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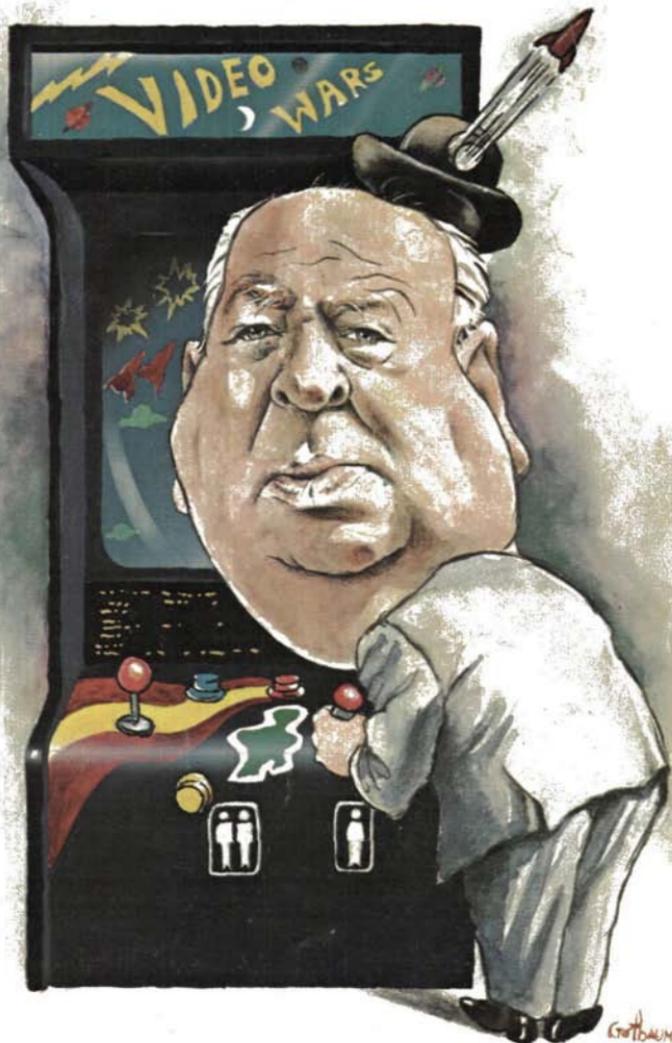
NEW DETECTIVE
STORIES BY

Rob Kantner

H. Edward
Hunsburger

Jeffrey Scott
and others

PLUS
A MYSTERY
CLASSIC SPECIAL
BY MARK TWAIN



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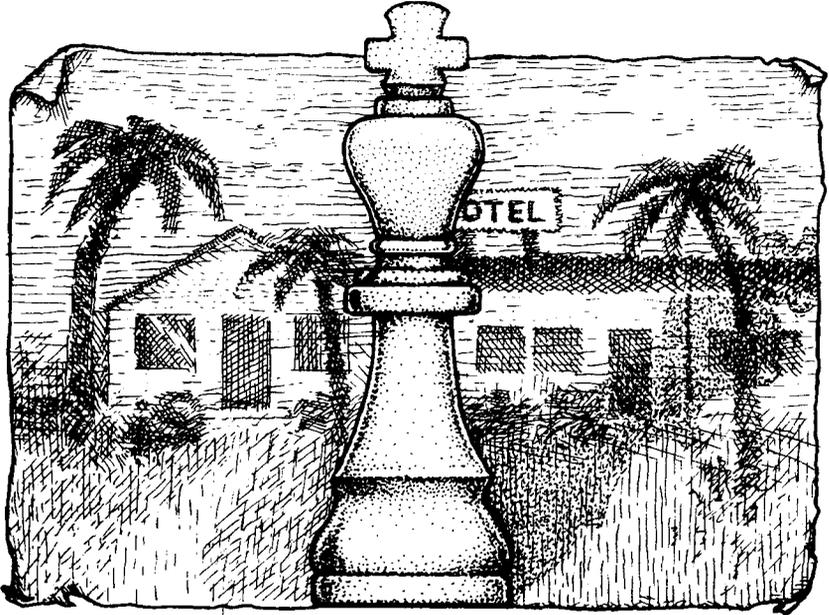
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Eternally Yours

by H. Edward Hunsburger



My name is Jeff Winsor and I'd like to say straight off and for the record that I don't believe in ghosts. I never have believed in them. I never will. And I can't think of one good reason why I should.

