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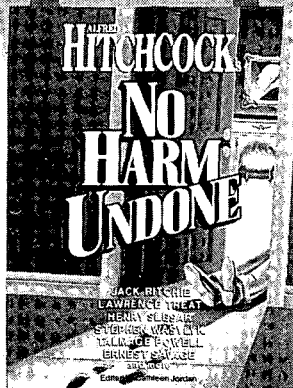


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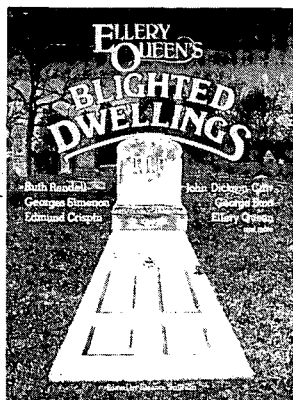
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FICTION

An Almost Perfect Crime

by William
F. Smith

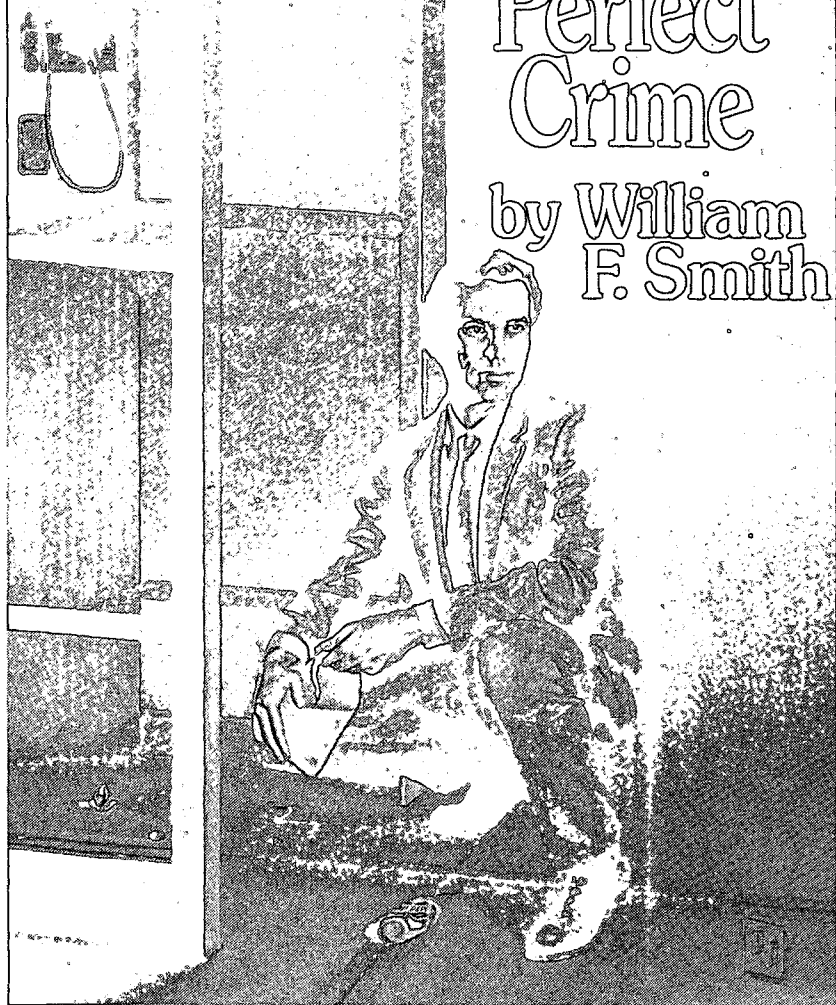


Illustration by Joe Jereda

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“According to six eyewitnesses,” said Captain Jack Parker, handing a manila folder to Detective Sergeant Raymond Stone, “a man named Richard Townsend entered a telephone booth last night, closed the door, and toppled dead a few minutes later with an ice pick in his back. Crazy, huh?”

Stone grunted a monosyllabic affirmative. “Are you sure it’s murder?”

“A blade in the back usually is. Read the report Paul Decker turned in. You know him. Meticulous.”

“Why don’t you keep him on it?” Stone suggested.

“He prefers to stick to the night shift. Decker’s excellent at accumulating details, but he’s not keen on these brain busters. He thought you might be better suited to solve this one. So do I. I’ve notified Curtis and Lissner to report to you.”

Parker returned to his office, leaving Stone to glean the salient facts from the report, which was a typical Decker job, complete with a detailed account of the crime, statements of eyewitnesses, photographs, charts showing the location of the booth, and its exact description and measurements. The works.

Stone marveled at the thoroughness of the report. He skimmed through to familiar-

ize himself with the details. A large number of fingerprints had been found both outside and inside the booth, but only Townsend’s were on the phone itself. Decker had noted that the usual litter—candy wrappers, cigarette butts, soda pop cans, and so on—was outside the booth. Each item found inside was listed separately. There were two crumpled Doublemint gum wrappers, a foot long piece of dirty string, a Dr. Pepper bottle cap, a scrap of paper with a grocery list written on it, one Lucky Strike stub, and a two inch piece of shiny black electrical tape that had been found stuck to the glass at the bottom of the booth. Decker had made the notation that the tape probably had been left by the telephone repairman who serviced the booth just prior to Townsend’s using it.

The death weapon was an ice pick with a blade four and three-quarter inches long, set in a round wooden handle a fraction over one half inch in diameter and four and a half inches long. The ice pick was in the folder, and Stone noted that although the handle was newly painted with shiny red enamel, the blade showed signs of years of use. It was an excellent homemade job, perhaps manufactured especially for the murder.

