



MYSTERY WRITERS
OF AMERICA *presents*

THE RICH
and
THE DEAD

NEW STORIES BY

MICHAEL CONNELLY LEE CHILD
S. J. ROZAN DAVID MORRELL
TED BELL HARLEY JANE KOZAK

AND 14 OTHERS

EDITED BY

NELSON
DEMILLE

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INTRODUCTION

BY NELSON DEMILLE

It is an honor and a pleasure to have been chosen as the editor of the 2011 Mystery Writers of America annual anthology.

This year's anthology is top-notch, and the stories collected here are in the finest tradition of the mysteries and crime stories that have appeared in this volume over the years.

The theme of this collection, as the title suggests, is rich people who are killed or who kill. And for fun, some of our authors also explore the illegal, illicit, and in some cases, immoral goings-on of the rich. For additional readings on this subject, I suggest any newspaper any day of the week. I think *everyone* had fun with this topic, and when the writer is having fun, the reader is having fun.

What is it that makes the criminal behavior of the rich and famous so fascinating to us? Often it's not the crime itself, which in many cases would barely make the news if committed by a lesser mortal. It is, I think, aside from the public's obvious fascination with the rich or famous, the idea that someone with so much to lose would risk so much in the commission of a crime. We are captivated by what drove this exalted person to the crime, and we want to know how the law and how society will deal with someone at this level. Will justice be done? Will the notoriety of the accused work for or against him or her? From O. J. Simpson to Bernie Madoff to every crooked politician and ditsy actress arrested for everything from DWI to murder that you've ever seen on the front pages of the tabloids, the answer is not always clear. But it *is* entertaining and engrossing to read about.

Some of the writers in this collection chose not to make the rich person the perpetrator, but to make him or her the victim. There is a saying in this business that it's hard for a writer to make the reader feel sorry for an unhappy rich girl on a yacht. True enough, but if the unhappy rich girl—or guy—is murdered, or blackmailed, or threatened, then we might feel some sympathy for them. In most cases, however, the rich person who is a victim usually got what he or she deserved. But still, a crime has been committed and now justice must be done. Or does it? Some of the stories to follow examine the moral ambiguities of getting rid of a rich, nasty SOB. Do we

want to see this crime solved? Yes. But do we want the perpetrator brought to justice for ridding the world of that rich, nasty SOB? Maybe not.

I WANT TO take this opportunity to thank all the writers who put so much time and effort into this year's anthology, though I won't thank them by name—they're in the Contents. But I do want to thank by name Barry Zeman of the Mystery Writers of America (MWA), with whom I had the pleasure of working on this project for the last year. Barry did a lot of the heavy lifting and kept me from getting a brain hernia. Thanks, too, to Margery Flax, administrative manager of the MWA, who was of enormous help to me when I was president of MWA and who was truly the administrative manager, par excellence, for this anthology. I also want to thank John Helfers of Tekno Books, who coordinated all the pieces of this project and did a fantastic job of editing. Thanks, too, to Celia Johnson of Grand Central Publishing (GCP) for pulling it all together. GCP is the publisher for my novels, and I'm happy to be working with them on this anthology.

This book would not have been possible without the hard work and dedication of the panel of judges, who read nearly two hundred submissions from fellow MWA members and who had the difficult task of choosing the best for me to pick from. Many, many thanks go to Libby Hellmann, Daniel Stashower, Persia Walker, James Lincoln Warren, and Carolyn Wheat.

And finally, I also want to thank the Mystery Writers of America, one of the finest professional organizations in the publishing business, for inviting me to edit this year's anthology. As a thirty-five-year member and former president of MWA, I can say with some authority and experience that the MWA has been instrumental in keeping the mystery story in the forefront of all writing genres and has assured mystery readers a continuous supply of the first-rate stories we love—up to and including this year's extraordinary anthology.

If you love crime and mystery stories, you will love this collection from the men and women who have proven themselves to be masters of the genre.

Enjoy!

—Nelson DeMille

DEATH BENEFITS

BY NELSON DEMILLE

On a pleasant Friday afternoon in June, best-selling author Jack Henry sat in the study of his Upper East Side townhouse. He had put his creative writing aside and was now focused on his finances—bills, income projections, royalty statements, and pending deals.

After a few hours, he was coming to the realization that he was on the brink of insolvency. Bankruptcy. “Holy shit.”

It just didn’t seem possible. He was rich and famous. How could he be broke?

