraid Elena’s less of a fan of our city than I am, Dirk. But then she’s a native. I suppose it’s familiarity breeding contempt. I’m from a small town. I’m still getting used to having half a million people so near to me. I don’t mind so much if only fifty of them come to our plays, as long as we’re able to touch at least one.”

From the mouth of someone else the lines might have seemed clichéd, the humility strained. But to Ned she was in compelling earnest.

“What brought you to Portland?”

She was taking an interest in him. Asking about Chicago, about his move here. If only he could get Elena out of the way.

BLACK BOX

He considered giving his stock “for the money” line, but ended up answering weakly, “The job. I was only reviewing part-time in Chicago.”

“Milson was only reviewing part-time in Portland, even though he had a full-time job,” Elena spat.

“The critic who had your job was not a favorite of Elena’s, I’m afraid.”

“Or anyone else in town.”

“You’re harsh, Elena. If he had a sin as a critic, it was that he cared too much. I think at times he cared so much that he asked for more than we could deliver. If that’s a sin, it’s one I can forgive. I hope you’ll care as much about our community’s theater as he did, Dirk.”

It dawned on Ned that he had not invited Nora to sit down. She’d spent enough time with her company. He wished he could get her out of there.

“I’ll certainly try. Would you care to join me?”

Elena was standing closest to the opposite bench. Without comment she began to slide into the booth. Ned silently cursed.

“You’re very kind, Dirk,” said Nora. “I’m afraid I was just about to head home when Elena came over. There is great energy in this play, but when it’s over I’m just spent. We have another performance tomorrow, and I need my sleep. We’re delighted to have you here in Portland. I hope you enjoyed the show.”

He thought this might have been a signal, an invitation for him to escort her out, to continue the conversation elsewhere. He was trapped, though. Elena had already taken a seat in the booth. He

GARY D. COLE

tried to come up with a way out, but in that instant Nora kissed Elena on the cheek and turned away. His eyes followed her as she circled the tables, quietly pressing hands and shoulders. Then, without fanfare, she was gone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wind lashed the flanks of the Navigator as it emerged from the woods on to an exposed overpass. Ned had checked the forecast for the coast, which called for smallcraft warnings and heavy surf. He figured he was still twenty to thirty minutes from the ocean, but it was blowing hard already.

He was wide awake and needed to be. The narrow highway jogged and dipped, and several times trees had loomed in his windshield as he'd taken unexpectedly sharp curves. The trees seemed to claw at him in the glare of his high beams, which he'd had on almost the entire trip since leaving the main coast highway west of Portland.

The note Karin had left at the Athletic Club desk with the beach house keys urged him to stop for coffee if he decided to take off after the Willamette Stage show. He had, at a diner where he'd also ordered some apple pie. Her note had presumably been based on driving a dark and unfamiliar highway late at night and not on the sleep-inducing qualities of her company's performance.

To be fair though, his mind had not really been on the play as he sat in the middle of the fifth row in Willamette Stage's plush venue. In fact, since he'd made his way unsteadily out of McMenamins after his fourth Gibson last night, his mind had not really been on anything except Nora. He knew her real name, of course, but he had seen her

first as Nora and that was the name that captured her essence shimmering in his mind.

He had never freebased cocaine, but wondered whether the purity of her performance was anything like that rush. As a critic he'd had plenty of good buzzes, performances that stayed with him, moved him, reminded him why he kept coming back to review shoestring productions seated in the threadbare seats of rundown venues when he hadn't needed the money. But the warm glow of those encounters was as a sputtering candle to the white heat that had seared him in the theater last night.

He was bewitched by her artistry and amazed by her devotion to craft. She seemed to him a vestal, the white-robed guardian of a decaying temple who stood ready to sacrifice herself on its altar. Her child-like fragility, that white-blond hair, those luminous eyes, all suffused her with an otherworldliness befitting a votary.

He had connected with her last night. Of that he was sure. There had been no chance to take it anywhere, of course, not with her cast all around and Elena making herself at home in his booth. But something had passed between them that was more than just an actress giving a reviewer his due.

He knew how he would go after her. He'd take advantage of being new in town to ask her out for coffee. He'd say it was just so he could get to know the companies making an impact on the local scene. Get the scoop on mission, history, etc., etc. He'd wait until after the review came out, of course, but not long. He couldn't wait long.