The results of the post mor-

tem were not in yet, but the medical examiner had speculated that death had probably been the result of a puncture wound through the heart. The pick had penetrated just below the left shoulder blade in a manner virtually impossible for it to have been self-inflicted. The photographs showed Townsend twisted in a heap on the floor, the handle of the weapon clearly visible in his back. The fold-in door was completely closed and held in place by the victim's body. The door had had to be taken off so that Townsend could be removed.

Nothing out of the ordinary had been found on the body, nor was anything conspicuous by its absence. Townsend had carried the normal items a man might be expected to have on his person.

Stone sighed and leaned back. Although the report was a masterpiece of detail, it contained nothing to indicate who had put the ice pick into Townsend's back or how the deed had been accomplished.

At nine Harvey Curtis and Fred Lissner came in. Stone assigned the detectives to a check on Townsend's background, personal and business, and told them to report back at noon. Having come to the conclusion that the scene of the crime was the most significant aspect of

the investigation so far, Stone decided to visit Lew Hall's Service Station at the corner of Halliday and Twenty-seventh Streets.

Lew Hall was eager to tell Stone everything he had told the "other cops."

"This guy drives in about nine last night, tells me to fill it up, and gets change for a dollar to make a phone call. I see him go into the booth and dial."

Stone noted that the booth, except for its aluminum framework, was all glass, enabling him to see straight through to the concrete block wall beyond.

"While I'm cleaning the windshield, I glance over, see him hang up, and turn to open the door. But before he gets it open, he staggers backwards, then falls on the floor. I get the hell over there quick. Some other customers seen it too and hurry over with me. We see through the glass how he's slumped over with this dagger or whatever in his back. I don't know whether he's dead or not. He could still be breathing, but he doesn't move none. We try to open the door, only his body wedges it shut. I call the cops. They have to take off the door. The whole thing takes half an hour. By then he's already dead."

"You didn't see anyone else by the booth?"

"Nary a soul," Lew replied.

"I been thinking, though. There was one other person that might have seen it. The phone booth had an out-of-order sign on it last night. The service man fixed it just before the dead guy drives in. Matter of fact, he was still at the station when the guy was in the booth. Over there at the air hoses." Lew indicated a small service island at the left of the station. "Probably didn't see nothing, though, the way he was bent over his tires. Must've drove off just before I ran to the booth."

"Did you notice the truck's number or get a good look at him?"

"Naw, you know how it is. They all look alike. A repairman and his truck. Guess I should say repairperson. Could have been a gal under that uniform and cap. Just noticed the. . . . Excuse me a minute." He dashed out to collect from a self-service customer who appeared ready to drive off without paying.

Stone studied the booth. It was a good thirty feet from any part of the station building and the same distance from the street. The door of the booth faced the station, so that anyone making a call would have his back to the pumps. On the right side of the booth were parking spaces for several cars. A small self-service air and

water island was halfway between the booth and the service bay area, exactly twenty-eight feet, four inches from the booth, according to Decker's precise measurements. The rear of the booth was no more than two feet from a seven foot concrete block wall, on the other side of which was a vacant lot.

Stone walked over and examined the structure carefully. It had suffered no vandalism. There were no holes in any of the panes of glass and the aluminum framework was intact. When the door was closed, the booth was completely sealed with the exception of a two inch ventilation space around the bottom of the structure. Stone kneeled and tried to reach into the booth with his right hand. It wouldn't go beyond the wrist. Impossible for anyone to get an ice pick into Townsend's back that way.

Inside the booth, Stone saw that the phone was attached to the right rear corner. To the left was a narrow shelf for the telephone directories, but both the yellow and white pages were hanging from it by their short lengths of chain. Even though it was daylight, Stone noticed that the booth light was not working. He recalled that Decker had stated in his report that the bulb was burned out. The telephone itself was

in perfect working order. Shaking his head, Stone walked back to Lew, who was leaning against a pump watching him.

"You said he opened the door and then staggered backwards?" Stone queried.

"No," Lew replied. "He didn't get the door opened. Just touched the handle, near as I could tell. You think someone threw the ice pick at him and he fell back into the booth?"

"It's a logical conclusion."

"Well, it's a good thing there were five other witnesses, or you might think I could've done it. The door was closed. It was like some invisible man pulled him backwards and shoved a shiv through his ribs. Only I'm tellin' you there ain't no one else in the booth or anywhere near it. And you can't throw nothing through solid glass without breaking it. You got a tough case here, sergeant."

"I'm well aware of that," Stone admitted. "Well, Mr. Hall, thanks for your help. I may drop back for another visit."

A check with the other witnesses verified Lew's version and gave Stone absolutely no new information. He returned to headquarters somewhat discouraged. He hadn't a thing that wasn't already in Decker's fine report.

The autopsy report was lying

on his desk. It proved to be a bombshell. The coroner had discovered that the ice pick wound had not been the cause of death. The point of the pick had been coated with curare, and it was the poison that had caused Townsend's death. The M.E. believed the wound alone would not have been fatal if the victim had received medical attention. He theorized that the poison had been used to make certain death would occur if the blade missed the heart.

There were other surprises in the report. Traces of opiates had been found in Townsend's blood and he had a malignant brain tumor. The M.E. didn't speculate about the significance of these two facts, leaving that to Stone.

Stone tossed the report into his out-basket just as Curtis and Lissner came in. "Well?" he said as the two detectives plopped onto straightbacked chairs by his desk.

"It's disappointing, Ray," Curtis said. "Never saw a guy less likely to get murdered than Townsend. Happily married. Has two teenaged sons. Haven't been able to dig up a ghost of a motive."

"Townsend himself?" Stone suggested gently.

"Age forty-nine. Quiet type, almost shy. No known enemies. We talked with dozens of peo-

ple. Everybody really liked him. Said he was the type who wouldn't hurt a fly. No one could imagine him ever getting murdered."

"Business?"

"Ran a bookstore with his wife. Not lucrative, but he earned a living."

"Will? Insurance?"

"Haven't had time to check on those," Lissner put in.

"Did you talk to his wife?"

"No, not yet," Curtis said. "Thought you'd prefer to do that. She's still under her doctor's care."

"All right. Go on out and do some more digging. Get a complete financial picture. Give the store a good going over, check on his insurance, and see if he left a will."

"Okay if we get some lunch first?" Lissner asked.

"Certainly. But don't make it a seven-course meal. I want some answers fast."

Helen Townsend was very attractive, even in her grief. Wearing a pink quilted bed jacket, she was propped up in bed with several pillows behind her when Dr. Wagner ushered Stone into the room. Her dark, wavy hair framed a face made pale by her ordeal. To Stone, the whole story was in her eyes, dry but still glazed from shock and re-

cent tears. Stone knew she would be devastatingly beautiful if her face were not devoid of color and if she were smiling.

Dr. Wagner, tall, ruggedly handsome, and just on the underside of fifty, stood by like a mother hen protecting her chicks. "You must realize, sergeant, that Mrs. Townsend has suffered severe shock. I hope you'll be discreet in your questioning."

"It's all right, Kurt," Helen Townsend said. "I want to do everything I can to help." She looked at Stone and waited for him to begin.

"I'll try to be brief, Mrs. Townsend," Stone said gently. "I'm fully aware of the strain you're under, but I'm certain you're anxious to learn the reason for your husband's death and who is responsible for it. I'll have to ask you some forthright questions: Do you know of any reason why someone might want to murder your husband?"

She swallowed, and spoke slowly in a way that tugged at Stone's heart. "No. I just can't understand. It's utterly inconceivable. If he'd been the victim of an accident, I could reconcile myself to it. But that he could be murdered is beyond my comprehension."

"Could there be another woman? A jealous husband?"

Dr. Wagner spoke sharply to

Stone. "Look here, I object to your asking Helen such questions at this time."

"It's all right, Kurt. No, Mr. Stone, there was no other woman, no jealous husband, and I have no lover who would want to kill my husband. One of the things I'm very grateful for is my seventeen years with Rich. We were completely faithful to one another."

Stone hoped she was right. "You worked with your husband at the store, Mrs. Townsend. Wasn't it customary for you to come home together?"

"No. I always left about two, in order to be here when the boys get home from school. A young college girl, Janice Carter, comes in shortly before I leave and also works on Saturday. Rich usually closed the store at six, but last night he stayed to check a shipment of books. I expected him about ten."

"The station he called from is at least three miles out of the way if he was driving here from the shop. I'm wondering if he went there for a particular purpose. He made a telephone call just before he was killed."

Helen Townsend bit her lips. "I know," she said in a choked voice. "I know. He called me." She buried her head in her arms and sobbed uncontrollably.

Stone didn't know what to say. He had never expected to find out whom Townsend had called. Why had he driven several miles out of his way to call his wife? Why not call her from the store?

Dr. Wagner had opened his medical bag and was preparing an injection. "I'll have to ask you to leave now, sergeant. Helen is in no condition to continue."

"All right, doctor, but, please, just one more question. Mrs. Townsend, what did your husband say to you?"

Dr. Wagner injected the sedative.

"He said he was on his way home. Then he said goodbye in a strange way. It was," she fought for control, "almost as if he knew he wouldn't be seeing me or the boys again." She closed her eyes and lay back quietly. Stone couldn't tell whether she was asleep or not.

Closing the bedroom door behind him, Dr. Wagner escorted Stone to the living room.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed her," he apologized. "Please let me know when I can talk to her again."

"Not for a day or two at least," the doctor said. "Now I think you'd better go."

"Of course. But may I ask you one or two questions?"

"What do you want to know?"

"The autopsy showed traces of drugs in Townsend's blood. I'd like that explained. Was he an addict or had you given him medication?"

Wagner considered for a moment. "Rich Townsend was no drug addict. As a matter of fact he took the prescription only with reluctance. About four months ago, he came in for a checkup. He mentioned he'd been having headaches which aspirin didn't help. I gave him a thorough exam and found he had a brain tumor. Inoperable. I told him he had six months to a year at the most. He took it better than I expected and asked me not to tell Helen or the boys. I probably will now that he's gone. It might help."

"I see. Tell me, was he in much pain?"

"He said no, but he could have been lying. A tumor like that can be relatively painless at first, but as the pressure increases, so does the pain. I gave him a prescription, and I suppose he had it filled. He wasn't a great talker, you know. Preferred to suffer in silence."

"Would the end have come quickly, or would it have been a long, lingering one?"

"Hard to say exactly," Wagner said. "He might have had several months in severe agony, or he could have gone just like that." He snapped his fin-

gers. "The odds are for the longer period, but we'll never know for certain now. I can't see that it has anything to do with his murder. Or are you thinking it was suicide?"

"We're looking into all possibilities," Stone said. "I need all the information I can get. Have you been his doctor long?"

"For over sixteen years," Wagner admitted. "I've been his friend even longer."

"Do you know if he took out an insurance policy recently?"