Well, because the money going out was greater than the money coming in. That’s how. Actually, he’d known about this problem for some time. But through a process of denial, disbelief, and maybe a little arrogance, he’d put off the inevitable conclusion, which now stared him in the face.

“You’re broke,” he said aloud. “You have no money. You’re screwed.” He opened the lower left drawer of his desk, pulled out a bottle of Rémy Martin, and took a swig.

He sat back in his leather chair and stared blankly out the window of his East Sixty-fourth Street townhouse. How did this happen? Well, two financially ruinous divorces had not helped the bottom line. Not to mention that his last two novels hadn’t been well received by the critics or the public and had also been turned down by the book clubs. And then there were the movie deals that had never materialized, and the foreign translation deals on his last two books that had dwindled to a few lowball offers from thieving publishers in countries that he couldn’t even locate on a map. Lithuania? His agent, Stan Wykoff, wanted him to accept *any* translation deal, like the thousand bucks just offered by the Bulgarian publisher for his latest novel, *Into the Dark Waters*. Stan had told him, “I’ll see if I can get you a paid trip to Bulgaria to publicize the book.” To which Jack had replied, “*You* go to Bulgaria. See if you can get me another thousand.”

Jack took a second swig of cognac. “How are the mighty fallen.”

His biggest financial problem seemed to be taxes—federal, New York State, and New York City. A letter from his accountant informed him that his tax obligations—past, present, and future—totaled slightly over half a million dollars with interest and penalties. How did *that* happen? Well, apparently he'd made enough money to owe taxes, but he'd been spending his gross income as it came in and had not set aside money for his government partners. That wasn't too smart, but he didn't believe he'd been too extravagant in his spending... except of course he had high fixed and necessary expenses, like the two top floors of this townhouse, which cost him ten thousand a month. Then there was his secretary and his housekeeper. And, of course, there was the summer rental in East Hampton at... how much was that? He found the entry in his checkbook. One hundred and forty thousand for the season. Maybe he should have spent this summer in the city. But how could he do that? *Everyone* was in the Hamptons.

Then there were his incidental expenses like the catered dinner parties; the BMW lease; his club, the Knickerbocker; his clothes; dining out; and a few vacations. Paris in the fall, for instance. St. Barths in January. A few bucks here and a few bucks there, and before you know it, it adds up.

And on top of all this were his necessary business expenses. Typewriter paper. Printer cartridges. Lots of paper clips. Plus a new dictionary. It adds up.

The problem, he was convinced, was not the expenses—he'd always had these expenses. The problem was the income. Expenses were steady; income was down. *That* was the problem. *That* was what had led to this alarming gap in his cash flow chart. Or whatever his accountant called it.

And was this declining income *his* fault? No. It was the fault of his publisher, who couldn't sell crack cocaine to a junkie. And they damned sure couldn't sell books. Not *his* books, anyway.

The other reason for this income crisis was Stan Wykoff. Laziest literary agent on the planet. And for doing nothing, Stan took 15 percent of everything that Jack made, which, admittedly, had not been as much in the last few years as it had once been. Yet there had been a time when Jack Henry pulled in two or three million a year, and Stan Wykoff skimmed his 15 percent right off the top. How much, Jack wondered, had Stan made off him in the last ten or twelve years? Jack did a quick calculation in his head and came up with about three million dollars. "Bastard."

If Jack thought that Stan Wykoff was sharing in his financial distress, he would have taken some satisfaction in that. But the Wykoff Agency had dozens of authors who Stan ripped off at 15 percent, and as long as half of

them produced, then Stan could actually live better than his highest-paid author. For doing nothing.

Jack Henry looked at his watch. It was close to 4 p.m., and he wanted to get on the road and drive out to his summer rental. He needed a break from this depressing reality and a break from his writing, which was not going well. He needed to sit on his back deck and stare at the sun setting over Georgica Pond, a drink in his hand, and his mind on something else. Like fishing or getting a tan. Or the new cocktail waitress at The Palm.

Something would turn up that would get him out of this predicament. It always did.

As he tidied up his desk, he came across a bill that his secretary had marked "Important." It was an annual premium notice from the National Life Insurance Company. Five thousand two hundred and thirty dollars. It took him a few seconds to recognize what this was. It was, in fact, the bill for a policy that he had taken out on the life of Stan Wykoff. The death benefit was five million dollars and the beneficiary was Jack Henry.