BLACK BOX

There had been no one with her last night. She'd made no mention of a boyfriend. Surely if there had been someone in the picture he would have put in an appearance at the cast party. It looked as if the field were open.

That wasn't surprising. Elena had said all Nora cared about was Vox Unum. She was completely immersed in her work, so it only made sense her social life would suffer. He appreciated that as only a fellow artist could. He'd make sure she understood that he understood.

It would be a bit awkward as a new critic going out with the artistic director of a leading local company. He'd made a point of not dating theater people in Chicago, although that was as much because they were all head cases as it was reviewer protocol. They'd have to be discreet, at least at first, and he'd probably have to assign stringers to Vox Unum reviews. So be it.

He'd rolled out around eleven this morning. To his surprise, he had no hangover. He'd planned to complete the *Doll's House* review that afternoon so he could focus on the novel at the beach, but in two hours he'd electronically balled up and tossed a dozen or so lead sentences. None was suitable to the task.

He had decided to give it up and go for a walk when the phone rang. It was Tucker Farr. After some bantering about the foibles of Roger Bolden, Farr turned to an update on the estate. The executor's team had been all over the house and through his father's files and safe deposit box and had come up with little in the way of additional documentation. While they did not yet have a definite number, they

were close to nailing down the amount his father had invested. It ran into the multiple millions of dollars.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you that your father did touch the principal of the trusts for you and your sisters. He didn’t exhaust the funds, but he made a pretty sizable dent. It’s clear, Ned, that he drew on just about everything he could without having to sell off any artwork or other property. I think he knew that would attract attention, and he obviously wanted to stay below the radar of the family advisors. We’ve interviewed them all, and none of them had any idea what was going on.”

“Do you have any better sense where the money went?”

“Not really. We’ve picked up a few clues, but I’d like to have a complete picture before I give you and your sisters a report.”

Farr had wrapped up the call by asking about Ned’s love life. He and Bolden shared a sophomoric idiom for discussing women.

“I’m sure those Portland actresses must be swarming all over you, Ned. Beautiful women in their twenties, all looking for their big break, and their fate is in your hands. I don’t know why I didn’t become a theater critic.”

Ned said nothing about Nora. That was his affair. He suggested that Farr probably preferred a well-appointed office to shabby theaters and a salary that would support a yacht instead of a rowboat. Farr rang off with a laughing “Touché.”

The SUV was entering the outskirts of civilization. Ned figured this must be Tillamook, which Karin had said was the nearest town of any size. He pulled over as he came into the deserted downtown, clicked on the driver’s light, and studied Karin’s directions and a map

BLACK BOX

he'd picked up in Portland. The beach house was in a development called Three Capes, outside of a little coastal village called Netarts. He got his bearings and set off again.

He'd almost phoned Karin earlier in the day to cancel for the weekend. He was in no state of mind to make headway on the novel. Since he'd arrived in Portland he'd been unable to generate any creative momentum. As a writer he was a creature of routine, and his routine for years had been based on the modest demands of part-time freelancing. The need to show up in an office and juggle multiple reviews in a weekend had played havoc with his writing.

That was why a retreat at the coast had seemed appealing. It was a chance to reset his course. Since last night, however, his focus was shot.

But his editor had already granted him leave to spend Monday and Tuesday out of the office and send in his reviews electronically. Bolden, who seemed to know his staff's every move, had stopped by his cubicle and joshed him about a romantic getaway with some fresh-faced ingénue. Having run that gauntlet, he thought, he might as well carry on and make the best of it.

The wind buffeted the Navigator as he crept along the Netarts Highway, his eyes peeled for the Three Capes entry monument. He spotted it as he rounded a dark curve, an understated beacon of stone and beam that hinted at wealth beyond. Three Capes was a gated community; Karin's directions had included the security code. The sentry box was unmanned at this hour. He punched in the code, saw the gate swing open, and rolled slowly in.

Ned wanted to clear his head. He did not drive much, and the coast roads after midnight had tested him. Not to mention that planning his campaign on Nora was trying, though exhilarating. A short distance into the development he saw an overlook. He pulled the Navigator over and got out.