"I don't think so. I happen to give all the physicals for the agency that insures him. I couldn't have signed a favorable exam report, which is required before a policy is issued. I suppose he could have gone to another company, but I don't think he could have fooled the doctors. You might check with his agent, Hal Harris. I'm sure he'll know more about it."

"I'll do that," Stone replied, moving toward the front door. He turned to face the physician. "By the way, doctor, do you happen to know anything about curare?" He noticed his question brought a slight smile from Dr. Wagner.

"I don't wish to seem immodest, but I happen to be an expert in that field. Why do you ask?"

"The coroner has attributed Mr. Townsend's death to curare on the point of the ice pick."

Stone paused slightly to allow Wagner to make a comment, but the doctor betrayed no reaction to the news. "Now I'm wondering how easy it would be for a person to get his hands on some of that poison."

"Not too easy for a non-medical person unless he has friends along the Amazon." Wagner replied. "Curare does have medicinal uses. Someone working for a pharmaceutical firm might be able to obtain it. Say, here's a coincidence. Some crude curare I had in my office was stolen just a few weeks ago."

Stone's eyebrows shot upward. "Oh?"

"You can get complete details from your burglary department," Wagner said. "When I reported the theft, I assumed the burglar was a drug addict, since my entire supply of drugs was taken. But it could have been the curare he was after, and he took the rest as a cover-up."

"Possibly. May I ask why you had such a bizarre poison in your office?"

"It's not so bizarre, sergeant," Wagner explained. "It's quite a natural hunting tool for South American Indians, and refined forms of it are often used in the medical field as a muscle relaxant. For the past several years I've been doing research to find additional uses for it. As an av-

ocation I've made many canoe trips on the Amazon River, and I became interested there in curare. I was able to obtain a considerable quantity of it for research purposes."

"Is it always fatal?"

"If the dose is large enough. In its crude form, curare is a deadly poison when injected into the victim's bloodstream. Death occurs because, to put it simply, the respiratory muscles are paralyzed, and the victim dies because he is unable to breathe. If it's injected into a vein, a man could die almost instantaneously. With a smaller dose, a person would live longer, depending on his size, and might even recover. There are antidotes which, if administered soon enough, can reverse the effect and save the victim's life. If taken orally, the poison is ineffective. This is why the natives are able to eat the meat of poisoned animals."

"Who knew you had the poison in your office?"

"Only several thousand local TV viewers, in addition to my office staff and a few patients."

Stone paused to let this startling news sink in. "Would you mind explaining?"

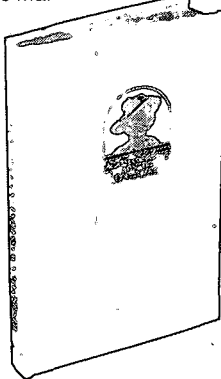
"Not at all. It's really very simple. I've taken movies of all my Amazon journeys and show them on TV. Channel 12 has a program called *Adventurous*

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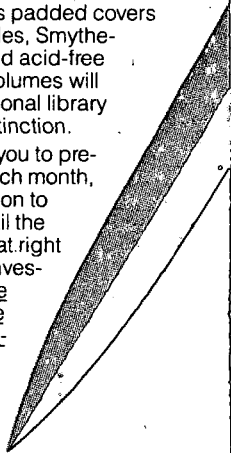
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Voyage, which I appeared on a few weeks ago. During the interview portion of the show, the host asked me questions about the poison the Indians in the film had used to kill game animals. I explained everything, even mentioning that I was doing research with the poison in my office lab. I didn't know someone was going to steal it in order to kill Rich Townsend."

"We don't know where the curare came from, but it's a good bet it could have been yours. You don't suppose Mr. Townsend could have taken some from your office?"

The doctor reflected a moment. "He had the opportunity. But for what purpose?"

"Perhaps to bring a swift end to his painful headaches," Stone suggested.

"Not Rich. He wasn't one to take his own life. Yet if the pain were unbearable. . . ."

Stone extended his hand. "Thank you, Dr. Wagner. You've given me some very useful information. I'll try not to disturb Mrs. Townsend again unless it is absolutely necessary." The front door was closed behind him, and Stone returned to headquarters.

store. Curtis had been able to ascertain that all of Townsend's property was held jointly with his wife. The big surprise was that Townsend had taken out life insurance for half a million dollars just three months previously. Stone whistled and gave Hal Harris a call.

Harris was on edge. Stone could hear the worry in his voice as he explained the situation. "Mr. Townsend had all of his business and personal insurance with my agency. Until about three months ago he had only twenty-five thousand in term on his life. Then he came in and wanted a policy for half a million. That's not so uncommon nowadays. You know, when a man reaches his late forties he begins to be a little more concerned about what might happen to his family if he should suddenly die. He wants a lot more protection. I was only too happy to service his insurance needs. I sent him to Dr. Kurt Wagner, who does all our insurance physicals. Townsend came back with a report stating he was in excellent health and fully insurable. However, he did seem somewhat concerned about making the monthly premiums."

"Did you try to talk him out of it?"

"Of course not. My business is trying to talk people into buy-

Curtis's second report was in Stone's in-basket. Lissner had yet to return from the book-

ing insurance. He paid the first month's premium right away, of course, but he was considerably late with the second, and missed the third completely. The policy is still in force because there's a thirty-day grace period. Sergeant, the company that underwrote the policy is not going to like paying. Any chance it was suicide?"

"You're the second person to ask about that today," Stone replied. "All I can say is that we are exploring all possibilities. Does his policy have a suicide clause?"

"You bet. Standard two-year," Harris said. "By the way, sergeant, I've got a very special policy for police officers. If you're interested, I'll send you a brochure."