Jack stared at the premium notice, recalling better days when he was doing well financially and he and Stan had a substantial insurable interest in each other's lives. Stan, he knew, had a similar policy on him. In fact, he recalled, they had taken their insurance physicals together, then gone out for drinks and later playfully pretended to push each other in front of moving vehicles. He smiled; then the smile faded as he thought about Stan getting his premium notice and paying it without a second thought or a second notice.

As for their present insurable interest in each other, Stan would not suffer a significant loss of income if Jack died, so the five million was all gravy for him. And if Stan died... well, Jack's income would go up. Five million. And Stan, who had seemed so irreplaceable when the policy was taken out, was now easily replaceable. In fact, Jack would have a new agent before the embalmers finished with Stan Wykoff.

Meanwhile, however, this was a term policy and the premiums were rising faster than Jack's and Stan's ages. And Stan, with nothing to do all day, went to the gym a lot and kept fit. Jack on the other hand was tied to his desk sixty hours a week, and perhaps he drank too much. In fact, he realized that Stan had a much better chance than he did of cashing in on the five million dollars.

Bottom line here, he thought, *this is a good place to save some money*. He threw the premium notice in the wastebasket, stood, and walked toward the door.

He stopped. Then turned, walked back to the wastebasket, and retrieved the bill. *Five thousand two hundred and thirty dollars*. That's what it would cost him to make five million if Stan died in the next twelve months. But what if Stan didn't die? Why would Stan die? *How* would Stan die?

Jack stared at the bill. His lottery ticket. The solution to all his money problems was pressed between his thumb and index finger. Stan was healthy... but even healthy people had accidents.

Jack came to his senses, then laughed silently at the crazy thought that had formed in his mind. "This isn't a novel by Jack Henry. This is real life. Real people don't murder people for insurance money." Actually, they did. *Desperate men do desperate things*. But he wasn't a murderer. He *was* a financial idiot, but not a killer. He threw the premium notice back in the wastebasket and left his office.

He called the garage for his car and began packing a few things for his long weekend in East Hampton.

His life, as he knew it, was coming to an end, and he tried to be philosophical about it. "Better to have had money and lost it than never to have had money at all." Better to be poor and honest than to be rich with a crime on your conscience. *Behind every great fortune is a crime*. He looked at himself in the bedroom mirror and said, "I can live without this townhouse, without the BMW, without the house in the Hamptons, without Paris or St. Barths. I can clean my own small apartment in a cheaper neighborhood and do my own laundry and my own secretarial work. I don't need to dine in expensive restaurants—I can learn to cook. And I don't need all the women that money can buy. And if I never get laid again..."

He went quickly back to his office and fished the insurance bill out of the trash.

JACK HENRY SAT in a rocker on his cedar deck and faced west. The big red sun was sinking into the wetlands around the large tidal pond. He sipped his gin and tonic—his third—and felt relaxed, but also tense. He had the means to turn financial ruin into financial gain. The five million dollars—a tax-free death benefit—would pay off the government and his creditors and buy him three or four more years of comfort, and also buy him time to turn out a few

more best sellers. The last two books, written perhaps too quickly under the stress of financial pressure, had not been up to his usual high standards. He could do better than that with a five-million-dollar cushion. He owed that to his readers.

And, of course, he'd have a new agent. Someone who believed in him. Someone who could negotiate a high advance for a three-book deal with a better publisher. "Someone," he said aloud, "younger and hungrier than the late Stan Wykoff." *The late Stan Wykoff*. He liked the sound of that.

Or he could liquidate everything here, take the five million, and move to St. Barths or the Bahamas. Maybe the Cayman Islands. He pictured himself in a nice beach house with servants. He smiled.

Then he frowned. Yes, he had the solution—but did he have the will to... well, do it?

In his younger days he had been a risk taker, but the risks were always calculated and the reward was always worth the risk. What he was contemplating might not be worth the risk, even with a five-million-dollar reward. But... well, what was the alternative? Poverty. No more nights at Elaine's. Cleaning his own toilet.

In his early writing career he'd written a number of police procedural novels—crime novels—and he'd done a lot of research on the subject of murder. A homicide detective by the name of John Corey had once told him, "*The perfect murder never looks like a murder. It looks like an accident. Right out in the open. And the murderer calls the cops right away. The best accident is the victim falling off a boat. Off the cliff is good, too. Gun went off by accident is a little dicey, but it can work. Everyone knows it wasn't an accident, but how you gonna prove beyond a reasonable doubt that it was murder?*" Corey had added, "*Have a good story and stick to it, and make sure there are no witnesses.*"

Detective Corey had given him some good inside tips on the perfect murder, and Jack remembered all of them and had incorporated some of them into his novels. His fictional detectives always got their man, of course, but Jack had always wanted to write a book where the killer outsmarted the law. "That happens in real life," he assured himself. "Smart killers get away."

A big crow sat on the railing of his deck and stared at him closely, waiting perhaps for him to move off and leave his bowl of peanuts. *The crow*, he thought, *must be a literary agent*. He grabbed a handful of nuts—about 15 percent—and flung them at the big black bird. The crow flew off, then

circled back, and landed on the lawn where the nuts had fallen and began pecking at them. “Vulture,” Jack said. “Bloodsucking parasite.” Which reminded him to call his agent. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and dialed Stan Wykoff.

Wykoff answered, “Hi, Jack. What’s up?”

“Not much. I’m out at the beach, and I thought I’d catch up with my old pal and agent.”

“Okay. Well, not much to report.”

“How’s the deal going with Columbia?”

“The country or the movie studio?”

“The *movie studio*, Stan.”

Stan replied, “There is no deal, Jack. Just some interest in *Into the Night*.”

“*Into the Dark Waters*.”

“Right. They like it. It got good coverage, but—”

“Don’t take less than half a mil for a two-year option.”

“Let’s see if they offer.”

“I want points and a screen credit no smaller than the producer’s.”

“Okay... I’m in the middle of something, Jack. Can I call you back?”

“What are you doing this weekend?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Come on out. I have a great place this year. Plenty of room. Pool and tennis court.”

“Sounds tempting, but—”

“I’m going to the Southampton Library fund-raiser tomorrow afternoon. Fifty, sixty big authors under the tent, all signing their latest for a good cause. You can poach.”

“I don’t *poach*, Jack.”

“You can make their acquaintance, buy a signed copy of their book, and leave your card on their table. They all hate their agents, anyway.”

There was a short silence, then Stan said, “Well...”

“Take the train out. I’ll pick you up at East Hampton station, we’ll go to The Palm for a few drinks and a steak, then maybe we can prowl. Call me with your ETA.”

“Well...”

“I can’t promise we’ll get laid, but I can promise we’ll get drunk. And tomorrow you’ll have fifty potential victims under one tent. Plus a cocktail

party afterwards with lots of top editors who you'll know. See you later." He hung up.

Jack sat back in his rocker and finished his gin and tonic. *Well*, he thought, *this story is going to have a twist*. Author bites agent. Plus a happy ending. Author keeps a hundred percent of what he makes.

JACK MET STAN Wykoff at the East Hampton train station, and by 8:30 p.m. they were at the bar in the celeb-studded Palm restaurant. The Palm in Manhattan and the one here in East Hampton were Jack's kind of place: overpriced, which kept the riffraff out, great steaks, Alpha male clientele, waiters who knew who he was, and women who appreciated all of the above. And if things went right this weekend, he could continue to be a regular at both Palms. If things did not go right, he'd be getting his beef at Burger King.

Jack had a scotch and Stan had white wine. Jack chatted up the lady bartender who was young enough to be his daughter. Stan played with his BlackBerry, probably, Jack thought, texting his ex-wife, imploring her to come back. Stan Wykoff was the antithesis of the macho male characters that Jack Henry created in his novels, and the antithesis of Jack Henry himself. And yet, they'd once been friends and still called each other friend. The truth, however, was that they'd grown to dislike each other, and the only bond that remained was professional. And even that had been weakened when they'd stopped making money for each other. It was like a bad marriage—worse, actually, because they both secretly feared they might be worse off without the other. So they continued the charade.

Their table was ready and they sat. Stan had a salad and fish, and Jack had a bloody red steak and more scotch. This, Jack thought, was why he hated Stan Wykoff. The man ate like a bird, drank like a worm, and took care of himself like he was going to live forever. Plus, Stan was cheap and never picked up the tab for anything. Agents were supposed to give back a little of the 15 percent. Like send a limo now and then or maybe buy a goddamn lunch once in a while.

Jack Henry was a generous man, and he had the Amex bills to prove it. Cheap people pissed him off. He wanted to remind Stan that he couldn't take it with him. But he *could* leave five million behind.

