

# KILL STORY

BY

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## CHAPTER ONE

THE PAY PHONE WAS RINGING in the rear of The Tasty. Joey Neary could have come out from behind the counter to get it, except Joey was at one of those delicate points in the life of a short-order cook. If he took my two eggs off the griddle now, they'd be slimy and disgusting on top. If he answered the phone instead, they'd fry into white rubber with brown lace on the edges. Either way the loser would be me, so I got off my stool and answered the thing myself.

The woman on the line said she was calling about the ad about the bunny rabbits, so I told her she had a really wrong number. "Well, this is the number they ran in the paper," she said. "It says right here in the *Banner* classified. It says ask for Joey."

"Hey, Joey," I hollered. "You order any bunny rabbits?"

"Tell 'em hold on a second," Joey called back. "You mind?"

I told her and set the receiver down on top of the old black coin box. Some weirdness had to be going on, or Joey Neary wouldn't have tacked on the "You mind?" Joey, the normal Joey, made it a religion never to be polite to a customer.

He slid my just-right eggs in front of me and headed out from behind the counter, while I tried to look busy with my *Boston Globe*.

"—Oh, absolutely," he was saying. "—Mickey's fourteen, very responsible kid—Yeah, he's kept rabbits for years—Well, they passed away—Yeah, just from one day to the next, bang, they were gone. The vet still can't figure it out—Oh, yeah, everything's all ready. Fresh newspaper down—That right? You use a screen floor, huh? Lets the stuff fall right through the holes? Sounds like a good idea, Mickey should try that—379 Harvard Street? Sure, I know where that is, Mrs. Bernstein—Oh, Ms. Bernstein. Sorry

about that—Listen, I’m off work at one. A little after that be all right?—Fine, see you then.”

I made like I was still interested in my paper, while Joey went back behind the counter. Let him think he dodged the bullet. Dream on, Joey, at least until I finish my breakfast.

“What did Ms. Bernstein want?” I asked when I had mopped up the last bit of egg yolk with the last bit of semi-toasted Wonder Bread.

“Hey, do I ask you about your personal calls?”

“Joey, Joey, you can talk to your old Uncle Tom. It’s Julius Squeezer, isn’t it?”

Julius Squeezer was the twelve-foot python that Joey’s son, Mickey, kept in the basement. Julius lived in a glass-fronted cage the size of a steamer trunk, with his own heat lamp and Vita-Lite and a wooden box the size of a small suitcase in one corner for those times when he felt like curling up away from it all.

“Got to be the old Squeezer, Joey.”

“None of your damned business, Bethany.”

“Did Ms. Bernstein tell you what kind of lettuce to give the bunny rabbits for their little lunchie-poo, Joey?”

“I’m warning you, Bethany.”

“Joey, you got nothing to warn with. Me, on the other hand, suppose I was to go over to Ms. Bernstein’s around twelve-thirty? Maybe I’d tell her about what the old Squeezer himself eats for lunch. Or maybe I could check in with the classified department at the Bummer, mention to them about the bunny fiend they’re running ads for.”

The Bummer is what everybody calls the *Cambridge Daily Banner*.

“You wouldn’t do that,” Joey said.

“Possibly not,” I said. “Talk to me, Joey.”

“No big thing, for Christ’s sake. You know how it goes.”

“How, Joey? Exactly how does it go?”

“Sis and Junior get bunnies for Easter, all right? Couple weeks later the kids lose interest, mom and pop got to feed the goddamned things, shovel the shit out of the cage.

Couple months, the whole rabbit bit gets pretty old. See what I mean?”

“It’s all coming clear to me, Joey. Hello, classified? Lonely child, single, sensitive, loves music and long walks. Seeks bunny similarly inclined.”

“Come on, Bethany.”

“What do you do when you’ve cleaned out all the Easter bunnies in Cambridge, Joey? Troll for gerbils?”

“Not gerbils, you dumb shit. Gerbils are too quick for Julius. What you want is your slower animals. Your hamsters, your white rats, your guinea pigs.”

“Joey, I’m not going to tell anybody about this—”

“Hey, why would you tell anybody anyway? Who would care?”

“Harry, Louise, Mick and Charlie, Bingo, Stretch, Joanna, the Corrigan brothers, Mel and Melinda, Chuck, Doc LaPorta, Ernie Gallagher . . .”

“All right, all right.”

“But I’m not going to share this with our little group here at The Tasty, Joey. On one condition.”

“Condition? What condition?”

“From now on, Joey, I want my Wonder Bread toasted on both sides, and I want to get it while it’s still warm.”