"Well, thank you very much, Mr. Harris. I'll get in touch with you if I need any more information."

Stone hung up and mulled over the conversation. Dr. Wagner had stated he could not have signed a favorable physical exam report for Townsend, yet Harris had just told him that Townsend had a clean bill of health from Dr. Wagner. Why would Harris lie? Stone could think of no reason. Why would Wagner lie? Townsend was his friend, and he might do it for a friend, especially if he were in love with the friend's

wife. The doctor could have wanted to be certain the widow would be well provided for after her husband's death. Stone decided it would be interesting to see a copy of that report.

Lissner's rushing in caused Stone's train of thought to run off the tracks. The young detective had a smile a mile wide across his face.

"I see you've had some luck," Stone remarked.

Lissner could hardly contain himself, but he wanted to milk the suspense. "You call it luck. I call it hard digging."

"Well, let's have it."

The burly detective took a crumpled slip of paper from his pocket and spread it out on the desk. "Found this in the wastebasket in Townsend's office at the bookstore."

Stone read the note. *Call from Lew's station—9 P.M.*

"Know who wrote it?"

"Townsend himself," Lissner replied. "The bookstore was closed today, of course, but Townsend's salesclerk, Janice Carter, showed up while I was there and helped me search. She identified the handwriting. The paper's from a pad by the telephone. Someone set him up for the kill."

"Could be," Stone said. "On the other hand, he could have simply written himself a reminder. But it does show he

knew where Lew's is located. Didn't even have to write down the address. Did you come up with anything else?" He noticed that Lissner was still grinning.

"Not much. Everything was in good shape, especially Janice. Now there's one bright chick. When I mentioned insurance, she dug these out of the files. I can't see they have anything to do with the case."

He handed Stone two letters. The first one was from some insurance company's main office, informing Townsend that the enclosed check for \$3,482.87 was in full payment for his accident claim, policy number 987 756 32. The second letter was from Hal Harris, thanking Townsend for returning the insurance company's check for \$3,482.87, which had been sent to him inadvertently by the head office of one of the firms Harris represented. The letter went on to explain that such checks were normally sent to the local representative, who then presented them to the claimant. Through a computer error, the check had been erroneously sent directly to Townsend; moreover, it actually was intended for another Richard Townsend, a man who had been involved in an automobile accident. Harris thanked Townsend and commended him

for his honesty in returning a check he could easily have cashed.

"More evidence that Townsend was a real nice guy," Lissner commented.

Stone just hummed, not mentioning the matter of the spurious physical report. Or was it spurious? Dr. Wagner might have lied about telling Townsend about his tumor. He had volunteered much confidential medical information. He could have given Townsend a favorable report for personal reasons. A beautiful widow with half a million could be sweet temptation.

After Curtis returned, without much useful information, Stone sent him and Lissner out with instructions to check very carefully on Dr. Wagner, Hal Harris, Lew Hall, Janice Carter, and any other close friends or business associates of Townsend. He specifically instructed them to be alert for any connections one might have with another.

For a few minutes Stone sat thinking. The threads of evidence he had were now beginning to form a pattern in his mind. Then he called the telephone company. As he had expected, he was told that the phone booth at Lew's station had not been out of order and that no service truck had been

dispatched to repair it. Mr. Larking, the manager, added that the truck seen at Lew's was probably one that had been stolen and was later found abandoned a mile or so from the station. Larking was of the opinion the truck had been taken by a gang of coin box burglars. Numerous other trucks had been "borrowed" for a few hours during the past several days. It was the gang's M.O. to place an out-of-order sign on a booth, then send a "service" man, who calmly emptied the coin box as he "repaired" the phone. The company had lost several thousands of dollars in the past few days.

Although Larking said officers from Burglary had already checked the stolen truck, Stone insisted that it be kept out of service until he personally released it. He thanked Larking for his cooperation, hung up, and dialed Burglary. Sergeant Kendrick answered.

"Kenny," Stone asked, "what can you give me on the phone truck stolen last night?"

"Not much. Wiped clean. Not a single usable print. We think it was used by the coin box looters. It's their M.O. all the way, and they're known to be working this area."

"How much was taken from the booth at Lew's station?"

"Funny you should ask,"

Kendrick replied. "Nothing."

"How do you explain that?"

"On that kind of job they use a key or pick the lock and put everything back in order. Ordinarily we don't know a booth's been hit until a company collector opens the box and finds only a few coins. We wouldn't have checked the box at Lew's station if Townsend hadn't been killed there, but when we did, we found it nearly full. I figure Townsend's coming scared the guy off. He was probably waiting around the water and air hoses until the coast was clear so he could have another try. When he sees all the commotion, he beats it."

"But the phony repairman was there almost ten minutes before Townsend arrived. Wouldn't that have given him time to clean out the box?"

"Normally more than enough. But he could have run into difficulties. The phone company's been installing tougher locks recently."

"Sounds logical," Stone conceded. "Okay, Kenny, thanks. Ring me if anything you find ties in with Townsend's death."

Kendrick's explanation fit Lew Hall's story all the way, but Stone had an uneasy feeling that something wasn't as logical as Kendrick's version made it seem. The sudden arrival of Curtis and Lissner

interrupted his thoughts.

The subordinates dragged up chairs and plopped into them. It had been a tedious shift and Stone could tell from their demeanor that they were anxious to call it quits for the day and go home. Stone felt the same.

"Okay, boys, let's hear it."

"Hell, Ray," Curtis complained, "we're up a blind alley. We can't find a motive for anyone to kill Townsend."

"Just tell me what you've learned."

"Wagner's been a friend of Townsend for nearly twenty years. He's been a widower for six. No children. Admittedly he's fond of Helen Townsend, but we couldn't come up with any evidence of hanky-panky. Wagner knew Townsend had only months to live. All he had to do was sit around and wait if he wanted the wife. He's got a good practice. Makes great money. Several years ago he helped out Townsend financially." Curtis unwrapped a stick of chewing gum and slid it into his mouth. He caught Stone looking at him. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Not if you keep it noiseless. Continue."

Curtis shifted the wad to the side of his mouth. "Hal Harris moves in an entirely different social circle than Townsend did. He's the country club type.

Young, dynamic. Hell, he's only twenty-nine, but he has an extremely lucrative business. He has a gorgeous wife, no kids. His only connection with Townsend is that he happens to be his insurance agent."

"What about any others? Lew Hall, the bookstore girl?"

Lissner stirred uneasily. "Nothing there, Ray. Janice Carter is just a college student who works part time at the bookstore. No romantic involvement with Townsend. She's got a steady boyfriend. Townsend bought his gas regularly at a station downtown. Probably had never been to Lew's before, but he could have driven past it many times because it's near Dr. Wagner's office."

"It would be great to find a motive," Curtis added. "A motive would lead to a suspect. Now we don't have either."

"So where does that leave us?" Lissner answered his own question: "With an unsolvable murder. Cripes, let's face it, this one's impossible. No one could've killed Townsend from either inside or outside the booth."

Curtis was quick to agree. "Right. And even though Townsend had a motive for suicide, he couldn't have stabbed himself in the back. Not even a well-trained contortionist could have done that. And even if he

could have, he would have left prints on the ice pick handle. And there were no prints."

All three sat silent, thinking. After a few moments, Stone said, "Look, either it's murder or suicide. There's no way we can call it an accident. Now, Townsend did have a compelling motive for suicide. He had a brain tumor and could have been suffering unbearable pain. But why would he want his suicide to look like murder?"

Curtis's eyes widened with sudden understanding. "The insurance! His wife couldn't collect if he took his own life."

"Right. But why such a bizarre death?" Stone wanted to know. "He could have 'accidentally' stepped in front of a vehicle moving at high speed or driven his car into a telephone pole, and there would have been no question of suicide or murder."

Lissner was right on it. "Townsend was a really nice, thoughtful guy. He never wanted to do anything to hurt anyone. He probably felt a car accident might involve others or that he might be horribly injured but not killed. I think he figured if he set up an impossible murder, no one could be charged with the crime, and his family would be certain to collect his insurance. He'd taken one of those pain-killing pills

and put curare on the ice pick to make death quick and certain."

Curtis put a damper on this theory. "Yeah, but how?"

Stone didn't answer the question. "That's what I want you two to think about. Go on home, get a good night's rest, and we'll talk it over in the morning."

After Curtis and Lissner had left, Stone sat meditating. He let his mind replay the conversation with Sergeant Kendrick and suddenly it was clear to him why Kendrick's logical explanation was not so logical. Stone decided it would be very wise to visit the scene of the crime once more.

Lew waved to him as he pulled into the station. It was nine P.M.—about the same time that Richard Townsend had died on the previous night.

"Hi, sergeant! What can I do for you?"

Stone nodded a greeting. "Mind keeping an eye on me the way you did on Townsend?" He walked over to the booth, stepped inside, closed the door, and performed a brief experiment. Then he went back to the pumps.

"Well, Mr. Hall?"

Lew pushed back his cap and scratched his forehead. "Looked like you were reenacting the crime. You went through all

the same motions the dead guy did, 'cept you didn't fall down dead. How come?"

"It helps me immensely in solving crimes if I don't fall down dead," Stone retorted with a suggestion of a smile. "Now pretend I'm the telephone repairman. Tell me if what I do is about what you saw last night."

Stone drove over to the booth. He got out of his car, entered the booth, closed the door, took the receiver off the hook, put it back, bent down, straightened up, then stepped outside to the back of the booth. He knelt for a moment, then moved slowly over to the air and water service island, returned to the booth, and drove his car to the island, where he checked the tires. He walked back to where Lew was standing.

"Pretty good show, sergeant," Lew laughed. "Like I said this morning, I didn't see him all the time, but I'd say he did pretty much what you just went through."

"Thanks for your help, Mr. Hall." Stone extended his hand and got a firm return shake from the station operator.

"Don't mention it. Think it'll help you find the killer?"

"It wouldn't surprise me at all," Stone flung over his shoulder and he got into his car and drove off.

Harvey Curtis was already in the squad room when Stone arrived at eight the following morning. Lissner came swinging in moments later with that mile-wide grin across his face.

"Looks as if you have something to tell us," Stone said.

"Would you believe I've solved this one? I knew my TV watching would pay off."

"Well, don't keep us in suspense," Curtis said.

"You know how we were talking about Townsend being the only one with a motive but we couldn't figure out how he could have got that ice pick in his back? Well, I can tell you, thanks to a movie I saw last night. It's called *Rage in Heaven*. Stars Ingrid Bergman and Robert Montgomery. Both dead now, but they live on in the movies. Maybe you saw it?"

"Can't say that I have," Stone replied. "Well, get on with your story."

"The picture's about this nutty millionaire who kills himself so it looks like murder, so the guy he thinks is his wife's lover will get executed. The guy wedges a knife in the door jamb, then walks backwards into it. He falls on the floor and it looks like somebody has stabbed him in the back. That's how Townsend did it. He wipes the handle of the ice pick clean, and hold-

ing it by the tip, puts it into the return coin slot, which held it at the right height and angle to penetrate his heart. Then all he had to do was to be sure someone was around to witness his murder and fall backward onto the blade. Sort of *hara-kiri* in reverse."

Curtis slapped his thigh. "Hot damn, Fred, that's it! Suicide made to look like murder. That's the only solution. Well, Ray, it looks like we can toss this one in the closed file."

"I don't think so," Stone said. "Townsend didn't kill himself; he was murdered. A very clever murder, which was supposed to be termed suicide. Just as you two did."

"Come again," Lissner blurted.

"I don't get it," Curtis admitted.

Stone sighed. The two detectives were good investigative officers, but without much imagination. "The murder of Townsend was well planned and executed. Incidentally, Fred, I thought of the ice-pick-in-the-coin-slot ploy yesterday and nearly came to the same conclusion you did. I let you go through the suicide theory to see if you would agree it was the only solution, and you did. That's the conclusion the killer wanted. He knew we'd sooner or later figure out how Town-

send could have put the ice pick into his own back. Once we thought of that, we'd call it suicide and close the case. I'll admit I was almost ready to do it. But a few things didn't fit."

"Such as?" queried Lissner.

"First, the telephone booth was supposedly out of order and had been fixed just before Townsend used it. Logically the repairman's fingerprints should have been all over the phone, yet only Townsend's were found. That told me that the repairman must have wiped the phone clean. No legitimate repairman would have done that. He might have cleaned the phone, but his prints should have been on it. Also a genuine company employee would have replaced the burnt-out light bulb and swept out the booth before putting it back into service. This one didn't. That tells me he was a phony."

"But," Lissner interrupted, "the phone company told us he was a fake attempting to rifle the coin box. We know that."

"We know nothing of the kind," Stone said gently. "Sure, he could have been one of the gang. Stranger coincidences have happened. But a couple of things told me he wasn't. If he had been attempting to break into the coin box, he wouldn't have taken down the out-of-order sign before successfully

looting it and putting everything back in order. If he hadn't opened the box in a few minutes, he would have run. He certainly wouldn't have waited around for a second chance."

Both Curtis and Lissner were more than a little dubious. Lissner had come up with a perfectly good explanation of Townsend's death, and they were reluctant to abandon it. However, they could see some logic to Stone's reasoning. "What else?" Lissner asked.

"That piece of electrical tape found in the booth. We assumed that the phone company's serviceman left it there. But remember the phone company hadn't sent out anyone to fix the phone, so that little piece of tape set me thinking. It convinced me that the fake repairman murdered Townsend and then drove off in the stolen truck while Lew and the other witnesses were discovering the body."

The two detectives looked at each other and shook their heads. Curtis spoke for both of them. "I can see how Townsend could have killed himself, Ray, but what you say is impossible. The booth was completely closed. How could anyone get the ice pick into the booth without breaking the glass?"

"Very simply," Stone explained. "He put it into the

booth before Townsend entered."

Curtis seemed puzzled. "Okay, say the ice pick was in the booth when Townsend entered. Why didn't he see it? How'd the fake repairman get it into his back when he was at least thirty feet away?"

Stone hesitated. In his mind he had already worked out the solution to how the crime was committed and he was positive he was correct. "The ice pick wasn't in the coin return slot. The killer used compressed air to project the ice pick into Townsend."

"Compressed air?" The puzzled look remained on Curtis's face.

"You know that Lew's station has water and air hoses situated at a distance from the gas pumps, so drivers using those facilities don't hold up the gas lines. It's the only place in town with a setup like that. That's why the murder occurred there. That's why Townsend was lured to that telephone booth. It had been converted into a death chamber. The mechanics of the thing are simple. Dr. Wagner's mentioning South American Indians hunting with the poison started me thinking. The hunters use poison darts and blowguns. The killer used the ice pick as his dart and had his own version of a blowgun."

"Sounds complicated to me," Lissner remarked.

"Not really. This is the way I think it happened. The murderer, posing as a telephone repairman, arrives in the stolen truck ostensibly to fix the phone. Earlier he had put an out-of-order sign on the booth to keep it free for his use. He then attaches his blowgun—a lightweight cylinder of some kind, probably cardboard or plastic, and about five inches long—to the underside of the telephone book shelf with some electrical tape, so that it hangs just slightly below the shelf and points to a predetermined spot which he is sure will coincide with the victim's heart. The shelf is just slightly lower than the shoulder blade of a man of Townsend's height. The killer inserts the ice pick into the tube, which is just a fraction wider than the diameter of the handle. Hanging phone books effectively conceal the device from anyone entering or standing in the booth."

Stone paused to see if Curtis or Lissner wanted to make a comment. Neither did.

"Attached to the closed end of the cylinder is a length of transparent flexible tubing—probably plastic—which the killer runs through the rear ventilation opening at the bottom of the booth. He uses a cou-

ple of short pieces of electrical tape to hold the thin hose against the framework, where it is virtually invisible. Then he goes over to the air and water island, connects his tubing to an air hose, and pretends to be checking his tires. A few seconds later Townsend enters the death chamber. The killer uses the free compressed air supplied by Lew to blow his 'dart' into Townsend's back. He gives a hard tug on the tubing; the cylinder comes loose from the shelf and drops to the floor. The killer pulls it and the tubing over to his truck and drives off just as Lew and the other witnesses are rushing to the booth. Unfortunately for the murderer, one small piece of his tape remains in the booth. Any questions?"

Lissner was dubious and blunt. "Well, it's a helluva lot more complicated than my suicide theory, but I'll have to admit, it does account for all those bothersome little details."

Curtis went further. "Okay, suppose we agree that the phony repairman is the killer. How do we find out who he is? He wasn't recognized and left no fingerprints."

The reaction of the two officers to his splendid deductions was not as enthusiastic as Stone would have liked. To give them time to appreciate his mental

efforts, he got up and walked to the window. The view wasn't good—the police parking lot with a couple of billboards thrown in for good measure. He turned to face his subordinates.

"I know," he teased. "Don't you?"

Both shook their heads.

"I take it we agree that Townsend was murdered. Okay, then we have to accept as fact that the murder was conceived to lead the police to label it suicide, just as you did, Fred. The murderer has to be someone who knew Townsend might have a reason to kill himself and make it appear to be murder."

Jumping to conclusions was one of Curtis's weaknesses. "Dr. Wagner! He was the only one who knew Townsend had a tumor. And he had possession of the poison. He could easily have faked that robbery. He could get his hands on the insurance money by marrying the widow."

"Wagner knew Townsend was going to die," Stone said, "but I don't believe he knew about the insurance, since he was aware Townsend was not insurable. And even if he did know about it, he had no motive to kill Townsend, since the man was going to die in a few months. Now, we know that Townsend didn't tell his family about his illness, and Wagner says he told no one. I believe him. But

Townsend himself may have told another person, and I'm certain he did."

Curtis and Lissner sat there with open mouths.

"Fred, get a warrant and search for rubber or plastic tubing, red paint, and electrical tape. Also check the area where the telephone truck was abandoned. The blowgun device may have been discarded near there. I'd sure like to get a look at that thing. Harve, you bring in the suspect for questioning."

"Who?" both detectives asked.

"Hal Harris."

By five in the afternoon proof that Stone's deductions were amazingly accurate started coming in. A search of Harris's garage yielded some plastic tubing, a can of paint that matched that on the ice pick handle, and a roll of tape like the piece found in the booth. Detective Lissner even managed to come up with the death device Harris had put together. It was found by neighborhood youngsters in a trash dumpster a few blocks from where the phone truck had been abandoned. Lissner had enlisted the kids in the search and it had paid off for both the detective and the children. It had cost him twenty dollars in rewards, but it was well worth the money,

for Harris's fingerprints were all over the gimmick. The device looked almost exactly as Stone had envisioned it—a five inch piece of PVC sprinkler pipe on one end of a forty foot length of quarter-inch plastic tubing and a connecting tire valve on the other. The files at Harris's office contained a copy of the medical report supposedly signed by Dr. Wagner. It was an obvious forgery.

The result of all this evidence was that Hal Harris, after having been questioned for more than two hours in the presence of his attorney, calmly dictated and signed a full confession. It was probably his best move, for by doing so he was certain to avoid the death penalty.

At six in the evening Sergeant Ray Stone sat in an upholstered chair in front of Captain Jack Parker's desk. Parker wanted some personal explanations. "I still don't see how you knew it was Harris."

"It had to be Harris or Wagner. Those were the only two who knew of Townsend's impending death. Wagner had no reason to murder Townsend. Harris was the only one with a motive. Townsend was blackmailing him."

Parker leaned forward eagerly. "How'd you figure that out?"

"Townsend managed to get a

whopping big insurance policy when he had only a short time to live. Dr. Wagner said he didn't give Townsend an insurance physical, yet Harris told me Townsend came in with a clean bill of health from Wagner. He was lying. No doctor lets the patient carry the exam report back to the company. He sends it. Harris had to have forged the examination report that was sent in with the policy application. It wasn't worth the risk to do that unless someone forced him. That someone could only have been Townsend."

This explanation did not completely satisfy Parker. "What did Townsend know that enabled him to blackmail Harris?"

"It's not so much what he knew, but what he guessed," Stone replied. "Those two letters we found in Townsend's files put me onto it. Harris was filing false claims and pocketing the proceeds. Townsend threatened to tell Harris's parent companies to examine his claims for fraud unless Harris got the policy approved. Townsend, normally a very nice and honest guy, was not concerned for himself when he learned of his terminal illness. He wanted his family to be without financial worries after he was gone. That's why he felt forced to blackmail Harris."

Stone leaned back, lacing his fingers behind his head. "Any more questions, Jack, or have I completely satisfied your curiosity?"

"Not quite," Parker said. "How did Harris get Townsend to go to the telephone booth? After all, he was the black-mailer. You'd think he'd set up the meeting."

"We got the answer from Harris himself. Townsend wasn't able to come up with the third month's premium, so he asked Harris to give him a receipt stating the premium had been paid. Now Harris began to sweat. If Townsend didn't die soon—and many who are given months hang on for years—he was afraid he would be paying all the future premiums for Townsend. He had to come up with a way to get rid of Townsend and have the policy canceled without an extensive investigation. 'Suicide' was the answer. It would appear as if

Townsend were trying to bilk the insurance company by faking his own murder."

Stone's pausing briefly caused Parker to blurt out, "So what did Harris do?"

"He telephoned Townsend and suggested that for formality's sake the premium should be sent to the main office. He persuaded Townsend to go to Lew's station at nine o'clock that night and make a phone call from the booth there. Harris told Townsend that when he got back to his car he would find the necessary cash in an envelope on the front seat. Then all Townsend would have to do was to deposit the money in his account and send in a check for the premium."

"You know, Ray, Harris's plan was ingenious," Parker remarked. "It would have succeeded, too, if it hadn't been for your keen observations."

"Could be," Stone said. "It was an almost perfect crime."