The surf was pounding below. The moon was nearly full. Its rays speckled the foam of the waves crashing on the sand. Ned saw a set of wooden stairs descending to the water. Visibility was good. Despite the heavy surf there was a wide swath of dry beach. He zipped up his windbreaker and headed down.

From the base of the stairs he followed a sandy path through thick coastal grass. A gentle dune then took him down to the beach. Most of the development extended to his left, so he went that way.

As a boy he'd loved to run at night on the Ingram's private beach along Lake Michigan. That beach was at most several hundred yards, but beside the immense blackness of the lake it had seemed endless. He felt a sudden urge to sprint. The wind sliced his face as he ran. Images of Nora tumbled through his mind: slamming the door in her final *Doll's House* exit, basking in adulation at the cast party, then fixed on him in that way she had across the table of a Portland coffeehouse near his place. He'd already picked out where they would go next.

He was winded quickly. His only exercise routine had been basketball and he hadn't yet made the time to look for a game in Portland.

He pulled up and caught his breath. The front rank of beach houses, perched along the dunes above him to the left, sat dark, the

BLACK BOX

moon glinting in their picture windows. Then Ned noticed a dim light four or five houses down the beach. He drew closer and saw that it was coming through the window of a house with a striking second-floor balcony.

Karin had said that he would always be able to tell their house from the beach by the distinctive balcony on the upper floor. She'd said it would have been perfect for the Romeo and Juliet "Wherefore art thou?" scene had the two lovers been Oregon beach bums. The design, according to her, had been Jerry's idea.

This had to be the house. Ned assumed the Bergrens left a light on for security, although Karin hadn't said anything about it. He saw a narrow path heading up the dune to the house. He felt ready to leave the beach. The wind was biting, and the run had eased the stress of the drive down. He had the beach house key with him on the SUV key chain and figured he could walk on the street back to the entry area and retrieve the Navigator after he'd had a look at the house. He veered up the dune.

The path crested next to an imposing deck. Ned turned back toward the ocean. For a few minutes he took in the magnificent moonlit view. He had to get Nora down here. Karin wouldn't have to know. He'd still get some work done on the novel, so it wouldn't be a complete lie. Theaters were always dark on Monday. They could come down on a Sunday night and come back early Tuesday. He'd feel her out on the idea at the coffeehouse.

He made for a concrete walkway running alongside the house that looked like it led to the front. Just as he gained the walkway, he caught a flicker of light dancing off the pane of the sweeping picture

window that opened on to the deck. That was no security light. He had to check out its source.

Ned found a small set of steps leading on to the deck. Sand ground under his shoes as he edged toward the picture window. Wind flapped the canvas of an umbrella that was drawn shut in the center of a patio table. As he came closer he could tell that the light was from a fire inside the house. Then he caught the murmur of voices.

He scurried over to the siding that extended along the back of the house. It smelled faintly of cedar. He crept toward the picture window. He noticed the ruffled shape of curtains bunched at either end of the window inside the house. It looked like his best bet was to slip in behind the cover of the curtains, then peer around them into the room.

The surf crashed down on the beach below. Ned pulled the collar of his windbreaker up around his neck. He drew even with the bunched curtains, then craned forward, his nose just off the chilled window pane.

A fire burned low inside a towering stone fireplace that dominated the back wall of the room. The stone disappeared up into the room's cathedral ceiling. In front of the fireplace stood a low-slung wooden table; the fire glowed in the table's glossy finish. At an angle to the left of the table were matching overstuffed chairs, each draped in blankets. At the same angle on the other side of the table was a long, deep sofa. An Arts & Crafts style lamp was lit beneath amber glass atop a side table at the far end of the room.

BLACK BOX

A man and a woman were stretched out together on the sofa. The man's stocking feet were crossed on the table. His left hand held a wine glass, his right cradled the head of the woman in his lap. The limp body of the woman lay against the man, her feet just reaching the left arm of the sofa. Her eyes were closed.

It was Nora. Her flaxen hair fanned out in the man's lap. Her smooth face was reposed. Music that recalled the Grieg pre-show theme from *Doll's House* played in the background.

Ned gave a violent start. He pitched forward and as he did his chin knocked against the glass of the picture window. The man's head snapped toward the sound. Ned did not recognize him, but the face was remarkable even in the dim light for its jutting chin and piercing eyes, which bore in on Ned as he straightened up and regained his balance.

Ned backpedaled, then spun and dashed across the deck, skidding on the sand as he pulled up to take the steps. He careened down the dune, the coastal grass scraping his ankles. He looked back over his shoulder as he hit the beach and saw the man silhouetted above him on the deck. Ned took off down the sand, the wind stinging his eyes as he tried to make out the stairs up to the lookout. Twice he broke toward the dunes to his right thinking he had seen the way out, only to find it was just the steps to another beach house. Finally he found the stairway and bounded up the steps two at a time, at one point crashing into the railing as he slipped on a sandy landing.

Panting, he reached the overlook and fumbled to unzip the pocket of his windbreaker where he'd stowed his keys. He punched

GARY D. COLE

the unlock button as he sprinted toward the Navigator. The SUV flashed its lights in recognition. He ripped open the door, slammed the key into the ignition, wheeled around, and floored it past the abandoned sentry post and the sleek entry monument on to the highway.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ned turned back the way he'd come, his eyes darting to the rear view mirror for signs of pursuit. There were none. His grip loosened on the steering wheel, and he tried to catch his breath. He noticed that his cell phone, which he'd left in the trough between the front seats, was beeping. He waited until he'd made what seemed a safe distance down the highway, then pulled on to the narrow shoulder and switched off his lights.

The toneless female on the voicemail announced he had one message that had arrived at 11:32 that night. It was Karin.

"Good evening, Mr. Marlowe. You probably won't get this until you reach the beach, because reception is awful on the way down. I just want to make sure you're settled in safely at the house. Call me on my cell when you get in. I'll be up. You know I won't be able to sleep until I hear something about our review. I understand you don't like to give anything away, but I hoped you might drop a few hints to an admiring reader. Roger Bolden will never know."

Her voice was warm and playful as he sat, dazed, in the darkness of the roadside. He re-played the message, grateful for its humanity.

He was stunned at Nora's betrayal. The field had been open, his for the taking. He'd had it all laid out. It would be a perfect communion of fellow artists. Nora shared his devotion to craft and

his willingness to forego material comforts in the service of a higher calling.

But now she was lounging in a high-end beach house with some middle-aged asshole. It did not fit. It was the place one might expect to find a mere actress, a starlet on the make, but not her.

A car hurtled past him on the coast highway. The driver cast an uncaring glance in Ned's direction as he passed, then turned away.

He had to call Karin. It was nearing one a.m., and she'd said she would be waiting up for his call. What was he supposed to say? That her husband was shacked up with a younger blonde? He knew the man had to have been Jerry Bergren, although he had never laid eyes on the guy. The man's proprietary sense of the room had been obvious.

He saw little use in lying. He could say he had decided against going to the coast that night, but then he would have to come up with a reason to beg off for the whole weekend. He couldn't very well return to the beach house tomorrow knowing what he knew. He could say he'd been unable to find the development or the house, but then he would look like a moron and in any case she would surely insist on guiding him over the phone until he'd arrived. He could pretend he'd made it there, but then she might call him on the beach house phone tomorrow and get someone else on the line, or later ask him questions about the house that he couldn't answer.

There seemed to be little mileage in not telling what he'd seen, and why would he want to anyway? He would be lying to protect Karin from the nasty truth about her marriage, and he wasn't inclined to engage in that sort of chivalry. From everything he'd heard so far –

BLACK BOX

from Selvaggio, from the bartender at the Lowbrow – Bergren was a rogue and a hypocrite. Philanderer could now be added to the list. She was no fool, but evidently she had a blind spot when it came to her husband. It was time she saw clearly.

And he had to get Nora away from Bergren. She had no business being with a sleazeball at least twenty years older than she. She didn't need whatever Bergren had to offer. He would shine a little light on Bergren's cheating and spring her loose.

Ned hit the call back button on his cell phone. After two rings she answered. There was no weariness in her voice.

"You're late, Mr. Marlowe. Too busy singing the praises of our production to call?"

Ned was not in a bantering mood, but he decided to play along. He would not lie, but he would try to break the news gently.

"I had to keep pulling off the road to jot down more superlatives. It must have added an extra hour to the trip. The back of my program now looks like the thesaurus entry for 'fabulous.'"

"Do *Columbian* computers allow theater reviews with more than three positive adjectives?"

"I'll have to check with Bolden. It may never have happened before. Thankfully I brought my own laptop, so there's no danger of it exploding when I say something nice."

"It wasn't very good, was it?"

He paused, wondering whether to keep up the charade.

"No. No, it wasn't. It was thin soup instead of a main course."

"It sounds like your review's already been written."

“Pretty much. Though I’m always open to suggestions from admiring readers.”

“I wouldn’t dream of interfering.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t.”

“Enough of our miserable opening. Did you have any problems finding the house?”

“No, your directions were perfect. Though that highway to the coast is a bear at night. A couple of times I thought the trees were going to reach through the windshield and pull me out. You were right to get me caffeinated. I needed my pupils fully dilated.”

“So do you have a fire going?”

Karin’s instructions had included tips on getting a fire started.

“Yeah, there’s a fire going.”

“You should have plenty of wood.”

“I’m sure there is.”

“Have you decided where you’re going to write?”

“I didn’t really get a chance to look around. It’s a beautiful house, though. My compliments to the designer.”

“I’ll pass that on to my husband. It was mostly his doing. So where are you now – curled up in front of the fireplace, plotting your next chapter?”

Ned paused. He did not relish the moment of truth.

“Karin, I’m not in the house.”

“Are you out on the deck? The forecast said high winds, so I wouldn’t stay out there too long.”

“No, I’m not on the deck.”

BLACK BOX

“What is this – twenty questions? Are you in some place bigger than a breadbasket?”

“I’m in my car.”

“In your car? Are you unloading your bags?”

“No. I’m a few miles down the highway from Three Capes. I never made it into the house.”

“I don’t understand. I thought you said my directions were fine. Was there a problem with the key?”

“I never got to try the key. There were already people in the house.”

“People in the house? Are you sure?”

“After I drove in, I decided to take a walk on the beach before I went to the house. I saw the house from below. I could tell it was yours because of the balcony. I thought I’d go up, let myself in, then head back and get the car. I went up the dune to the deck and heard voices. I looked in from the back window and saw two people. They had a fire going in the fireplace. I didn’t know what to do, so I took off.”

Karin seemed to suck in her breath.

“What did they look like?”

“It was a man and a woman. I didn’t get a good look, but I’d say the man was in his mid-fifties. He had a full head of hair and a strong chin. The woman was younger.”

The muscles of his jaw clenched as he mentioned Nora. He had no intention of giving a fuller description of her. That wasn’t necessary for the business at hand.

There was a long silence at the other end of the line.

"I'm so sorry you drove all this way for nothing. We need to find you a place to stay. At this hour it's probably better for you to go back into Tillamook. You should have no problem getting a motel room there this time of year. Of course I'll reimburse you. Call me when you get settled into a room so I know you're all right."

"I could just drive back to Portland."

"No, no. It's very late, and it's a hard drive. You need sleep. You can drive back tomorrow. I don't suppose you'll want to do much writing now."

"I haven't made much progress anywhere else. Maybe a Tillamook motel is just the place."

Ned regretted the levity as soon as he spoke.

"I'll wait for your call," said Karin, in clipped tones.

Ned felt he should offer some sort of condolence.

"I'm sorry this didn't work out."

"So am I. More than you know. Drive safely."

The line clicked off.

Ned dropped the cell phone on to the passenger seat and started the Navigator. He looked into his rear view mirror before pulling back on to the road. There was no sign of anything behind him on the dark highway.

It hadn't been a pleasant task, but it needed to be done. He'd let the axe fall as lightly as he could. She had nothing to reproach him for.

Bergren had best enjoy his night of nookie at the beach house. It would likely be his last. Karin didn't strike him as the sort of woman

BLACK BOX

who would just look the other way. Old Jerry would have some ‘splaining to do when he got back to Portland.

He retraced his route into Tillamook. The wind had subsided, but a few gusts still caught the SUV and forced Ned to tighten his grip on the wheel. He felt a need for air and decided to crack both front windows.

His mind arced back to one of the scenes from *Doll’s House*, where Nora puts all her charms on display to win her husband’s favor. She minces and prances, flitters and flutters. She is a child’s caricature of feminine wiles, and yet it is because she seems a child in need of protection that she wins the man over.

That was no child lying on the beach house sofa with Bergren. There was no mistaking that look on her face as she lay there, her head in his lap. That was a mature woman who was fucking a married man in his own house and seemed damned pleased with herself.

What the hell was Nora doing? He couldn’t imagine she was shacked up with Bergren out of anything resembling love. The man was beneath her. Did her sacrifices for art’s sake leave her that starved for companionship?

The call with Karin had stanchd the seep of hurt, if only briefly. Now the bitter current quickened as he sped down the road. As it did he found the cells of a plot beginning to coalesce. Not just an explanation, a plausible string of facts, but a plot, the meshing of characters in an artful fabric.

It was Nora, of course, and he and Bergren. The two men were locked in an unwitting battle for her soul. Bergren had money, status,

things. He had the purity of his vision of her and the critic's power to anoint or consume.

Ned reached the outskirts of Tillamook. His head swiveled as he surveyed each side of the empty streets in search of the neon glare of a motel sign. Finally he spied glowing red block letters announcing a vacancy. He swung into the motel's parking lot, his headlights illuminating the unlit "NO" in the lower left corner of the sign.

The motel was laid out in a two-story courtyard that framed three sides of a cracked asphalt parking lot. The office was an architectural afterthought grafted on to one end. A rickety carport offered the registering traveler scant shelter from the elements.

A hand-lettered cardboard sign urged late arrivals to ring for service after midnight. The night clerk, a thick-set man sporting an "Oregon Is For Lovers" T-shirt, emerged from a back room after Ned pressed the cheap white plastic doorbell. He checked Ned in, then from an undusted slot plucked a keychain of oblong green plastic marked "7" in red marker scrawled on masking tape.

The night wind was no longer oppressive but welcome after the fetid air of the office. There were a handful of other cars in the hotel lot. Ned parked the SUV in a faintly striped space. He pulled his laptop case and overnight bag out of the back seat.

The door to Number Seven required several pushes before yielding. He flicked the switch, which turned on both a nightstand lamp and a dim overhead light sheathed in a square fixture of frosted glass. The bed, a queen covered by a faded floral spread, drooped against the white stucco wall to his right, opposite a particleboard bureau with tarnished brass fittings. A gauzy beach scene print in a

BLACK BOX

thin brown frame hung, slightly askew, over the bed. The carpet appeared cut from the same roll of rusty shag that covered the office floor.

Ned threw his overnight bag on top of the bureau and deposited his laptop on the bed. The bathroom, tucked behind a half wall a few feet beyond the bed, was tan throughout and very cramped. He splashed some water on his face leaning over a hairline-cracked sink. He kicked off his shoes, feeling the scrape of sand against his socks, and dropped on to the bed, which sagged under his weight. He drew out the cell phone that he'd placed in his jacket pocket, scrolled to Karin's number, and pressed the call button. He tossed his jacket into one of two folding, fabric-backed chairs to the right of the door that flanked a round table matching the bureau.

He was put into voicemail after the third ring. He left a message saying he'd found a hotel. He gave the name and room number and promised to call again after he got back to Portland on Sunday. He started to offer something more, but decided he was unlikely to improve on his earlier lame regrets. He signed off with just "Good night, Karin."

He rolled over toward a nightstand that completed the particleboard ensemble, unplugged the clock radio, and plugged in his laptop. He had meant to get the Willamette Stage review out of the way, but he could come back to that any time. He had caught hold of something, and he meant to ride it.

There was no headboard, so he tucked a pillow behind his back, sat up against the wall, and drew up his knees, cradling the laptop.

He clicked to open a new Word document and started flinging out notes.

“A masterful actress, at center of it all. Art conferring beauty, beauty endowing art. Slave to theater. Craved by two men. Corrupt philistine, jaded critic. Hackneyed stage door romance – flowers, wooing? Love triangle, but no love.”

His riffing gathered force. His jottings, at random points within the frame of the laptop monitor, grew almost manic. There was a surge of release, then a deep weariness.