“What do you think, I got three hands?”

“Every day, Joey. Both sides. Warm.”

The phone rang again, and I was over to it before Joey could even think about coming out from behind the counter. Maybe Ms. Bernstein forgot something.

“The Tasty,” I said. “This wouldn’t be Ms. Bernstein, would it?”

“Oh, Tom,” said a voice like no other voice. “I hoped I’d catch you there. I tried your apartment but naturally nobody was there. Since you’re here instead.”

Felicia Lamport was one of the few people who knew both my numbers, the unlisted one in my apartment and the one on the rear wall of The Tasty. She was a poet who had been my friend for years, ever since she caught me

sneaking into a class she taught at the Harvard extension school. Being an outlaw at heart herself, she let me stay.

“I’m here, all right,” I said. “Where are you?”

“I’m home, and I’d like to talk with you about something.”

“Your place or mine?”

“It’s far too nice a day to stay indoors. How about the terrace in front of Au Bon Pain? Order me an iced tea and I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

THE TERRACE IS ON Massachusetts Avenue, only a few yards up from The Tasty. In front of it is Harvard Square, and across from it is Harvard Yard. The warm May weather had brought out both the Harvard kids and the street kids. People poured in and out of the subway stop in the middle of the square, which was actually a triangle. Cars and busses and trucks jammed the streets and backed up at the lights, rumbling and fuming to be on their way. Except for cabbies at the cab stand, nobody ever parked in Harvard Square. Nobody except Felicia Lamport.

I waited and wondered, to see how she would pull it off this time. One time she backed her yellow Volkswagen bug halfway down the pedestrian passage that runs through Holyoke Center and parked in front of the Harvard University Press bookstore. She asked a security guard to keep an eye on things while she went to find the nonexistent men who were supposedly going to load her car up with donation books for the scholars in the Charles Street Jail.

This time she just pulled her VW over, next to a police sergeant. She looked up helplessly, cluelessly, a pitiful little old lady with snow-white hair. The sergeant leaned forward to hear what she was saying. He smiled and opened the car door for her, carefully shutting it after her. Then he stood out in the street with his back to the car, waving traffic around the obstacle. Felicia came toward me without a hint of a limp, so she couldn’t have used her pathetic old cripple ploy on the sergeant.

“What did you tell the cop this time?” I asked, when she was settled at my table.

“Honesty is always the best policy. I told him I intended to break the law, and would he very much mind aiding and abetting a tiny misdemeanor. He said he’d be delighted. Of course it helped that the bishop presided at his confirmation thirty years ago.”

Felicia’s husband was an Episcopal bishop, who was theoretically retired but still spent every day volunteering at a shelter in East Cambridge. He had founded the shelter so long ago that his clients were still called vagrants. Then they got a little brief respect in the early ’80s when the right wing of our single political party dignified them as The Homeless. The point was to hang them around the neck of the extreme right wing, called the Republican Party, which was then taking its turn in the White House. But now that a Democrat was actually in a position to do something about The Homeless, they were back to being shiftless bums again. Clinton’s plan, if I followed him correctly, was to retrain them all as computer programmers. Probably half of them already were, at least in Cambridge, so it looked like the Bishop would be in business for the foreseeable future.

“You’re telling me there’s an Episcopalian in the Cambridge Police Department?” I said to Felicia.

“I don’t imagine there could be many, but there’s at least one. Who is this Ms. Bernstein whom you were so eagerly awaiting when I called you?”

When I told her about Julius Squeezer she said, “Yes, I like the idea of an Easter bunny recycling service. I think I’m in favor of your Mr. Neary. Although I do wish he’d find someplace else to spend his advertising dollar.”

“What’s the matter with the Bummer? One rag is pretty much like another.”

“More and more is the matter with it. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Do you know Linda Cushing?”

“No, but I bet you do.” Felicia knew an amazing number of people in Cambridge.

“She’s the widow of the man who used to own the *Banner*. Mike Cushing. I don’t suppose you knew him, either?”

“Nope.”

“He died at a Holy Cross football game, and not in a terribly dignified way, I’m afraid. A piece of Polish sausage lodged in his throat. Somebody tried whatever that thing is on him. The Hemlock Maneuver?”

“Heimlich.”

“Exactly so. Heimlich. Anyway, apparently it doesn’t work if you have a heavy coonskin coat on, and so poor Mr. Cushing died in his season seat. Are you beginning to wonder what the point of all this is?”

“Not particularly. I’m just enjoying the ride.”

“Aren’t you nice. Nonetheless, there *is* a point. Linda inherited the paper, and sold it last year for a perfectly obscene sum of money to a perfectly revolting man named Thurman Boucher. He claims to be descended from Jonathan Boucher of Virginia, which is probably a lie and is in any case irrelevant. You do know who Jonathan Boucher is?”

“Sure. He was an establishment brown-noser just before the Revolution. Sort of a Rush Limbaugh for the Brits.”

“I thought you’d know. It’s the kind of thing I count on you for.”

Facts stick indiscriminately to me, most of them useless. I would have remembered Thurman Boucher, too, if I had ever come across the name.

“Actually he didn’t stay in Virginia all that long,” I said. “He moved to Annapolis. Jonathan, not Thurman.”

“I’m sure he did. In any event, Linda Cushing is terribly upset by the things Mr. Boucher is doing to her paper, but there doesn’t seem to be anything she can do about it. So I want you to get Linda’s paper back for her.”

“I see. Why?”

“I told you. Thurman Boucher is a perfectly revolting man and he has upset Linda Cushing terribly.”

“Oh, *that's* why. How about how?”

“I don't have the slightest idea, but it's exactly the sort of thing you do so well. As you think about it, bear in mind the obscene amount of money I mentioned. I imagine Linda would be more than willing to give some of it to you.”

“I don't need money anymore.” I had re-stolen quite a pile of it from a savings and loan thief a little while ago, so Reaganomics had finally trickled down even to me.

“I know that. But whatever scheme you came up with might call for money and you couldn't be expected to spend your own.”

“Hold on, Felicia. Something just struck me. What did you mean when you said you *imagined* Linda would be more than willing? Did she ask you to help out? Does she even know you're talking to me?”

“Of course not. She's far too distraught to deal with practical matters now.”

Someone was close to our table, making the little throat-clearing noise you make when you want to interrupt politely. The name above his pocket was Sergeant Ethridge, which sounded Episcopalian enough.

“Sorry to butt in, Mrs. Lamport,” he said.

“Perfectly all right, Ben. Won't you join us?”

“Well, thanks, but I better not. What I wanted to say was that I happened to hear over the radio the captain's headed this way.”

“And no doubt he would wonder what a yellow Volkswagen was doing parked in the middle of Massachusetts Avenue? As well he should. That's what captains are for, poor souls.”

THE SAUNA OUGHT TO BE a good place to read, but it isn't. After ten minutes or so, for some reason, mental meltdown happens to the point where I can't concentrate enough to follow Mother Goose, or even the *Boston Herald*.

But ten minutes had been plenty of time to absorb the *Cambridge Daily Banner*. It was every bit as flyweight as I remembered, full of semiliterate syndicated gruel and local mush that was even less literate. Its guiding editorial principle seemed to be to load as many local names as possible into as many short stories as they could fit between the ads. There was no good reason that I could see to read the *Banner*, but then there's no good reason to bite your nails and look how many people do it anyway. Like most papers in America, the *Banner* was just an irritating habit.

Not being a native of Cambridge, it was a habit I never picked up. I had tried to read the paper a few times back in the early eighties, when I was new to the area. It wasn't much good then, and I couldn't see that it had gotten either better or worse since. I set the paper aside on the bench of the sauna. The pages were lumpy where my sweat had dripped and dried.

Even though the season was over, half a dozen other wrestlers were in the Malkin Athletic Center sauna with me, kids on the Harvard team. We had been horsing around for an hour or so, staying in shape. I helped the coaching staff in season and out, in return for gym privileges and the chance to keep my own skills alive. I had been way above the Harvard level of wrestling in my day, but that was back in the late seventies. I could still keep ahead of even the best Harvard kids, but now I had to rely on skill and experience to do it, instead of speed and strength.

"The hell you reading the Bummer for?" Tony Mastrangelo asked. "You out of toilet paper?"

Tony was a 160-pound sophomore who would be a pretty fair wrestler in a couple of years if he worked at it. He had the Boston area accent, but my ear wasn't good enough to make distinctions beyond that.

"How do you know to call it the Bummer?" I asked. "You from Cambridge?"

"Just across the line in Somerville. We take the Bummer, though."

“You ever read it?”

“Ann Landers. High school sports. That’s about it.”

“What do you think about this new guy that took it over?”

“Did some new guy take it over?”

“Last year. Where were you?”

“Hey, it wasn’t in Ann Landers, okay?”

Tony Mastrangelo didn’t sound any more enthusiastic about the *Banner* than I was, even though he was a local boy. I wondered what it was about the paper that made it worth an obscene amount of money to Thurman Boucher or anyone else.

WHEN YOU LIVE ALONE and don’t have a job, it’s easy to let go. Why get up with the sun, or even at all? If you do bother to get up, why bother to shower? Or shave? Why get out clean clothes? Why not just slip into some old sweats? Why wear shoes you have to shine? Who cares?

Nobody, unless I do. So there I was the next morning, rubbing Meltonian Cream into my loafers and taking a fresh pair of gray flannel slacks out of the cleaner’s plastic bag, like some idiot Brit dressing for dinner in the jungle. Except at least the Brit could say he was setting an example for the natives and the only one I was trying to fool was myself. Sometimes it even worked, the same way you can sometimes trick yourself out of the blues by smiling. My theory on dressing was that if I wrapped the package neatly enough, maybe there would turn out to be something inside after all.

The phone rang, which seldom happened before breakfast. The number was unlisted, and under another name. Even information didn’t know where to find Tom Bethany. So usually it would have been a wrong number, but this time it was Felicia again.

“Are you dressed?” she asked, without even saying hello.

“Pretty near,” I said. “Why?”

“I just got a call from Linda Cushing’s maid asking what to do. Evidently Linda always leaves her bedroom door

open a crack, but now it's locked from the inside and she doesn't answer."

"She should call the police."

"We don't know what's happened, Tom. Linda might not even be in there."

"What do you have in mind, then?" I asked, although of course I knew. She wouldn't be calling me just for advice.

"I've known Linda for years and her mother before her," Felicia said. "I've been dropping by most days for a visit, which is why Josephine thought to call me. Linda had been feeling terribly low, but she didn't strike me as suicidal. She even seemed pleased about something yesterday. I think we ought to find out exactly what's going on before we involve the police."

"We?"

"Of course, we. You don't expect someone my age to go around breaking down doors, do you?"

JOSEPHINE MET US on the front porch of a large three-story house on Wendell Street. Behind her the old oak door and its big brass knocker had the soft shine that things get when you rub and polish them on a regular basis for a lifetime or so. Josephine was a small, black woman in her sixties. "I tried again just now, Mrs. Lamport," she said. "I still couldn't raise her." Her voice was steady, although her hands were working as if she were trying to wring her apron dry.

"You'd better show us up, Josephine," Felicia said.

Mrs. Cushing's bedroom was on the second floor. The door looked nearly as solid as the one downstairs. "Can you break it down?" Felicia asked me. I liked it that she didn't bother to holler through the door or knock on it, that she took Josephine's word for it that anything necessary along those lines had already been done. The knob turned, but the door didn't budge.

I gave it the shoulder and nearly lost my footing when the door swung open. The shades were down but I could see a

bed on the far side, with a shape in it. “Mrs. Cushing?” I said, but there wasn’t any answer. I turned on the light.

“Lord God!” Josephine said behind me.

The woman’s hands were crossed peacefully on a flowered coverlet. Her upper body leaned against a backrest with cushioned arms. She might have fallen asleep reading in bed, except that a clear plastic bag covered her head. And the book lying face down beside her was called *Final Exit*.

The bag was fastened around her neck with a rubber band. Moisture had condensed on the inside of the plastic, so that her features were blurred. Curls of damp hair stuck to the inner surface of the plastic. She was a small woman who seemed to be in her late forties or early fifties. Her eyes were closed and her mouth had fallen open.

Felicia picked up one of the crossed hands and then gently replaced it. “Cold,” she said. “Poor thing.”

She looked at Josephine, who was standing just inside the door. “We should call Serena,” she said. “Would you do that, Josephine? No, I suppose I should. Do you have her number?”

“I called her before I called you,” the maid said. “Nobody answered.”

“So you did, and that’s why you called me. I should have remembered. Well, we’ll try again in a little bit.”

“Who’s Serena?” I asked.

“Linda’s daughter. She’s at Tufts Medical School, which is probably why she doesn’t answer. Medical students are always off doing something or other.”

Felicia picked up a glass from the bedside table and sniffed at it. “What would you say?” she asked, handing it to me to smell. “Whisky?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Something alcoholic but I can’t tell beyond that.” The residue was tea-colored.

“Well, I don’t suppose it really matters,” Felicia said. “Let’s look through the wastebaskets.”

Only a couple of wadded-up tissues were in the one beside the bed, but the bottom of the one in the adjoining bathroom was covered with empty orange capsules. There

was an empty pill bottle on the sink, with its childproof cap lying beside it. The name on the label was Michael Cushing. “What’s secobarbital?” I asked.