They talked about the publishing business, and Jack realized, not for the first time, that Stan Wykoff was not current on the new challenges facing

the industry. Nor was he up on any good gossip. In fact, Stan had no clue about what was going on along Publishers Row. Stan did not read the trade journals or online publications or go to seminars or trade fairs or do many lunches with editors. In fact, Stan Wykoff mostly sat in his Upper West Side apartment doing who knew what all day. Meanwhile his midtown agency was run by two clueless, underpaid recent college grads whose most outstanding attributes were their tits. *How*, Jack wondered, *did this guy survive?* Well, partly on his past reputation and mostly on his stable of authors who hadn't fired him yet. In fact, most of his authors lived out of town and weren't around enough to figure out that Stan Wykoff was lazy and out of the loop. The editors knew this, of course, but they liked Stan Wykoff because he never drove a hard bargain. Jack Henry could attest to that.

And to add insult to injury, Stan Wykoff's reputation, such as it was, was enhanced by his being the agent of best-selling author Jack Henry. It occurred to Jack, perhaps because of the alcohol, that *both* their careers and reputations were in decline and that this relationship—symbiotic or parasitic—was no longer working for them. They were both dying. The writer couldn't write, and the agent couldn't agent. And that, Jack knew, was the truth. *In scotcho veritas.*

But one of them could survive if the other was dead. Thanks to the National Life Insurance Company.

The bill came and Jack said, "I'll get it."

"Thanks," Stan replied. Bastard.

STAN DID NOT want to go club hopping, and Jack was just as happy about that. Stan was not a good wingman. In fact, he had a knack for driving the women away, especially when he told them the long, sad story of how his wife had left him for a tweeby college professor—English literature—who she'd met when taking a class at NYU. As Jack liked to tell people, she got an A in the course and Stan got an F.U. Jack had always wanted to use that in a book but thought Stan might be offended.

They drove to Jack's rental house, a big contemporary on Georgica Pond. Jack pulled into the long gravel driveway and said to Stan, "Do me a favor. I like to garage the car. Can you move that bicycle?"

Stan got out of the BMW and walked toward the bicycle that Jack had left in the driveway.

There wasn't another house in sight and no traffic on the dark road. In fact, no witnesses.

Jack put one foot on the brake and pressed slightly on the accelerator. The engine revved, and the car strained forward.

Do it! Now!

Just as Jack was about to hit the gas and release the brake, a thought flashed into his mind. *What if the impact doesn't kill Stan?* He'd have to back up and run him over again. Then he'd have a lot of explaining to do to the cops: *Well, Officer, I... I don't know why I backed up and ran him over again. I was distraught.*

Do it!

Jack realized he was pressing harder on the brake and the accelerator, and the engine was roaring.

Stan turned and looked back at the car, and Jack saw him staring at him like that proverbial deer caught in the headlights.

Jack slumped in his seat and took his feet off the pedals.

Stan hesitated, then wheeled the bicycle onto the grass.

Jack pressed the remote and the garage door lifted—revealing a garage filled with sporting equipment, bicycles, storage boxes, and other junk. Not much room for a car.

Stan stared into the garage, then turned and looked back at the BMW.

Jack took a deep breath, killed the lights and the engine, and got out of the car, forcing a smile as he walked up the driveway. He glanced into the garage and said to Stan, "I thought I cleaned this out."

Stan didn't reply. They made eye contact in the dim light of the lamppost. Jack forced another smile and said, "Too much to drink."

Stan walked back to the car, retrieved his suitcase, and both men entered the house.

It occurred to Jack that this would have been far from the perfect crime. His enthusiasm was interfering with his judgment. He wouldn't write a scene with so many illogical mistakes. And if he did, he could write it over again. But in real life—real murder—there were no rewrites. *You get one shot at this, Jack. If you get it right, you get five million; if you get it wrong, you get twenty years to life.*

He noticed that Stan was standing in the middle of the living room, looking at him. Stan seemed to be disturbed about something. *In fact*, Jack thought, *Stan, who was not usually a very imaginative man, may have imagined that his author was trying to kill him.* Not good.

Jack smiled widely and waved his arms to encompass the big cathedral-ceilinged room, saying, "Isn't this a great place? Boy, I could get some good writing done here. You gotta come out for a few weeks. You work too hard, buddy. I want to run a few proposals by you. We'll sit by the pool. Tennis in the morning. Hey, I have a bottle of Chateau Montelena in the wine cooler. How 'bout a nightcap?"

Stan replied, "Where's my room?"

Jack maintained his smile and good cheer and replied, "Terrific room. Overlooking the pond."

He carried his agent's suitcase up the stairs and showed him to a big guest room, saying, "If you need anything, I'll be out on the back deck."

Jack went downstairs and poured himself a scotch from the bar, then went out through the sliding glass doors to the deck and collapsed into a chaise lounge.

Stan definitely looked a bit... troubled, but Jack was sure that Stan would conclude that he had misinterpreted what happened in the driveway. Jack was drunk and Stan had also had a few. Plus, Stan was still alive, so that was proof enough that Jack—his author and pal—was not trying to kill him. Jack recalled the night when they had pretended to push each other in front of moving vehicles. Just a little drunken fun. Maybe that's what Stan was thinking now. In fact, maybe that's how Jack should have played it. Well, he couldn't rewrite that, but he could write the next chapter.

He put his creative mind in gear and thought about ways for Stan Wykoff to have an accident.

"Killing a friend, wife, or acquaintance is easy," Detective Corey had told him. *"You have access and trust. What you also need is balls and brains. And a plausible story. You need imagination."* "Got all that," Jack said to himself.

Detective Corey had cautioned, however, *"The only thing the cops and the D.A. will have on you is your motive. A strong motive equals a strong presumption of guilt. But motive is not enough to build a case."* Right. The five million dollars would look like a good motive, but the policy was over ten years old. It wasn't taken out last week. Right?

He felt that he was starting to vacillate. Maybe he was just fantasizing about killing his agent. All authors fantasized about killing their agent. Maybe that's what had happened in the driveway. A half-played-out fantasy.

Jack stared up at the starry sky. This could be his last summer in the Hamptons. His financial future—his entire life—rested entirely on what he

did or did not do this weekend. He looked back at the big house and stared at the light in the guest room window; then the light went out.

In the morning, he'd know if Stan had let his imagination run wild—especially if Stan called a taxi to take him to the train station. But if everything seemed okay, then Jack would suggest taking the boat out for some ocean fishing.



THE MORNING DAWNED bright and sunny. Good boating weather. “Good day to drown my agent.”

Jack got out of bed and headed for the bathroom. Little Scotsmen were playing bagpipes in his head and he took an aspirin, then washed up while he listened to the maritime weather channel. Seas were calm with one- to two-foot waves; winds were from the south at three to four miles per hour. Perfect day to take the twenty-eight-foot Sea Ray out on the ocean. Five miles should do it. In fact, since Stan Wykoff couldn't swim, five feet should do it. But he needed to be away from witnesses. Five miles.

Jack slipped on a ratty flannel bathrobe over his boxer shorts and went downstairs.

He found Stan in the kitchen, already up and about, having a cup of coffee and reading the *New York Times*, which was delivered each weekend morning.

Stan glanced up from his newspaper, and Jack greeted him with a smile and a hearty good morning. He inquired of his houseguest, “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Jack thought Stan seemed subdued, but he wasn't dressed, packed, and waiting outside for a cab. So, as Jack had hoped, Stan had forgotten or dismissed the driveway incident. People rarely took that long leap from suspicion to absolute belief—from reasonable doubt to conviction. That was why juries returned verdicts of not guilty and why murder victims rarely saw it coming.

Stan was wearing stupid yellow pajamas—silk or synthetic—with idiotic bears on them. Probably a gift from his wife. Jack hated men who wore pajamas. And open-toed slippers. *Wimp*.

Jack poured himself a cup of coffee and noticed that Stan had found a frying pan and had scrambled some eggs in a bowl, and he'd also found some chives in the kitchen garden. Stan was one of those men who liked to

cook. Jack disliked men who liked to cook. Skinny men, like Stan, who sliced and diced and made horrible healthy things to eat. The only green thing in Jack's refrigerator was the mold on the cheddar cheese.

Jack sat at the round table and sipped his coffee. He asked Stan, "Is this decaf?"

"Yes."

That, Jack decided, is a capital offense punishable by drowning.

The Saturday *Times* had the Sunday *Book Review* section included, and Jack picked it up from the table and flipped through it. None of the ads for other authors' books included a blurb from Jack Henry, and he realized he hadn't been asked for a blurb in almost a year. He noticed, too, that many of the reviews were of novels by hot new authors who Jack considered terminally cool or effete or just plain incomprehensible. But the *Times* loved them for "taking chances" or "making us rethink how we see the world" or some other cliché. Bottom line, the culture had changed, and Jack Henry's fictional heroes—men who were men and women who were women—were no longer in fashion. In fact, his career was in a death spiral.

Stan put down his paper and asked, "Would you like an omelet?"

"Sure."

Stan went to the stove and began puttering. Maybe Stan should write a cookbook, Jack thought. *Cooking for Lonely Losers.*

Stan was now pouring some liquids into the blender—orange juice, apple juice, milk—plus ice cubes and a powdery nutritional supplement from a can.

Jack said, "We don't have to be at the Southampton book signing until three. I want to take you fishing this morning. This house came with a twenty-eight-foot Sea Ray."

Stan flipped the omelet. "All right."

Jack had thought Stan might find a reason not to go out in the boat, but Stan was making it easy for him.

Georgica Pond was actually a tidal basin with an inlet that went out to the Atlantic Ocean, and he'd tell Stan they were going for big game fish. *Maybe, he thought, I'll also chum for shark, and Stan will be the chum.* But maybe a shark wouldn't eat Stan out of professional courtesy. He smiled.

Stan Wykoff, for all his physical fitness, couldn't swim, as Jack knew. And the life jackets, which should have been aboard in the sea locker, were still stored in the garage, as Jack had discovered last weekend and as Stan

would discover if he happened to inquire about a life jacket, which was something prissy Stan might do.

One thing Jack would not forget to bring aboard was binoculars to look for other boats. *Make sure there are no witnesses.*

He thought about his statement to the police: “Well, Officer, I was at the helm with the twin engines roaring, making about forty knots, and Mr. Wykoff was sitting aft—or maybe standing—and a rogue wave hit the port side and the craft rolled, and the bow went up and slammed back into the water. I turned to see if Mr. Wykoff was okay, and... he was gone.” Add an appropriate facial expression. No smiling.

There would be questions, of course, and though he was in shock and distraught, he’d do his best to answer. “Yes, of course, I came around, but I didn’t see him. No, I don’t know if he knew how to swim. Apparently not. And unfortunately, there weren’t any life jackets on board. It’s not my boat. I circled and called out; then I got on the radio and called the Coast Guard as I continued my search.” He’d make sure to add, “This is all in the Coast Guard report.” *Word for word with no inconsistencies.*

Sounds good, Jack thought. Tight and to the point. No rewrites necessary. No plot holes. Murder on the high seas. Perfect crime. Just make sure not to mention that I pushed Mr. Wykoff overboard, waved, and yelled, “Fuck you!” Jack smiled.

Stan put a plate in front of Jack and asked, “What are you smiling about?”

“Oh... I just had a thought about... I forgot.”

Stan poured the contents of the blender into two tall glasses and set them on the table. He said, “This will clear your head.” Stan sat and took a long swig of the foamy drink.

Jack sipped it. Not bad. Cold and sweet. He took another drink, then dug into his eggs.

Stan said, “There are actually a few things I wanted to speak to you about.”

Jack glanced up from his eggs. “What?”

“Well, your career.”

Not Jack’s favorite subject, but he was relieved that Stan didn’t want to talk about Jack asking him to get out of the car so he could run him over. Jack replied, “I’ve hit a rough patch.” He added, “What I’m working on now is a blockbuster.”

Stan reminded him, “You said that about your last two books.”

Jack was totally pissed off, but he kept calm. Why argue with a dead man?

Stan assured him, “I’m here to help.”

“Good. Go write me a few chapters.” He knocked back the rest of the smoothie and finished his eggs.

Stan said to him, “I need to be very frank with you, Jack, and I need you to just listen.”

Jack had the feeling that Stan was about to fire him, which, last week, would have been fine with him and would have saved him the trouble of firing Stan. But now, he didn’t want any unpleasantness—he wanted to get Stan on that boat. Jack said, “Let’s save it for later.”

“No. There will be no later.”

“Stan—”

“Listen, Jack. We’re *both* in trouble.” Stan explained, “To be totally honest with you, all my authors are either drunks, senile, lazy, burned-out, talentless hacks, has-beens, dropouts, or pending suicides.” Jack stared at Stan but didn’t reply.

Stan continued, “I’m broke and in debt, and I know you are, too.”

“I... I’m not...” Suddenly, Jack didn’t feel well. His stomach was tightening, and his chest felt heavy.

Stan continued, “We’ve worked all our lives and now we face poverty, and worse—professional embarrassment and personal humiliation.” Jack tried to reply, but he felt a tightening in his throat.

Stan said, “Don’t try to speak. I know it’s difficult.” He continued, “A few days ago I received a bill in the mail that you also received.” He inquired, “Did you see it?”

Jack stared at Stan, but his sight was getting blurry and tears formed in his eyes.

Stan said, “Bills coming in, no money in the bank, and no prospects for the future. It’s very frightening. But where there’s life, there’s hope. Don’t you agree? No, don’t answer that. It was rhetorical.”

Stan finished his smoothie and went on, “So, when I saw the bill... well, you’re a bright man, and you have—or once had—a great imagination. So you can imagine what passed through my mind. But then I said to myself, ‘No, I can’t do that. Jack and I have been through thick and thin together. We go back almost fifteen years.’ You were there for me when Cindy left and I liked you for that—even after I heard about that joke you were telling

everyone. The one about Cindy getting an A and me getting an F.U.” He frowned. “Not funny.”

Jack felt his throat constricting, and he tried to stand but fell back into his chair. Heart attack?

Stan glanced at his watch and said, “Just a few more minutes.” He let Jack know, “Cindy is considering coming back. Part of our problem was money, but I think I have that straightened out now.” He asked, “Isn’t that good news? Jack?”

Jack was concentrating on trying to breathe, but it felt like someone was sitting on his chest.

Stan watched him for a few seconds, then said, “Hang on. I’m almost finished.” He leaned across the table and continued, “Anyway, as I said, when I saw that life insurance bill, I had a bad thought, an evil thought, and I felt very guilty about it. So, when you invited me here, I thought this would be a good opportunity for us to reconnect. I actually have some good news for you about a movie deal I’m working on for two hundred thousand for one of your older and better books. I was going to tell you about it when we got back here last night.” Stan looked at Jack, frowned, and said, “But you tried to kill me.”

Jack managed to shake his head.

Stan seemed annoyed and impatient, then snapped, “Well, you were *thinking* about it. But Mr. Macho got cold feet. Or maybe you realized how stupid your plan was.” Stan added, “You’re losing your balls *and* your brains.”

Jack felt a flood of acid rising in his stomach and he thought he was going to vomit, but nothing came up except a stream of sour-tasting bile that made him gag.

Stan seemed not to notice and said, “So, I thought to myself, if Jack wants to kill me for the insurance money, then maybe I should kill Jack for the same reason.” He looked into Jack’s eyes and asked, “Do you see my point?”

Jack noticed that the backs of his hands were turning purple and swelling.

Stan noticed, too, and said, “I think you’re having an allergic reaction. Like anaphylactic shock. Did you eat something that you’re allergic to?”

Jack managed to croak, “You... bastard...”

Stan stood and retrieved the can of nutritional supplement and read the ingredients. “Vitamins... minerals... uh-oh... ground oyster shells.” He

looked at Jack and asked, “Aren’t you allergic to shellfish? Deathly allergic?” He put the can down and gave Jack a look of contrite concern. “Oh, Jack, I’m so sorry. I put this stuff in the omelet, too. Oh, my God, Jack, I think you’re going to die.” Then he suddenly smiled as though just realizing something and said, “But it’s not all bad news. The good news is that I’m going to make five million dollars. That’s the best deal we’ve ever done together.”

Jack managed to stand and stagger to a kitchen drawer. He opened it and withdrew an EpiPen filled with adrenaline, the antidote to the deadly allergic reaction.

Stan snatched the device out of Jack’s hand and said, “You don’t need that. I’ll call an ambulance. Right after you stop breathing.”

Jack felt his knees buckling and slumped against the counter. His eyes were so swollen he could barely see, but he did see the chopping board that Stan had used to cut the chives, and on the board was a knife. With all the strength that remained in him, he grabbed the knife with his swollen purple hands and plunged it into Stan’s chest.

Stan looked at the knife in disbelief, then staggered back, blood spreading over his yellow silk pajama top.

Jack Henry and Stan Wykoff stood staring at each other; then Jack slumped to the floor, followed by Stan.

They lay side by side on their backs, each of them in respiratory distress—though for different reasons—and each on the verge of cardiac arrest. Jack felt his airway closing and the room was getting dark. Stan’s chest wound was bubbling frothy blood, and wheezing sounds came from his mouth.

Jack drew a final gulp of air through his constricting windpipe and got a single word out of his mouth. “Bastard.”

Stan felt himself drowning in his own blood but managed to reply, “Has-been.”

Both men lay on the cool terra-cotta floor, staring up at the rotating ceiling fan.

Jack’s last thought was of a silly cartoon he’d stuck over his desk—horned demons with pitchforks driving a crowd of people through the gates of hell, and there was a sign over the gate that said, “Authors *Must* Be with Their Agents.”