

**EDGAR ALLAN POE AWARD FINALIST**

**KENNETH  
WISHNIA**

**23  
SHADES  
OF  
BLACK**

**A  
FILOMENA BUSCARSELA  
MYSTERY**

**INTRODUCTION BY  
BARBARA D'AMATO**

"From page-turning thriller to mystery story to social investigation, *23 Shades of Black* works on all levels. It's clear that Wishnia is charting a unique path in crime fiction. Sign me up for the full ride!"

—MICHAEL CONNELLY

**Praise for *23 Shades of Black***  
**Edgar and Anthony Award nominee**

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“Packed with enough mayhem and atmosphere for two novels.” —*Booklist*

“Everything a first mystery should be—hard-boiled, gritty, passionate, and raw. The sheer force of the protagonist’s voice holds you.”  
—*Biblio*

“Sardonic, street-smart humor. Strike back against the boredom of polite mysteries; buy this book.” —*Sierra Club Book Reviews*

“Action is swift in this politically charged thriller.” —*Midwest Book Reviews*

“Literate ... humorous ... finely nuanced writing that will satisfy both genre fans and a wider audience of appreciators of the contemporary novel.” —*High Times*

“Ken Wishnia’s work gets more complex and deeper with each book. He started strong and keeps taking chances that pay off. This is a writer I admire.” —S.J. Rozan, author of *Ghost Hero*

“Tough, fast moving, gritty and great fun to read, the Filomena novels rank right up at the top with the best cop novels being written. Pick up one of these books. Read three pages. You won’t be able to stop either.” —Stuart Kaminsky, MWA Grandmaster, author of *People Walk in Darkness*

”It fuckin’ rocks. Cool as a margarita in Vegas. Superb writing.” —Ken Bruen, author of *Headstone*

“Ken Wishnia’s Filomena Buscarsela is one hell of a woman fighting the good fight in politicized bad-to-the-bone stories where the point is not merely to interpret the world, but to change it ... one goddamn block at a time.” —Gary Phillips, author of *The Jook*

“If I’d had a partner like Filomena, I wouldn’t have left the force.” —Robert Knightly, author of *Bodies in Winter* and twenty-year veteran of the NYPD

“The writing is top notch. I don’t think I have read any male author who writes a better female character.” —Sandra Tooley, author of the Sam Casey mystery series

“Wishnia writes with a rare combination of graceful prose and hard-hitting action. His protagonist Filomena Buscarsela is perfectly realized—one of the freshest, most original voices in crime fiction today.” —Rick Riordan, author of *Rebel Island*

“I always look forward to a Ken Wishnia book, because his world is bigger than most other mystery writers’, not to mention a lot more interesting. He writes with as much intelligence, as much humor, and as much pure originality as anyone in the business.” —Steve Hamilton, author of *The Lock Artist*

“The Filomena Buscarsela novels have the wonderful ability to be funny, caring, outraged, and informative all at once. Ken Wishnia is my favorite!” —Barbara D’Amato, author of *Other Eyes*

“Ken Wishnia is a rare author of authenticity. His hard-nosed stories guarantee strong characters, a tough hero, and an unflinching view of reality at a time when the abyss between rich and poor is the deepest since the era of Hoover and the Great Depression. Step into Wishnia’s world for an unforgettable reading experience.” —Gayle Lynds, author of *The Coil* and *Masquerade*

“Fil Buscarsela is as smart, tart, and tough as any three pop private eyes rolled into one. Ken Wishnia is an enormously talented writer who deserves a wider audience.” —Doug Allyn

“If you are a fan of female protagonists in crime fiction, you must not miss Ken Wishnia’s Filomena Buscarsela series. Every book in the series is a true delight, combining fast-paced plots with outstanding characterizations and often deeply moving moments. I highly recommend this series.” —Katy Munger

“New York City’s mean streets as they were meant to be walked, by a kick-ass, Hispanic lady cop. Gritty. Sardonic. First rate!” —Parnell Hall, author of the Puzzle Lady series

“The Filomena Buscarsela series is written the way urban police officers live, which is ‘on the edge.’ The author of these novels, Ken Wishnia, has a sharp ear for cop-talk, and a deft way of making it spring from the page. Enjoy—and learn from—a young Latina from Ecuador as she tries to protect and serve the citizens of New York City despite the cynicism and downright betrayal of those around her.” —Jeremiah Healy, author of *Spiral* and *The Only Good Lawyer* “Feisty female sleuth: for mystery fans, that’s a well-known phrase, and the description certainly suits Ken Wishnia’s fearless crime magnet of a heroine, Filomena Buscarsela. But it hardly makes for the whole story.”

since what Wishnia has done is give us a vibrant and quintessentially New York series that manages, at the same time, to be both gritty and charming—two words that rarely, if ever, appear in tandem.” —Michele Slung

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“Filomena Buscarsela is one of my favorite people, as real to me as anyone in my address book and a lot more fun than most. I always enjoy spending time with her energy, humor, and compassion. She is also a crazy idealist who sticks her nose in a lot of messes that are none of her business, but nobody’s perfect.” —Kate Derie, author of *The Deadly Directory*

“Ken Wishnia cuts a different path with his stories and novels, choosing subjects, settings, and characters of a sort the reader is unlikely to encounter in the mainstream of mystery and crime fiction. His fine sensibility and skillful prose will appeal to discriminating readers.” —Janet Hutchings, editor of *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*

“With her sharp tongue, quick mind, and stubborn will, Filomena Buscarsela is the ultimate New Yorker: a cop, a woman, an immigrant who has made the city her own.” —Linda Landrigan, editor of *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*

“Ken Wishnia writes with passion and authority. I love his cultural and sensual details and the tough resourcefulness of private investigator Filomena Buscarsela. Fast-paced, intricately plotted, rich with exotic lore, these books are not to be missed.” —Barbara Seranella, author of the Munch Mancini series.

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# **23 SHADES OF BLACK**

Kenneth Wishnia

**PM**

23 Shades of Black  
Kenneth Wishnia

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# INTRODUCTION

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In 1997, a novel by an unknown writer, Ken Wishnia, was published by a small but cleverly named imprint, The Imaginary Press. *23 Shades of Black* received a rave review in *Booklist* and went on to be nominated for both an Edgar Allan Poe Award and an Anthony Award for crime fiction and was eventually optioned by HBO.

*23 Shades of Black* begins with an evening's tour of duty for New York City cop Filomena Buscarsela. Buscarsela, a transplant from Ecuador, is combative, angry, political, and very, very funny; her take on U.S. culture alone is worth reading the whole book. Buscarsela comes out swinging: "I was riding around with my partner, Bernie, a beef-brained *cabeza de chorlito* so cerebrally challenged he couldn't pick his own nose without the aid of an instruction manual and a detailed map, when we both spotted what looks like a typical Saturday night street fight." And she doesn't let up: *23 Shades of Black* is gritty and real, a patrol cop's life is where the rubber meets the road in police work, and Wishnia gets it just right.

The story of how *23 Shades of Black* became a published novel is as suspenseful as the novel itself. Wishnia wrote the novel on an electric typewriter while living in the mountains of Ecuador, switching between pen and paper whenever the power failed, which was quite frequently. He then spent nine frustrating years trying to sell it to a publisher. He did it the "right way," researching the market, querying editors who published in his subgenre, not broadcasting unsolicited manuscripts over transoms; he got nowhere.

Wishnia feels the biggest challenge to commercial publication was the protagonist's outsider status as a politically Left-leaning Ecuadorian immigrant: in 1991, "one editor basically said, 'Wow, we love the tough female crime fighter and you sure can write, but what is this with the Ecuadorian stuff?' She couldn't bring herself to actually say, 'Make her white and you've got a deal,' but that was the subtext. It was like Tony Hillerman being told, 'I like the book, but lose the Indians.'" Wishnia wrote about this in a piece that ran in the Writers Market book *How I Got Published*:

One agent wanted me to change the ending—not to make it more logical, or hard-hitting, or any other advice that I might actually have listened to, but to give it a run-of-the-mill ending where the hero unambiguously wins the day and Justice Is Served. That didn't fit my vision of the novel, or why I choose to write crime fiction in the first place. Another time, an editor at a major New York publishing house told me that they loved the book, loved the gritty realism, loved the tough female protagonist. There was just one problem: "Cut the politics," she said. Now, I'll admit there were a few spots where my character gets on a soapbox and gives a speech. So, trying to be accommodating, I said, "I know just what you're talking about. I'll cut those passages." And she said, "It isn't a matter of a few passages. It's pretty much every sentence."

You love the book, but you want me to change *every sentence*? What on earth does *that* mean? ... They wanted me to gut the novel of all social content and produce—you guessed it—a run-of-the-mill book that any idiot could have written.

Finally, with the help of the Small Press Center in Manhattan, Wishnia decided to publish the book himself. He typeset the manuscript using desktop publishing, bought a 600-dpi laser printer, and paid a printing company to make about a dozen ARCs, which he sent out to pre-publication review sources.

The Edgar and Anthony Award nominations led to a three-book contract with Dutton/NAL, then a two-book contract with St. Martin's Press, and numerous short stories in anthologies and magazines. There are now five Buscarsela novels in what the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* called "one of the most distinctive series in crime fiction."

Wishnia says, "Sometimes the received wisdom is wrong. Books set in Central and South America don't sell. Books with green covers don't sell. You can't write socially conscious crime fiction—even though 'the Black Mask boys' were doing it more than eighty years ago."

Wishnia has skirted the edge of the genre, working without a net since he first broke onto the scene writing about the seedy underbelly of Ronald Reagan's America in *23 Shades of Black*. (What else do you expect from a "red diaper" baby, the child of Jewish radicals?) Most recently, he produced the magnificent historical novel *The Fifth Servant*, which he says he wrote in part because he wanted to give the historical mystery genre a swift kick in the butt. Despite being set centuries apart, *The Fifth Servant* shares some of the DNA of the Filomena Buscarsela series, with its unconventional outsider detective walking the "mean streets" of Prague in the year 1592. This tour-de-force received starred reviews in *Publishers Weekly* and *Library Journal* and a Macavity Award nomination. Rich with wisdom and powerful in its scenes of horror, it is leavened with Wishnia's mordant humor and will stay with the reader long after the book is on the shelf.

Writing about marginalized people can be risky, because in the world of corporate publishing, it can lead to the marginalization of the author. Wishnia says that even after he was under contract, some editors and publishers did not know what to do with him and attempted to curtail the originality of his storytelling. It is therefore fantastic that PM Press is bringing back the whole series, uncut.

I am privileged to say that I knew Ken Wishnia when *23 Shades* first came out—I could say I knew him "when." He's gone from strength to strength.

**Barbara D'Amico**



# CHAPTER ONE

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“There ain’t no clean way to make a hundred million bucks.”

— Raymond Chandler

**ALL THIS HAPPENED** a few years ago, when Ronald Reagan was busy making tuna fish hash out the national budget and trying to learn which countries belong to South America, and the second wave of Punk still ruled the East Village.

I was riding around with my partner, Bernie, a beef-brained *cabeza de chorlito* so cerebral challenged he couldn’t pick his own nose without the aid of an instruction manual and a detailed map when we both spot what looks like a typical Saturday night street fight. A local loser and three college age kids are scuffling and groin-kicking in front of a glass-enclosed restaurant.

Bernie says, “I’ll handle this,” as he swings the car up onto the curb, hops out, and proceeds to take command of the situation by doing his Elvin Jones imitation on the head and shoulders of the loser who looks like the principal cause of the whole mess.

I get out of the car and get my nightstick between the two peripheral participants, and move them over towards the glass walls of the restaurant, where a yuppie foursome delight in getting some free entertainment. Bernie stops conducting the acoustical test on the guy’s spine long enough for me to get some answers.

It turns out to be a \$30 ripoff involving a quarter-gram of what tastes like mannitol and baby laxative, and the big, curly-headed blond kid is blubbering just like a baby. I can’t blame him. He’s obviously not used to the way real dealers work.

It’s clear that the guy Bernie’s holding is a crackhead, which is unusual. The street vendors tend to be pretty sharp around here. This neighborhood is the New York Stock Exchange for controlled substance dealing and doing are kept separate when there’s that much money to be made. But the crack junkies are definitely starting to move in, making a dirty game even dirtier.

Bernie cuffs the guy while I give the three college kids a good “Don’t-let-me-catch-you-around-here-again” speech, which disappoints my glassed-in audience, who want to see their tax dollars working for them.

“What’s going to happen to him?” they ask.

I’m about to tell them that it would be better if they just got out of there, when Bernie says, “I’m going to kick his ass all the way to the precinct house, *that’s* what’s going to happen.”

This seems to satisfy the kids, and they move on into the crowd, which is already dispersing. Bernie’s beating has turned the guy green.

“Help me shove this snotrag in back,” snarls Bernie.

“Oh no, I’m not cleaning this guy’s vomit up off the back seat,” I tell him.

“Well what do you want me to do?”

I notice part of the crowd has decided to stick around for more.

“You could try letting him get some air first.” I can see that Bernie is racking his brains to come up with a way of telling me off without using improper language in front of the public.

“Piss on that,” he says, stuffing the junkie’s head inside the car with the heel of his hand and leaving the door open for me to deal with as he goes around to the driver’s side. I’m not sure if Bernie is away

that “piss” is considered improper language in some circles.

I waste my time waiting for further instructions as Bernie parks himself behind the wheel and slams the car door. The remainder of the crowd is staring at me wondering, what is she going to do? Then the junkie gives me something to do.

“I’m going to be out by tomorrow morning, babe!” he says, climbing halfway out of the car. “And I’m going to come looking for you!”

“Just get in there,” I say, replacing his body on the seat and slamming the door. Bernie guns the motor as I go around the other side and climb in next to him, then he pulls off the curb and away down the street.

“Why don’t you just leave me there, Bernie? You got everything under control all by yourself.”

“You’re damn right I do, Buscarsela. I didn’t need you in there.” He turns to shout through the cage. “It was just two puppies slapping each other over some baby powder.”

“Watch the traffic, will ya?”

Bernie decides *not* to run over a young woman pushing a baby carriage, aiming instead for an old man with a walking stick.

“You blew it, Bernie: an old man with a cane is only forty points. A mother and baby is eighty-five points,” I say. Pregnant nuns are one hundred and fifty points, but they’re rare. “Okay: so it turned out to be two puppies slapping each other over some baby powder, but it *could* have been two psychos knifing each other over three thousand bucks. And one of them could have had a gun.”

“I’m hungry. Let’s eat,” is how Bernie chooses to wrestle with that particular enigma.

“We can’t call in a meal break with a prisoner in the back.”

“Fuck that.” That’s Bernie talking. “I said I’m hungry.”

I turn and get my first good look at our detainee. He’s young, but already got the face of a life prisoner. Glazed, sunken eyes, a few requisite knife scars, and a sallow malnourished complexion that bleeds right through what in a WASP would be considered a healthy tropical tan. Without that extra melanin, he’d be as pale as chalk, pale as that powder he’s trading in the world for. At least he’s calm. He’s been through this a few dozen times before.

“What are you trying to do, selling for yourself in this neighborhood? You want to end up as dog food?”

“Fuck you, cop,” is what he says. So much for the civics lesson. “*Put a traicionera de tu propia raza*.” That’s supposed to burn me real bad, I guess. But I’ve been through this a few times before, too.

“*En cambio tu eres el ejemplo para todos, ¿no cierto?*”

“Fuck you,” he says. So we’re back to that.

Is that all the English he knows? “*¿Y porque no me lo dices en español?*”

The junkie opens his mouth to speak.

“You say ‘Fuck you’ one more time and I’m going to feed you this,” I say, shoving my nightstick through the mesh close enough for him to use it as a tongue depressor. “It’s a perfect fit, too.” Now he shuts up. That’s the only language the lifers understand. And me a B.A. in Spanish Literature.

Bernie jerks the car to a halt in front of an all-night deli with one of those cheap, glaring neon signs that always has a couple of letters sputtering on and off and makes you feel like your eyes are going to blink. Gddzt. Blink. Gdzst. You could go blind trying to focus on them.

“What do you want?” Bernie asks.

The junkie says he’ll have a hotdog with everything.

“Not you, snotrag,” Bernie informs him.

“Get me a whole can of salmon on rye and coffee, extra extra light.” Guayaquil style.

Bernie gets out and goes into the deli. Normally, that would be my job, but tonight, staying in the car with the “snotrag” is the chickenshit detail, so I don’t have to play waitress. Not this time, anyway.

Bernie does not exactly have a poker face. I can see that he’s planning something by the way he smirking at the Korean guy behind the deli counter. Hmm. Will today’s gag be on me or on the prisoner? Bernie doesn’t always differentiate. I see him stuffing some Devil Dogs into the pockets of his jacket when the Korean man has his back turned.

He comes back with his hands around a paper bag that is dripping wet. He has already spilled my coffee. I roll down the window of the car, letting in some of that crisp March breeze, which isn’t too bad tonight. You can tell that spring is coming.

“You adding shoplifting to your growing list of petty crimes?” I kid him.

“Oh, he won’t charge me for them,” says Bernie, handing me my bag.

Of *course* he won’t charge you for them if you stick them in your pocket when he isn’t looking, I’m thinking, but my coffee cup is already tearing through the bottom of the bag, and I have to grab the bag to keep from getting soaked, but Bernie’s got his hands around it in such a way that I can’t get a grip on it.

“You owe me four-fifty,” he says, as if unaware of what he’s doing. I’m about to put my hand under the bag when it gives up the ghost (it must have had help) and an uncovered Styrofoam cup of hot coffee drops into my lap, spilling about half of it down my thighs and onto the seat and elsewhere. This makes the snotrag laugh. I’d like to dump the rest of the coffee on his head for that, but at this point in the game that would be considered excessive, and he obviously knows it. I peel myself up off the seat as best I can, but the damage is done.

“Sorry, Buscarsela,” says Bernie, doing a lousy job of trying not to laugh. “You know how cheap these Koreans are with them plastic tops.”

I’m struggling to keep some kind of cool here: “Bernie, wet paper bags are receptacles not noted for their strength.”

“Huh?” he replies. You can’t put anything over on Bernie.

The snotrag continues to laugh.

“Here you go—this is for you,” says Bernie, passing a hotdog with everything behind me to the prisoner, who greedily starts to gulp it down. “Hey, that’ll be a buck twenty-five, pal.”

I’m not sure, but I think the junkie says “Fffk yuf” through a mouthful of hotdog—with everything. Then without warning the junkie’s face goes sour and he starts spitting out half-chewed “everything” all over the back seat of the car. It seems that there are five or six live roaches crawling around between the hotdog and the sauerkraut.

“Oh, I didn’t see them roaches,” says Bernie. “They’re extra. That’ll be a *buck-fifty*”

“(SPIT) Fuck you.”

Must be his charm: he sure doesn’t get by on originality.

Bernie keeps jabbing: “Hey, I thought you asked for ‘a hotdog with everything.’”

“What do you carry them around in a test tube where your log’s supposed to be?” I really *am* curious how he pulled that off.

Bernie is laughing. Sometimes it’s hard to say. Meanwhile, the junkie is spitting half-chewed food all over the back seat, and I’m using every napkin I’ve got—how nice of Bernie to provide so many—clean up my mess, asking myself if I can get compensation for scalded thighs as a job-related injury: “Um, yes, your Honor, that’s correct, my asshole partner poured hot coffee on my lap. Well, he didn’t exactly pour it. Maybe we could settle for half a million in damages?”

“While you’re at it, Buscarsela, why don’t you clean up the rest of that stuff?”

“Bernie—fuck you.”

I am hungry, however, but somehow no longer desire to eat in the same car with the junkie who is busy spitting on every available surface. So I step out of the car and start to unwrap my sandwich leaning on the cold car door. The breeze is a bit nippy, but I prefer it to being in there with the Great Expectations. I finally get half of my sandwich unwrapped, and take a bite, only to get a mouthful of cold sardines in oil, complete with bones. This is not my favorite meal.

So now it's my turn: I spit my mouthful into the gutter and storm inside the deli and shut the door behind me.

“What's the big idea charging four dollars for a sardine sandwich?”

The Korean man looks at me in that half-perplexed way of someone who is new to a culture, and he dreads every new encounter in this strange new language. I realize that he's not the regular owner.

“Fo dolla price for salmon sandwich,” he says.

“Yeah, I know: The *price* says salmon, but the *mouth* says sardines. You trying to make me sick?” The man now looks truly worried, and I can tell this is not his fault. Hmm. “Uh, could I see the can?” Nothing. I pick a can of peaches up off the shelf, and show him: “The can.” Now he understands, and he pulls a flat, ellipsoidal can off of a pile of twenty or so identical cans and hands it over the counter towards me. “SARDINES,” it reads, in big red letters. I now play a little charades, pointing out each and every noun, and trying to fill in the verbs with meaningless gestures. “Did *Officer Morgan* [point out the door] tell you [point at him] that this [the can] was *salmon*? [emphasis added]” Vigorous nodding on the part of my Korean friend. I nod back in order to show him that, See? We *can* understand each other. I'm about to walk out when I spot the Devil Dogs on a display rack.

“How much are these?”

“Senty-fi.”

I plant down a buck-fifty on the counter and walk out empty-handed, leaving the Korean man even more in the dark about the ways of these crazy Americans. And he doesn't even know the half of it. I get around to the passenger side of the car and get inside.

“Where's my four-fifty?” asks Bernie.

“Some of it's on the front seat, and the rest of it's back with the store owner. Let's move.”

“Not until you get in back with the perp.”

“I'm not getting in back with that guy.”

He wants me to clean the crap up.

“Listen, girlie, I was pounding a beat when you were still swinging naked through the trees in the Amazon jungle. Lucky for you, too. Hell, they didn't even have TVs down there 'til we discovered you had some oil you could sell us.”

Bernie's in-depth sociopolitical analysis of my country-of-origin's economic situation is cut short by a radio call to respond to what is reported to be a toxic leak at a food stamp center, with as many as fourteen possible victims. Now it's my turn to bust procedure. I pick up the mike and roger the call.

Bernie says: “We're not supposed to respond to a code with a perp in the cage. That's procedure, Buscarsela.”

“Since when have you cared about following procedure?” Three more points and I'm a detective and I can dump this lousy partner. “You know how fast insecticide fumes can kill someone?”

Bernie throws on the lights and siren, and we go wailing out into traffic. The food stamp center is just a few blocks away, but it is next to the Lilliflex factory, where, among other things, they make insecticides.

We are the first to arrive at the scene, and let me tell you it's a mess. People are lying face down on

the sidewalk and clouds of toxic smoke are wafting out of the building. We hop out of the car, leaving the doors open, and try to get a reading on the situation.

I ask: "Any more inside?" Nobody knows. Bernie and I look at each other.

"Should we be heroes or what?" Bernie asks me.

"I don't know, I've heard about this kind of stuff: your lungs fill with fluid and you drown." People are standing around, more are hanging out of windows, looking down at us. I say, "Oh, shit, let's do it."

I run to the glove compartment, fish out the pair of surgical gloves that we keep there and start ripping them in half. We put them over our faces, our noses lodged in one of the fingers. We look like stagecoach bandits, except for the long rubber noses. I rip the one towel we've got in half and wrap it around the gloves. It's hard to breathe, but that's the idea.

We run inside. The fog stings our eyes like triple-strength tear gas, but we plow through it. Dead bugs are dropping from the ceiling like rain. I hadn't counted on this. We can barely breathe, and our eyes feel like they're being soft-boiled in hydrochloric acid. I try to get a fix on where some of the bodies lie, then shut my eyes tight and start feeling around where the afterimages tell me they should be. I grope around in the dark, my eyes sizzling away in their sockets, until I find one. It's a leg. I find the other leg, get the knees over my shoulders, and try to stand up. I can't. I get my knees right under the weight and try again. I can't budge this one. Much as I hate to, I drop the legs and open my eyes. No wonder. In a flash I see that the guy can't weigh less than two-hundred-and-ninety pounds. I spot a young black woman sprawled backwards over a desktop, grab her, and run out of there, slipping and sliding on a uniform layer of dead bugs, my eyes screaming a three-alarm fire. I stumble out through the corridors and onto the street, where I can see through a veil of tears that the ambulance squad has arrived. Somebody takes the woman off my back and flings her onto a stretcher.

One of the onlookers is drinking a beer—I think. I grab it from him—or her.

"Excuse me, I need that," I explain, and begin dousing my eyes with the contents of the bottle, which are a soothing relief to my scorched cornea. I suppose Tabasco sauce would probably be a relief at this point. Then the burn starts to come back, even worse.

"Allow me," says one of the squad guys, and he turns me around, forces me to my knees, and starts pouring quarts of clear fluid into my eyes, where it runs all over my face and uniform. After a few minutes, when it begins to feel like my eyes are *not* sizzling like two slices of pepperoni on a hot pizza, I breathe easier, knowing that, once again, I may yet live to see my grandchildren. If I ever get around my grandchildren.

"Feel better now?" the blurry mass above me asks.

"Much. Thanks. What is that stuff?"

"Water," he says. I had to ask.

By the time my eyes clear, he's gone, and the people who are *prepared* for toxic fumes show up. Protective coveralls, face masks, oxygen tanks. They go in and pull out nine other victims and get busy feeding them oxygen and the same water treatment. Most of the victims are the usual shades of black and brown, but one of them sticks out like a Klansman at a Knicks game. Basically, he's white—which is not all that remarkable, I'll admit, but on this block it's a novelty, and at this food stamp center, it's practically unheard of. Other cops from the 34th are keeping back the crowd, letting only the ambulance crew through. A reporter is trying to get in to see the victims, but they keep her out. I walk over to the rescue worker who is treating the white guy.

"You need help taking these people to the emergency room?" I ask.

"Nah," he says, not looking up. "We can treat them right here, none of them is injured seriously. Just for a couple days they might get nauseous, dizzy, with persistent headaches, chest pains, and thro-

inflammation.”

“Oh is that all?”

Now he looks up at me: “Look, you wanna do this? I could be home watching *The Late Show*.”

He goes back to attending to the victim, not waiting for a response. I tilt my head sideways and get a good look at the prostrate form of the one white victim. He’s pale and blond, with reasonably delicate features, but even in this condition the muscles of his face are hard, pushing up through his skin. Looks like a nice kid who fell on hard times, or maybe one of the middle-class New Jersey suburb Punk crowd who willingly embraced hard times rather than put on a white shirt and a tie and work the cash register at Wal-Mart. Yes, now I see it: he’s probably a musician or a painter. He’s definitely not an employee at the food stamp center. Either way, I’m not getting any answers out of this guy for a while.

I step over some of the emergency paraphernalia, glancing at each of the victims. There’s a grandmother asking to see her children in a Puerto Rican-accented Spanish. I go over and talk to her, tell her everything’s all right now and I even radio in her name and her family’s telephone number so someone at the station can call them and tell them she’s OK. There’s a young black man who isn’t moving yet; there’s my three-hundred-pound friend, draining an entire tank of oxygen all by himself. It took three men to carry him out of there. Then I see the young black woman who I brought out slung over my back. She’s recovering, and is trying to push off the oxygen mask, but the rescue worker is slapping her hands away and holding the mask in place. I tap the rescue worker on the shoulder.

“How soon will she be able to talk?”

Hearing this, the black woman tries to say something, but the rescue worker redoubles the pressure with which he is holding the mask in place. He looks at me.

“Get out of here, will ya? Can’t ya see I’m busy?”

I look at the woman. Over the mask, she looks like she is trying to tell me something with her eyes which have the wild, petrified look of an ensnared doe. But then I suppose it’s normal to look that way after a brush with death. I get down on one knee and take the woman’s hand in mine. I tell her we got everyone out OK. Her eyes appear to relax almost immediately. I stroke her forehead with my other hand, and she breathes deeply for the first time since I’ve been watching. She even closes her eyes. When she opens them, the panic is gone. She knows now that she’s going to be all right. I nod and continue to stroke her forehead. I ask her is there someone she wants me to call and say she’s all right. The rescue worker gives me a look.

“Don’t you have something else to be doing?” he says to me.

I stare at him for longer than I’m supposed to.

“Go arrest some pimps, awright?”

That reminds me, I left the junkie in the back seat of the car—How long ago? Five minutes? Ten minutes? A half an hour? My sense of time is shot, which looks real bad on a report. I check my watch which reads 9:40, so it’s only been about fifteen minutes, and I start looking around for Bernie and the car. I spot Bernie through the modern-ballet-like movements of the rescue workers rushing back and forth with tanks of life. He is trying to write a memo of some sort, shaking his pen like a thermometer to get the ink flowing.

I give the black woman some more comforting. She points to my notepad with her free hand. I take it out and pass it to her. She manages to write “Kim Saunders” and a local number.

“This is your name?” I ask. She tries to nod. The medic presses the mask down harder. “I’ll call ‘er right now. You’re going to be fine,” I say, and start to get up. She won’t let go of me. She squeezes my hand tightly. Then I gently remove it and get up and walk away.

I make the call as promised, from a pay phone, and keep at least one grandmother from having

heart attack tonight. The thanks I get from her make it just about worth it.

~~Bernie is standing near the car, and I can see that the junkie is still in the back. The junkie's wrists look terrible. They are bloody and torn. I think he actually tried to bite through them in order to get away while we were busy with the rescue.~~

"Let's get this punk down to the station before he bleeds all over the car," I say.

That's all right with Bernie. I go around to my side, and a woman stops me and says, "Excuse me, Officer—" she tilts her head to read my nameplate "—Buscarsela, Sergeant Kroger says you were the first to arrive on the scene. What do you think happened?"

She is wearing a grey trench coat that sets off her trim figure and reddish-brown hair a lot better than my box-shaped off-the-rack uniform does mine. I tell her, "Either General Westmoreland tried to defoliate North Harlem, or the Lilliflex factory sprang a leak."

She chuckles. "I can't print that. General Westmoreland'll sue the shit out of us *and win*."

"Sorry, but if you really want to find out what happened, talk to Lilliflex. It's their mess."

"But what do *you* think happened?"

"C'mon, Buscarsela!" says Bernie. "Haul some ass!"

"I gotta go," I say.

"Can I call you later?"

She gives me her card. It says:

Megan O'Shea  
Crime Reporter  
*New York Newsday*

"Call me Meg," she says.

"Crime reporter?"

"I was in the neighborhood."

"Okay, sure."

"See ya," and she goes off to get the story from someone else.

I climb in next to Bernie. He radios in that he is leaving the scene and why, gets the OK, and we drive off uptown. I turn my head to get one last look at the scene, but the junkie throws himself at me, crashing into the screen. Bernie shakes his head.

"Animal," comments Bernie. This time, I agree with him.

After a bit, I confess: "Jeez, I was scared shitless back there."

Silence. Then Bernie says, "It was a bit hairy, yeah."

I can't believe I'm hearing this. "What is it with you guys?" I say. "A two-ton steel girder fell fourteen stories and lands two inches from your nose, but, 'were you scared?' 'No, not a bit.' Well I don't mind telling you I was scared shitless back there when I couldn't lift that big guy up off the floor."

"It's different for a woman, Buscarsela. How'm I supposed to tell my wife I was scared, huh?"

"You're talking to the wrong person, Bernie. I have no sympathy whatsoever."

More silence.

"What was the food stamp center doing open at 9:30 at night, anyway?" I ask.

"Some special giveaway. A private charity was paying to keep the place open 'til 10:00, distributing surplus cheese to whoever came in."

"Get the name of the organization?"

"Negative."

"I didn't see anybody among the victims that looked like a charity worker."

~~"So now you're a mind reader? You want to tell me what a charity worker looks like?"~~

"Sure. The emergency food center volunteers tend to be bilingual Maryknoll nuns. See any nuns back there?" He doesn't say another word to me until we get to the station.

"You gonna catch this guy?" he asks.

"Sure." The usual exchange.

Once upstairs, we get the junkie into a chair and I start to type up the report, while Bernie disappears somewhere. I believe I'm the only cop in the place who doesn't mind doing the paperwork. Some of the others say it's because I'm the only one who can write. I think it's because I don't think the paperwork is any more or less bullshit than the rest of the job. At least I don't have to worry about the typewriter taking a shot at me.

I ask the questions, and of course the junkie's got no address, no telephone, no next of kin, no past, no present, and no future. It's a wonder he's got a name, which he tells me is "Pepe Gonzalez." In this precinct, that's equivalent to "John Smith." Worse. Does he have any I.D.? Of course not.

When I'm finished, I call Dorset over. He is busy doing a crossword puzzle.

"Hey Fil, what's a nine-letter word for a deadly radioactive substance, beginning with 'P'?" asks Dorset.

"Plutonium."

"Oh, yeah—ain't he that guy in *Hamlet*?"

"No, that's Strontium-90."

"You busting my balls again, Buscarsela? Jeez, I'd hate to be the first one to respond to a code from *that* place. A domestic dispute with poisoned swords?"

"Yeah, plus you'd have to write your report in iambic pentameter."

Dorset helps me dump the junkie—excuse me, Pepe Gonzalez—in the cell, and I go to see the chief. You see, it would be really nice if somebody got it on record that tonight's toxic fume rescue was exceptional work. Or at least commendable. That and the upcoming third-year evaluation of my performance on special investigative assignment to the Rape Crisis Unit should give me enough points to make me eligible to apply for the Detective Bureau and get out of this beat garbage, which, by the way, is driving me nuts.

They were going to stick me in a Field Internal Affairs Unit, but I petitioned that knife-in-the-back job, and the police commissioner himself determined that I would do the Department the most good in the Rape Unit. This was seen as favoritism from the top, and ended up doing me about as much good with my peers as the FIA slot would have done. People don't exactly flip over the Department's current policy of quicker promotions for women and blacks. And some of the blacks don't dig it when a *latin* leapfrogs over them. It's a mess. I don't care, I just want that shield.

"Come back later," is what I am told.

It's already a quarter to midnight, and I'm supposed to take off for the night in fifteen minutes. I go looking for my partner. He's not anywhere in sight. I knock on the men's room door.

"Yeah?"

"Bernie in there?"

"No, but there's plenty of room for you."

I walk away from the sound of male laughter echoing off the tiles, and go down the stairs and out into the street, where I find Bernie killing our last few minutes on shift by cleaning up the back seat of the car with my half of the towel. That is, it's my half now. He would actually rather do that than have to contend with a typewriter and the English language.



I stand watching him for the next several minutes, until he finishes up and crawls backwards out the car. ~~Then he sees me. He can't think of anything cleverer to say to me than, "Yeah, so what?"~~ so he makes up for it by adding, "Here, wash this" and tossing the blood-spit-and-hot-dog-with-every-thing-soaked towel at me. I dodge it. Unhappily the lieutenant is not standing behind me to get hit in the face with it so he can bust Bernie's ass. That lieutenant is never around when you need him.

Then a call comes over the radio to respond to a rape at 168th and Audubon Avenue.

"Uh-oh, Buscarsela's specialty," says Bernie, beating me to the driver's seat by throwing his body between the wheel and me. I run around to get in the other side to acknowledge the call. Bernie is there.

"I've acknowledged the call, Bernie, move it."

"Yeah, I can't seem to find the keys."

This is Bernie's idea of humor.

"OK, Bernie, I'm calling the precinct to tell them we haven't left the parking lot yet because you're trying to be funny."

Bernie doesn't think I mean it. He smiles at me. So I pick up the microphone and call the board. "Thirty-four-A-nine unable to respond."

"Thirty-four-A-nine," squawks the radio, "why aren't you responding?"

"You tell 'em, Bernie," I say, sticking the mike under Bernie's nose. He turns the key and starts the car.

"Car trouble," says Bernie. "We got it fixed now."

We pull away from the curb, make a U-turn across four lanes of traffic and head down Broadway towards 168th. I choose this moment to inform Bernie that he's going to have to explain all about the car trouble, in triplicate. He responds by driving slowly enough for me to lean out the door and pick daisies.

168th and Audubon is a bad neighborhood, as neighborhoods go. I've seen guys here rip the hood off cars and walk off down the street holding them over their heads.

We turn the corner and pull up in front of the apartment building. People are standing around the street trying not to look as if their very next move depends on our very next move. This house—the block—is one of those where every other person between the ages of eight and eighty deals drugs for living. Right now I couldn't care less about that.

I dash up the stairs two at a time and into the building. I don't need to be Charlie Chan to follow the stares of the people standing out in the hallways directly to apartment 401, which is locked. I knock on the door, announce that this is the police, and that we're responding to a rape call. No answer. I knock two more times, announce this is the police twice, and were you the one who reported the rape? No answer. Oh, great. The blood in my head is already pounding from sprinting up four flights, and now I get the silent treatment from an apartment where a woman has just been sexually assaulted, perhaps fatally. I pound the door with my nightstick and announce that I'm going to shoot the lock off in about ten seconds if I don't get a sign of life. There is no sound from behind the door. A breeze blowing off the Northern tundra gives me a chill. So I have to start counting: "One ... two ... three ... four ... five ... six ... seven ... eight ..."

I hear a bolt click. I jump to the side, which I should have done before I started counting. My hand is on my revolver. Another bolt clicks. A metal bar gets slid out of shot. The door opens, and a pair of severely distressed eyes peer at me over a length of eight-pound chain. The eyes belong to a very frazzled Latin American woman, who is clearly glad to see another Latin American woman—in uniform.

"Did you call the police?" I ask. Nothing. "Are you hurt?" She blinks. Well, that's something. "Is there anyone else in there with you?"

This time I get a very soft, throaty, “No.”

“May I come in?”

---

She is about to unlatch the chain when Bernie bounds up the stairs and shouts at me:

“Jesus, Buscarsela, you’d think you were chasing Son of Sam!”

The door slams shut in my face. Thanks, Bernie.

“You know it’s after midnight,” Bernie reminds me.

“So go home.”

“What’s the deal here?”

“I got it covered.”

He looks at me, then at the door. “Women,” he says.

I bring my voice down to a whisper. “You know, Bernie, I don’t know what’s wrong with you—if I weren’t for women, you wouldn’t be here.”

“Who needs being here?”

“So get out of here. Tell ‘em where I am, that it’s under control, and go home.”

It’s not. There *could* be six crack dealers with Uzis in there. But I’m not getting the door open with Bernie there.

“Suits me,” he says. He pushes his way through the conglomeration of the curious and he’s gone, his steps clomping down the stairs and fading away.

And I’m back to an unresponsive door. But I don’t remember having heard the bolts. I try the knob and it opens. I let the door fall open to where the chain goes tight. I turn to the wide-eyed neighbors and ask if anyone knows what this woman’s name is.

“Doris,” I am told by a tall thin dude who’s probably waiting for me to be out of sight so he can get back to business.

I put my face up to the opening.

“Doris,” I say, “My name is Filomena. I’m a police officer with the 34th Precinct. I’m here to help. Just come closer to the door so we can talk. I’m alone.”

I quickly look around to make sure that I’m telling Doris the truth. The few remaining bystanders try to step further into the background, even though most of them are already leaning against the walls with nowhere else to go. I tell everyone to beat it. They do. Must be something in my voice. When I turn back Doris is facing me about six inches away. If this woman were dangerous, she could have had my eye out. Something tells me she’s not dangerous.

We start talking, in Spanish. After a few minutes she lets me in. I step inside and she slams the door behind me and throws both bolts. I take a quick look around. The place is sparse but clean. What I can see speaks of a working woman who is trying to keep her integrity above water in a very deep ocean of scum and misery. A sanctuary has been violated.

She asks me if I want some coffee. I don’t, but I figure that going through the motions would be good for her, so I say sure. I follow her into the kitchen and watch her filling the kettle with water, putting it on the fire, getting down the can of El Pico, getting out the sugar. Unfortunately a family of roaches has moved in with the sugar.

“¡Caramba!” she shouts, swatting at the scattering roaches. Under the circumstances, anger is actually a good emotion for her to be showing. Anyway, it’s a big step away from paralyzing fear. “¡Tantas cucarachas!”

“You call these roaches?” I say in Spanish. “The roaches in Guayaquil could eat the New York roaches for breakfast!”

She laughs at my joke, thank God: this is the best sign there is that she’s not going to turn into one of

those poor people who are so afraid of dying that they stop living.

“¿Tu eres del Ecuador?” she asks.

“Sí. ¿Y tu?”

“*Soy de Colombia*. So we’re neighbors.”

“Hey, neighbors!” I say, not really knowing what to say, because what I want is to know some details while the trail is still warm, but, seeing Doris enjoy a moment of talking about pleasanter things, hesitate. So we talk. It turns out she’s from Cali, which helps explain why this tiny woman is so tough inside instead of being in complete shock. Maybe this has happened to her before. Cali makes Guayaquil look like Playland Park. Or so I hear.

Eventually she brings up the subject herself: she woke up with a knife at her throat and was raped. Did she see him? No, it was too dark, but she felt his face and is pretty sure she would be able to identify him by that alone. Did she mark him in any way? She might have scratched his face a little. With which hand? Her right. Maybe. OK, possible scratches on his left cheek. He was very big. How big? The length of the bed. I go check it. It’s at least six and a half feet. Hair? Curly. Did he talk?

“He just told me not to move.”

“What were his exact words?”

“No *te muevas*”

“Caribbean accent?”

“Sí.”

“Puerto Rican or Dominican?”

“I ... It was only three words.”

“It’s OK. Try.”

“If I had to, I’d say Dominican.”

Hmm. Well, we’re getting somewhere. I make note of all this. Did he take anything? I don’t think so. Did he say or do anything else? No, he got up and left. Have you showered yet? No. Good. How long did you lie there before calling the police? I don’t know, maybe twenty minutes. Maybe as much as an hour. And then you got up and locked the door?

She looks at me, her dark eyebrows drawing together, leaving a few worry wrinkles in their wake.

I rephrase it: “Did you lock the door before or after you telephoned the police?”

Two-second pause during which I can feel both our pulses rising.

“I ... I didn’t lock the door. The chain ... yes, but not the door.”

I stare at her. “Are you sure?”

“Sí.”

Oh shit. What’s going through my mind now is *He’s still here*. I slide the chair out and I’m on my feet. I have to check my near-instinctive move to the gun.

“Stay right here. Don’t move.”

When I’m out of the kitchen I unsnap the holster and palm the Police Department’s .38-caliber revolver. Now I have to check the whole apartment. It’s a very small place; there’s only the bathroom and the closet, unless he’s in the freezer. It takes all of about thirty seconds to assure myself that he’s not in either of these places. The windows are closed and locked tight. The bed is just a mattress on the floor, there can’t be anyone under it. I check anyway. Satisfied that he’s not in the apartment, I go back to the kitchen.

“Who else has a key?” Another blank stare. I know I should be more patient, but right now the adrenalin has me hopping. “What I mean is, do you have a boyfriend, or any male friend who might have access to a key?”

“No.”

~~Then it's either the super or the landlord; whoever it is must be an unbelievable schmuck, because he~~  
went and locked the door behind him.

“Wait here,” I tell Doris. “And don't open the door for anybody. And whatever you do, *don't wash*. Got it?” No response. “Got it?”

She nods, and I let myself out. She locks the door behind me. People are back out there. I see some dime bags disappear into pockets as I step out into the hallway. (All right, I couldn't swear that they were dime bags in a court of law, but what the hell else could they be?)

I step up to the tall thin one and ask him where I can find the super.

“First door on the right in the basement, mon—I'll go.” He starts down the stairs.

“Get your ass back on this landing,” I tell him, and I swoop down the stairs past him. “I'd rather talk to him myself.”

“Was jus' tryin' to be a gentleman, *guapa*”, he calls after me.

Right.

I go down to the basement and turn right, past the laundry room. At the end of a narrow, mildewy hall is a faded red door with a sign that says “Superintendent” that looks like it has been there since the day they dug the foundation. There is a party going on inside. I can hear it and I can smell it. Rapid-fire Dominican Spanish is being shouted over loud, thumping *merengue*.

There's a bell button, which I push a few times before anything happens. The music quadruples in volume as the door swings in and there stands one bad-looking Dominican with forearms that are bigger than my legs, and a face that looks like his sweetheart caresses it three times a day with a tire iron. He has curly hair. There are also three parallel rows of fresh scratches running across the left side of his face. A single red light bulb that glows in the corridor behind him adds a nice touch, too.

I don't wait for introductions this time. I throw my weight against the door, pushing him back about an eighth of an inch, and I'm part way in the apartment with my nightstick wedged between us, although this one looks like he could take it away from me and eat it if he wanted to. He doesn't have to fight me, he just stands there. I pull my gun, aim it just above his groin and tell him to turn around, then he's under arrest. He turns around and lets me put the cuffs on him. They almost don't make it all the way around his wrists.

At least he doesn't resist.

Now the rest of the party shows up, wondering where the host has been. Three guys that are built more to scale appear in the dull red glow. Their eyes shine at me as they come closer.

“Is there a phone here?” I ask.

The three red-tinted zombies stop. One of them says, “Yeah.” I give him the number of the precinct and tell him that if he's real nice and calls them up and asks them to send a car over, I might be nice back and not make the three of them spend the night hanging by their aortae in a jail cell. None of them know what an aorta is, but they get the general idea. The one I'm telling this to leaves, and I hear him picking up the phone, dialing, and delivering my message.

I turn the big guy around to get another look at his face. He bares his teeth at me.

“Whadayou want from me, bitch?” he says.

I tell him I want him to know how it feels to wake up with a knife at his throat.

An hour later I'm back in the station house booking the super on suspicion and waiting for Doris to show up and identify him for me. But I'm not moving fast enough to satisfy the super, who wants to get back out on the street and rape some more women, I suppose.

"Hurry it up, will ya?" he says to me. "You're getting paid for this time, I'm not."

I look at my watch. It's just past 1:30 A.M. I inform him that not only am I getting paid for this and he's not, but I'm getting overtime, and how about that?

I get the high sign from Carrera—who, by the way, is one of the few sympathetic male cops in the place—which means that Doris is here and is being taken to the observation room. I nod to Carrera, and turn back to finish booking the subterranean.

"You're just doing this to me because I'm a man, right?" he says. I ignore that and keep typing. "You know I'm goin' to be out by three o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

I look up at him, directly into his slimy eyes.

"Tomorrow's Sunday," I tell him. "You can't have a bail hearing until 9:00 A.M. Monday morning."

"Then I'll be out by noon on Monday at the latest, bitch."

He's probably right, but how does he know this? Unless he's been here before. No wonder he didn't resist. Personally, I think he should get two to three hundred years, but that's just my opinion.

I call up Gladys downtown and tell her I need some info fast. I know she can't deliver any hard copy right now, but I ask her as a favor just to check this guy out for me and get back to me as soon as she finds anything. She says, why not? she doesn't have anything better to do than honor about five hundred other similar requests, but she'll see what she can do. I tell her that's all I can ask for, and she hangs up.

Then I get some help and haul the worm into the Sweatroom. As the arresting officer, I get to go and be with the victim.

Doris has cleaned herself up, but not too much I hope. She is pale and nervous, shivering blue-lipped with cold and aftershock. I don't even want to think about how I'd be reacting in her place; but then not thinking about it isn't much of a solution.

During the time that I've been booking the worm, his lawyer has shown up. Well, I guess it's his lawyer. I sure didn't invite him. He's wearing a splotchy pinstripe suit that looks like it was pulled from the Costume Collection at the last minute when the actor failed to show and they had to fit the bellboy for the part.

Over in the Sweatroom, the worm deliberately comes right up to the one-way mirror, which makes Doris take a step back, and starts to comb his hair arrogantly. When he is finished, he takes out a magic marker and manages to write "FUCK YOU" backwards on the mirror—that is, backwards for him, but it comes out just fine for us—before Carrera grabs him and shoves him back into the room. It's late and we're all tired. I get right to the point:

"Is that the guy?"

"I can't tell from here," says Doris. "It was too dark."

The worm's lawyer is beaming.

"But I ran my hands over his face, many times. It was very rough and had a lot of scars. He also had a smell that I don't think I will ever forget. If I could touch his face—"

"NO!" injects the lawyer.

"I might be able to identi—"

"Not a chance, baby."

I have a brief shouting match with the worm's lawyer. It seems he has come prepared with some legal fucking precedent whereby a legally blind rape victim was barred from identifying a suspect by touching

the faces of men in a police line-up.

“What about the scratches?” I say. “We can compare skin samples.”

“I washed my hands,” confesses Doris.

“She washed her hands,” parrots the lawyer unnecessarily.

“Fingerprints,” I say.

“Get with it, Officer Buscarsela. My client has been up to that apartment a dozen times during the last six months as part of the normal course of his duties as building superintendent.”

It occurs to me to bring up the pot smoking, but I don't want to—I beg your pardon—cloud the issue, and I don't even want this sleaze to *think* about plea bargaining.

“Well, there's always the semen,” I say, mentioning the forbidden subject.

Now the lawyer looks cornered, but Doris says, “No,” and he perks right up. I look at Doris.

“I'm sorry,” she says. “But I can't. Not that ...”

I ask to have a few minutes alone with the victim. The lawyer says that I can have five, as if he runs the place.

And I talk to Doris. It's very difficult. She knows what kind of torment they're going to put her through. She knows it and I know it. And my good friend the lawyer has made it a point of telling her that even if we book his client on evidence, he'll be out on \$250 bail by Monday afternoon, as promised because hey, he didn't take anything, or hurt her, really. I say yes, that's true, but she has to think of the next woman this creep decides to rape. She's on the edge now. But I can't push her. She has to jump. Then there's a knock on the door that makes Doris jump with fright. It's Carrera. I tell him to come in. He leans his head in and says:

“Phone for you, Fil.” Oh please oh please oh please ...

I excuse myself and leave the room, heading for the desk. It's Gladys. She asks me if I'm ready. I say shoot. She goes on to say that this will be the fourth time this worm will have been booked on charges of rape, but that none of the victims have ever pressed charges.

“Thanks, Gladys. I owe you one.”

“You owe me about five, honey.” And she's right.

I go back and give Doris the full report. It's hard for her. She is fighting back the tears when she says

“All right. I'll do it.”

I hug her, and she starts shuddering as the pent-up tears of the past four hours' pain finally surface. I have to swallow a few times myself.

The chief is no longer in, of course, so my bid for a Career Program Transfer will have to wait until Monday. Doesn't every thing?

I stay and wait with Doris until the medics arrive, stay with her through the whole nasty business, confirm a Monday morning deadline for the lab results, and take Doris home so she can finally take the shower. She makes me enter the apartment first and check it out before she'll go in. I ask her, doesn't she have any friends or relatives she can stay with, at least for tonight? She says not yet, she's only been in the country for two months. Jesus.

It's just past four in the morning by the time I get back to my apartment, which is empty because the Saturday-night shift was a last-minute surprise. No French boyfriend tonight.

I hope tomorrow's better.

## CHAPTER TWO

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“Pluck out his eyes.”

— Goneril

### IT ISN'T.

Megan O'Shea of *New York Newsday* quoted me as saying “It's their mess,” meaning the Lilliflex Corporation, and I get the shit dropped on me for it. The lieutenant spends about twenty minutes screaming at me that even a baby-faced recruit knows enough not to comment to the press on an open case. I say I didn't realize it was a “case,” so he shows me the Lilliflex press releases denouncing the regrettable incident as sabotage. So it's not their fault.

“Sabotage? By who?” I plead. “The roaches? They got together and chewed a hole in a 16-inch pipe. 'Cause if the roaches are getting organized, I'm out of here.”

The point is that it's now under investigation, so any public comments are to be made by Departmental press release only, so they concoct some crap about how I really said “It's a mess” but was misquoted by an irresponsible member of the press, and the decent human being that surfaces in me every Groundhog Day makes me fish out Ms. O'Shea's card to call her up and warn her. She can't be reached all afternoon, she's out covering a lover's revenge murder in Queens, one of those wonderful cases where the girlfriend dumps the boyfriend for being such a violent S.O.B., so he comes back a couple of days later and shoots her. A half hour before the Departmental release goes public, I finally get her.

“Megan O'Shea? This is Officer Buscarsela of the 34th.”

“Off— oh sure. What's up? Got a good quote for me?”

I tell her no, sorry, and spill the whole deal, warning her that we're about to issue a statement claiming she misquoted me. She's pretty nice about it, says as long as she can get me down as “an anonymous Police Department source” who confirms the authenticity of the first reported version her boss will buy it. I say, sounds like an OK boss, and ask, “What's all this about sabotage?”

“They say one of their monitors was snipped and someone cut a hole in a scrubber duct right next to an air vent that fronts the food center.”

“They let you in to see that?”

“Well, not me, but it's in the pr—”

“—in the press release,” I say, finishing her sentence. “Can you get in there?”

“Why should I? Page Three murders are my specialty.”

“Then tell your boss that your ‘anonymous Police Department source’ says this may have been an attempted murder.”

“Is that official?”

“It's not impossible. *Don't* quote it.”

“You're making this up, aren't you?”

Pause. “Can we meet somewhere and talk?”

“No. We're two men short and I gotta help put 'er to bed tonight.”

“I just think *something's* screwy when a cop gets her head chewed off for chatting with the press at an accident scene. They usually like folks to know we showed up in time.”

Pause. Or is that the sound of hush money?

“OK ... Listen: I’ve got a list of the victims’ names. Eleven of them. You’ve got their addresses.”

“Somewhere,” I answer.

“What say you interview the victims and I have a look inside the Lilliflex factory?”

“I’d say you’re getting the sweet end of the deal.”

“You want me to take a few of the names?”

“Yes.”

“OK, OK. Why don’t you take A to M and I’ll take N to Z? Call me with the stats, Office Buscarsela.”

“Filomena. Call me Fil.”

“OK. And I’m Meg.”

“Right. Meg?”

“Yeah?”

“Get me some photos.”

Three days later we meet in an East Side coffee shop to split what we’ve got, which is nothing times two. Megan shows me some 8 x 10s that certainly look like an air-quality monitor whose cables have been cut and a big metal pipe with acetylene burns around a three-inch hole.

“How the hell did the saboteur survive this?” I ask.

“They say a breathing mask was missing from the main office.”

“Who is this guy? James Bond? I sure could have used one of those masks. My lungs are still stinging.”

“Now what have you got?”

Nothing. All of the victims were locals, unemployed, underemployed, or just plain hungry, waiting to get some government-surplus cheese, who didn’t know what hit them and don’t remember a thing.

“Even the white guy?”

“White guy?” says Megan.

“Yeah: the *white* guy.” Nothing. “Let me see your list.” She shows it to me. It doesn’t tell me anything. Dead End. I toss it back on the table. I say: “Maybe it *was* sabotage ...”

I’ve got no personal stake in the Lilliflex business, so I let the cops who are getting paid for it chase down the sabotage angle. They come up with enough evidence to admit the possibility of sabotage by the proverbial “disgruntled employee,” but that’s as far as they get. They scour every employee that’s worked there in the past ten years without turning up a serious suspect. Which leaves the white guy. I mean, if he had just turned in the same story as the other ten victims, it would’ve slipped right by. But a little legwork with Megan’s half of the list confirms that he gave someone else’s name and address, and when Megan knocked on the guy’s door, he was just so thrilled about getting his name in the paper that he said yes to everything. Great.

We relay this info to the detectives in charge of the investigation. They don’t get any further with it than we did. It’s tough to get an eyewitness account from people who were being blinded by carcinogen



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