“Seconal,” Felicia said. “Sleeping pills. Those look like the hundred-milligram size. Is that what the label says?”

“That’s it. The prescription was filled three years ago.”

“Three years wouldn’t affect potency much. The rule of thumb is to add ten percent to the dosage if they’re more than five years old.”

“Why would she have emptied the capsules out?”

“It speeds up the absorption. In addition to which, it’s customary to dissolve the powder in alcohol. Alcohol can increase the potency of the drug by as much as fifty percent.”

“You seem to know a lot about this stuff, Felicia.”

“I should. The bishop and I have been members of the Hemlock Society for years.”

“She just followed the instructions in her book, then?”

“So it would appear.”

“Why would she commit suicide?”

“Who said she did?”

“You just did.”

“I didn’t at all. What I said was, ‘So it would appear.’”

“Where are you going with this, Felicia?”

“Possibly nowhere. But I just find it curious that there doesn’t seem to be any note.”

“Not everybody leaves notes.”

“True, but as you say, she apparently went by the book. In fact the book was right beside her, just to drive the point home. But the book says over and over again that you must always leave a note.”

“Why?”

“In part to warn medical personnel not to attempt to revive you, but principally to ease the pain for family and friends.”

“You’re reading a lot into this note business, Felicia.”

“I’ve known Linda since she was a little girl. She was the kind of child who never colored outside the lines. And she

would agonize for days over the thought that she might have inadvertently hurt some other little girl's feelings."

"She couldn't have been worried about hurting other people's feelings this time. Suicide itself is kind of selfish."

"Exactly," Felicia said. "And Linda was thoughtful. And don't you think she looks a little bit *too* peaceful?"

"She took sleeping pills. Wouldn't she have just dropped off to sleep?"

"Possibly. Possibly not. Frequently at the end there's a reflex attempt to tear the bag off. Not long ago in Connecticut a man's son had to hold the bag on before his father's second attempt was successful."

"Are you going to tell all this to the police?"

"Do you think I should?"

"I don't think it matters. I don't think they'd pay any attention to you anyway."

"Well, then, what's the use? And I could be wrong, of course. But it wouldn't be hard to force Seconal down a woman and then put a bag over her head once she fell asleep."

"Josephine," I said, "did you hear anyone or see anything last night?"

"I only come in days."

"Were any doors open?"

"No, sir. Everything tight the way I left it."

"When did you go?"

"After I done the dishes. Seven-thirty, right around in there."

"Somebody could have come by after that," Felicia said.

"She wouldn't have let in nobody she didn't know."

"How about the daughter?" I asked. "She live here?"

"Serena has her own apartment in Medford," Felicia said.

"So basically anybody could have come in," I said.

"Anybody she knew, anybody who could get her to open the door so he could push in. Presumably the front door has a spring lock?"

"It locks by itself when you go out," Josephine said. "If that's what a spring lock is."

“Who would have wanted to do it, though?” I said. “Did she have enemies?”

“Thurman Boucher,” Felicia said. “He promised to keep all her old employees on at the paper and then fired half of them.”

“That’s what these guys do, Felicia. Doesn’t make him a murderer.”

“Somehow he’s behind it.”

“He’s got the paper. He’s fired the people. He’s won the war. Are you saying he’s going around the battlefield shooting the wounded?”

“I’m sure it’s exactly the sort of thing he would do.”

“It’s a pretty long jump from would to did. We don’t even know if anybody did anything. All the actual evidence points to suicide.”

“Yes, it does. I’m sure if I mentioned murder to the police they’d just laugh.”

“Probably not out loud.”

It would take a braver life form than a Cambridge cop to laugh at Felicia. More likely they’d nod and pretend to take notes, and then forget about it. The woman was under treatment for depression. If she was acting out of character, why not? Suicide itself was out of character. For the police, the shortest and easiest distance between two points was going to be to write the thing off as a suicide.

I couldn’t think of any reason why I needed to stay around till the cops came. I don’t like my name to be in any police files or any other government files. Besides, I had nothing to add to what Felicia and Josephine could tell the police. “I think I’ll take off and leave the rest to you,” I said to them. “I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t tell them I was here unless they ask.”

“Why would they ask?” Felicia said.

“Good point. Don’t ask, don’t tell.”

On my way home I detoured down Brattle Street to buy a copy of *Final Exit* from Wordsworth Books. It was a short book with big print, and in an hour I had gone through every word. Sure enough, Linda Cushing had followed

directions like a good little girl—except for failing to leave a note.

Felicia was right. It was odd. I was right, too. Nobody but her would believe it was murder. And so far, that included me.