The whole notion of restless, prowling spirits strikes me as a waste of time. Even in the afterlife there must be better things to do than wander around

moaning and wailing, frightening poor mortals out of a good night's sleep. Messages from the recently departed are an even sillier idea. Let's face it, most people say far too much in one lifetime to have anything worthwhile left over for broadcasting from The Great Beyond. And as for things that go bump in the night, all I can say is that they never bump into me.

Illustration by Steve Karras

I figure it's over when it's over. You total up a life's credits and debits, rise quietly from the table, and cash in your chips. Maybe there's an after-life. Maybe there isn't. But either way, there are no such things as ghosts.

Now what I *do* believe in is the scarcity of good apartments in New York City. The kind of elegant, spacious apartments you find in those old but beautifully maintained buildings surrounding Gramercy Park. The kind of apartment I finally got to move into when Admiral Miles Penny tripped on the carpet and fractured his skull.

I'd like to be more sympathetic, but I never met the man. From everything I've heard, he'd led a long, full, if somewhat tempestuous life. Not to mention all the trouble he caused me *after* he died. But up until I moved in, the only connection between us was that I got his apartment. I'm not even going to go into what I had to do to get it or how much the rent is. Let's just say that wretched excess pretty well covers it all.

I moved into the place on October first, a week to the day after they moved Penny out to a less spacious but far more permanent address. I wanted to concentrate on unpacking, but I had an assignment due. I decided the cardboard carton ob-

stacle course would have to wait for a while.

As it turned out, both projects got sidetracked. Because that was the day the first postcard arrived.

It was jammed in the apartment door mail slot along with some catalogues from a shoe company, a bookseller, and one of those Vermont cheese and smoked ham places. It was an old postcard, yellowed at the edges, with a view of a few ragged palms and a seedy looking pink stucco hotel. All that was on one side. The following brief message was on the other.

Miles,

You were right about that adaptation of the Krimsky book. It stank. I didn't like the lizard scene either. Knight to C-3.

*Fraternally yours,
Charles*

Nothing unsettling there, nothing ghostly. Right? Just a chess-by-mail crony of Penny's who hadn't yet heard of his demise. That's what I thought too. The incongruity of it didn't hit me until later that afternoon when I was hard at work at my easel.

The adaptation that Charles had referred to was *Cold Moon*. It was a blockbuster novel that had recently been made into a

TV movie. It was the recently part that bothered me. The film had had its world premiere just five days ago. So how in the world could Miles Penny have an opinion about a movie televised after his death? I felt something like a chill along my spine. Inside my head a tiny voice started humming the theme from *The Twilight Zone*. Was the late admiral carrying on a correspondence from beyond the grave? Was heaven a seedy resort hotel? And was I, Jeff Winsor, nonbeliever in ghosts, being haunted, indirectly, by means of the U.S. mail?

A ringing phone cut short my crazed speculations. For a wild moment I thought it might be Admiral Penny trying to reach me *direct*. But as it turned out it was the earthy, and earthy, voice of Karen Hunter, the lady in my life.

"You sound a little flustered," she said after the usual preliminaries. "Anything wrong?"

I told her about the postcard. I heard a suppressed giggle, but at least she didn't laugh out loud.

"There has to be a rational explanation," Karen insisted. "You should try to contact this Charles guy who sent the card. Is there a return address? What about the postmark?"

I looked at the card again.

"There's no return address and the postmark's too blurred to be legible."

"Well," Karen sighed, "that's all I can think of. You've roused my curiosity about Admiral Penny, though. I remember you told me he died of a fall. Is there any possibility of foul play?" Her rich, contralto voice gave the last two words a lot of dramatic emphasis.

"Give me a break," I said. "The authorities pronounced it accidental death. He was going to get his mail when he tripped on the little rug in front of the door, fell, and fractured his skull. The realtor told me Penny was in his eighties. The bones get thin and brittle at that age. Any kind of bad fall can be fatal. There's no way it could be murder. The door was locked and bolted from the inside. They had a locksmith take the whole door off just to get into the apartment."

"He died on the way to get his mail," Karen said thoughtfully. "Doesn't that strike you as a strange coincidence? And now he's sending you messages, messages that come to the exact spot where the crime occurred."

"What crime?" I practically shouted. "Penny's death was accidental. And he isn't sending *me* any messages. He's writing to some guy named Charlie who's sending his replies here. What the hell am I talking

about? Penny isn't writing any-one. Penny is dead."

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line. "Forget about the locked door," Karen said finally. "It doesn't prove anything. People are always getting murdered behind locked doors in mysteries. All of this," she said solemnly, "can only mean one thing."

"What?" I demanded irritably.

"That Admiral Penny was murdered. His restless spirit is calling upon you to bring his killer to justice. The poor man won't be able to rest in peace until you've solved this murder."

"I don't believe in ghosts," I shouted.

"See you tonight at eight," Karen cheerfully ignored me. "You'd better get busy on this. Painting book jacket illustrations for mysteries is one thing. Actually *solving* one might not be so easy."

Before I could get another word in, she hung up on me. I replaced the receiver and swore for a while. Karen's a terrific lady with more than her share of intelligence, beauty, and charm. The only thing she has too much of is imagination. She not only believed that there was a murder and a ghost involved in this. She really did expect me to solve the mystery.

And I knew I'd never hear the end of it if I didn't at least go through the motions.

Slightly dazed by my sudden elevation to amateur sleuth, I threaded my way through the cardboard-box jungle and went back to work. I make a comfortable living painting dust jacket illustrations for mystery and suspense books. I did all kinds of commercial art up until a few years ago when the cover I painted for *Death Is My Interior Decorator* won all the big awards in the field. Now I specialize in the crime stuff, which is fine with me because I like to read mysteries, too.

I'd barely gotten back into the painting when the doorbell rang. If this was the late admiral calling in person, I wasn't even going to bother unpacking. The apartment was nice but not *that* nice. As it turned out, it was only Tom Banks, the doorman.

"Getting settled in?" he asked with a friendly smile. A tall, broad-shouldered man in his early sixties, he has one of those open, expressive faces, the kind that seem readymade for smiles and laughter. I figured him for one of those rare people, a man who actually enjoys his work.

"Settled in," I answered. "I'll be lucky if I get everything unpacked before the two year lease is up."

Banks laughed and handed

me a stack of mail. More catalogues, from the look of it, and perched on top of them, you guessed it . . . a neat little pile of postcards. "I've been holding them downstairs," he explained. "Drayton, the postman, asked me to. He didn't want the moving or cleaning people tampering with the mail."

Better them than me, I thought.

"Very conscientious," I said aloud. "I've never been in an apartment building before where they deliver the mail right to your door."

"That's Drayton," Banks nodded. "Very dedicated to the job, he is. Never taken a sick day in twenty years. The perfect postman, I call him. He told me just the other day that he was being considered for mail carrier of the year."

"How about that." Just my luck. If he'd been a little less zealous, I might not have ever seen the damned postcard.

"Do the rugs look okay?" Banks asked. "They spent all afternoon on them. I guess they got all the blood out of that one," he added, peering down at the faded two by three Oriental I was standing on. It was the very same rug on which the admiral's sea legs had a fatal loss of footing.

"They look fine to me. When's the relative due?"

"Well now," Banks was suddenly evasive. "A couple of weeks, I guess. Shouldn't be more than a month or so." He spread his hands in a gesture of futility. "There's nothing I can do, Mr. