

The Sophia

By

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Chapter One

The old woman drew her coat tight around her as she moved out into the chill night air, raining and so cold for October. The night was dark and only the light from the portico of the old mansion illuminated a short stretch of the asphalt of the circular driveway.

The fallen Sumac leaves are plastered to the driveway; they had looked so splendid on the trees such a short time ago, now they were a slippery threat to every step that she took.

Where is Rebeka? It wasn't like her to venture out so late, and she's been gone so long, could she have fallen? Was she laying somewhere? Hurt, unable to move, I must find her, where could she be.

"Rebeka, Rebeka, are you out there? Can you hear me?"

Only the wind and driving rain answered her, she took the flashlight out of her coat pocket and turned it on, at least she had the foresight to bring it with her. She continued around the side of the building and saw nothing, heard nothing.

She headed towards the Croquet courts and the Lawn Bowling Rinks at the back of the mansion. The decision had been made to close the club early this year.

The weather has really been dreadful, she thought.

She kept calling, "Rebeka, can you hear me? Oh, please answer me."

Still nothing, the light from her flashlight seemed to be swallowed up by the darkness, she moved carefully, searching each bush and shrub, no sign of her.

She's been gone almost an hour. It's so unlike her. First, 'it's' gone and now Rebeka, who would have called her at this hour? Her disappearance and that call, they are connected, I'm sure of it.

She recited prayers aloud as she continued towards the Lawn Bowling Rinks, and then she saw it.

What is it? Something, a shape, she hurried forward, the wind whipped her coat open. The rain drenches her.

"Rebeka, are you there?"

She hurried towards the shape; it looked like a body.

Could it be, no, not Rebeka, surely not Rebeka.

She stepped on the soggy rink, so expensive to maintain, so lovely to look at. Now it didn't matter, she must see.

She shone the light on the shape, and gasped in horror, she stifled a scream by placing her hand over her mouth. It was Rebeka. She knew in an instant that she was dead. Protruding from her chest was a croquet hoop, driven right through her, impaling her body to the turf. Only the top of the hoop remained exposed, the heavy rubber mallet normally used to set up the court was laying beside the body.

This must be the work of the Demiurge, such evil, who else would it be. There was no time to perform The Consolamentum, but surely, she would be considered "perfect"

She could feel herself beginning to lose control, her head began to spin. Her stomach was churning.

Get control. Do not let go, get the nerves under control, can't go to pieces at a time like this.

However, she could not resist the spontaneous urge to throw up.

* * *

Dave Harris had received the call from the Chief of Police, a murder in a very exclusive part of the city; the victim was a friend of the Mayor, would he look into it personally.

I thought when I made Chief of Detectives; I would at least be able to get a good night's sleep. Not bloody likely. Why is it that people seem to commit murder in the middle of the Goddamn night?

The rain had slowed to drizzle, but it was still soggy, dark and windy, he could see the lights of patrol cars just ahead on his right as he approached.

He remembered passing this spot and thinking what the property might be worth, a mansion and 20 acres of prime land in the most exclusive part of the city, had to be worth 75 million anyway. The mansion

had been large enough to create several luxury condominiums and there was still enough room for an exclusive club, Lawn Bowling and Croquet he seemed to recall.

Keeps the "old farts" off the street I guess.

As he approached, he could see the circular driveway plugged with four or five Patrol cars an ambulance and he thought he could make out Tim Cassidy's car.

Good. Maybe I can hand this off to him and still get a little shuteye.

He parked his car on the street, just south of the entrance to the driveway and made his way to the group standing in the portico at the front of the building, out of the rain at least.

"Hey Tim. Whaddya got?"

The young detective turned from the cluster of officers and waved to Harris.

"Hi Chief, how come they got you out of bed on this one?"

"Seems the victim is a friend of the Mayor."

He moved under the shelter of the portico, trying to shake off the wetness from his raincoat as he did so.

"All I have so far is that the victim is a female, age approximately early seventies, impaled with a croquet hoop. The coroner's out back with the body, he may have more for us by now."

"OK, let's go see."

They walked around the right side of the building. It was a mansion, three stories of ornate stone with cornices at the top of the third story.

I wonder where Bella Lugosi is on a night like this; I might expect Dracula to jump out at any time.

He could see the floodlights at the back; a makeshift rain shelter provided protection for the Crime Scene Unit, and the coroner. And not that it mattered, for the corpse too.

The lawn was clear of any leaves.

Odd thought Harris.

Never having been on one, Harris guessed that it's for Lawn Bowling, he couldn't see where the Croquet set up might be.

He moved into the canvas lean-to, and could see the body clearly in the area lit by the emergency lights. She was on her back, hair plastered to her face from the rain, unseeing eyes staring at nothing, he would've guessed early to mid-seventies even if Tim hadn't told him.

She was wearing a rather strange dress, a sort of gown of a purple colour, tied at the waist with a golden sash. The soles of her shoes, coated with the gold autumn leaves of the Sumacs that were all over this place Except for the Lawn Bowling Green.

"Hello David, I didn't expect to see you here, given your exalted new position."

It was Carl Pelley, the short fat little coroner; he was just removing his rubber gloves as he spoke

"Do you want a closer look? I'm just about finished, we're ready to move the body."

Harris knew that small man was a born tease, he liked him, he was thorough and efficient, and there would be no screw up with this crime scene.

Harris pointed to the croquet hoop that had been driven into the victim's chest. Only the cast-iron red portion of the hoop could be seen,

"That the cause of death?"

"I doubt it, not enough blood, I think she was dead before that thing was driven into her, note the ligature marks on her neck, I won't be sure until the autopsy, but I think that's what killed her."

"Have we identified her?"

"Yes, her name is Rebeka de Sevigny, she's a resident in one of the condo's at the rear of the club."

"Thanks Tim, who found her?"

"Her name is Magdelene Whittaker, she shares the condo with the victim, she came looking for Ms De Sevigny, when she awoke and found her absent."

"Where is Ms Whittaker now?"

"I have asked her to wait in the club area of the Mansion."

Entering the building, Harris was struck by the opulence of the foyer, he stood, awed by what he saw. An impressive staircase ascended to the next level with ornate carvings on the balustrades. An enormous crystal chandelier hung overhead.

Hand carved walnut paneling adorned with hand carved figures on the ceiling, it was wondrous, dark and he thought oppressive.

“I am in here, just to your left.”

The voice was clear and strong, Harris and Cassidy turned and entered what had once been the drawing room and was now clearly a “Games Room.”

At one end of the room was a huge fireplace, surrounded by an altar like, carved mantel that soared a full 16 feet to the ceiling above, an oval portrait hung over the fireplace, maybe the original owner he thought. A comfortable fire was burning in the grate; he stood a few moments absorbing the warmth.

“I assume you are in charge?”

He turned to see woman standing, facing him, in spite of her diminutive size; she seemed to have an almost regal bearing. She was dressed in a purple gown, similar to that the victim wore, again tied at the waist with a golden sash.

“Yes Ma’am, I’m Chief of Detectives Dave Harris, and this is detective Cassidy I’m sorry to have to bother you at such a late hour, but it is important that we talk to you while events are still fresh in your mind.”

“Quite all right detective, I’m just having some tea, would you and Mr. Cassidy care for some, it’s herbal I’m afraid.”

“No thank you Ma’am” Cassidy shook his head.

“Come, sit down gentlemen, how can I help you?”

Cassidy had his notebook out with pencil poised as Harris began.

“It is my understanding that you found the body, do you have any idea what Ms de Sevigny was doing out there at this time of night, in this weather, with no coat?”

“I’m afraid not, as I told this young officer here, I awoke and got up to get a drink of water I noticed the light on in Rebeka’s room, I went in to see if she was all right, but she wasn’t there.

“I couldn’t settle so I decided to sit up and wait for her, when an hour had passed, I decided to go look for her I thought she might have stepped outside onto the portico and perhaps slipped and fallen.

“But there was no sign of her, so I began searching the grounds, that’s when I saw her.”

Harris noted the lack of any distress in her voice; this was a calm restatement of facts of a horrific event. She seemed unshaken, clear eyed, without a tremour of any kind.

“I understand that you and Ms de Sevigny share accommodations in one of the condos here, is that correct?”

“Yes, in fact we were one of the originals, we’ve been together here for 12 years, she will be missed.”
She shows no anguish, just a statement.

“I can appreciate that you must be very upset by what has happened here Ms Whittaker, I will try to be brief.”

“That’s quite all right officer, death is our constant companion in life, you grow closer to it as you grow older, but you will be unaware of that at your age.”

Why is she so cold? No emotion, most old ladies would be hysterical at this point, given what she has seen and the friend she has lost. Could she be involved in the crime? Seems unlikely, but how can I tell?

“Is there anything else that you can tell us about this evening or anything that you think might be related to this crime?”

“The only other thing that comes to mind is that I think I heard the telephone ring, that may have been what woke me up, but I can’t really be sure, I may have just been dreaming.”

“Nothing other than that?”

“I am afraid not.”

“And I don’t suppose that you know who phoned?”

“As I said, I’m not truly sure it did ring, let alone who was on the other end.”

“Can you tell me how many people live here Ms Whittaker?”

“Well, there was a total of seven, that of course included Rebeka, so now six, then of course there is Henry, Henry Porteous, in season he is the groundskeeper, in the off season he is our handyman. He has two small rooms in what used to be the servant’s quarters.

“Rebeka was the chairperson for the condo association and I used to assist her with some of the tasks, that’s how I come to know these things.”

“Just the one employee, this is such a big place.”

“In summer, we hire part time staff for the club, for any luncheons or tournaments we hire caterers. Each condo owner is responsible to contract anything they need in the way of cleaning services and of course there is the condo management company that look after all of the common area issues.”

“Would you please be good enough to give Detective Cassidy a list of all those names, including part time help and the various companies that are used.”

“Of course, but I hope it won’t be necessary to question the condo owners at this late hour, like me, the ladies are all quite elderly, I wouldn’t like to distress them too much.”

It would take more than this to distress them if they are anything like you.

“No Ma’am, we can arrange that for daylight hours, I thank you for your time and help. I’ll leave you with Detective Cassidy. I have other matters to attend to,”

He got up to leave.

“Sir could I have quick word before you go?”

They both moved out to the foyer,

“What the hell do you make of that ‘cold fish,’ do you think she might be involved?”

“Tim, just pursue it as though she is, make sure you check the phone records to see if a call was made and if possible, who made it.”

He closed the heavy door behind him and stepped into the portico. It was still raining, harder than before, one patrol car and two officers remained.

“They clean everything up?”

“Yeah, body’s off to the morgue, the crime scene guys are gone, I guess the weather was bad enough to keep the media people away, so I guess it all went pretty fast.”

“Good, Cassidy’s still here, probably be another hour, I’m heading home, if anything comes up you can reach me there.”

“Yessir.”

He turned up his coat collar and headed down the circular drive to the street where he had left his car, he turned left on the sidewalk and was soon out of line of sight of the two officers.

The trees that lined the street made it seem even darker; the streetlights must have gone of in the storm he thought. As he approached his car a figure darted out the shadows, he was startled; he was deep in thought.

A talon like hand shot out and grasped his right wrist, the grip was so strong he almost cried out in pain. The man pulled Harris’ face close to his; he could smell the putrid smell of stale wine, and vomit.

The man was thin, with wild eyes and narrow face, a straggly beard; his clothes hung like oversized bags on his thin frame Harris could see mucus beginning to escape the man’s left nostril, with a quick sniff he pulled it back in and swallowed it.

The man exhaled in Harris’ face a rotting smell overcame him, then the voice, more a metallic rasp than a human voice.

“YOU MUST FIND IT. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

THIS IS A CATASTROPHE, IT MUST BE FOUND.”

The pain in Harris’ right wrist was almost unbearable, was it broken? He tried to pull away; finally, he directed a kick to the man’s groin. The man crumpled in pain releasing his grip; Harris had fallen in the process. He struggled to get to his feet; his right wrist throbbed, the hand seemed useless.

When he had righted himself, he looked for his attacker, but he was gone. The street was empty.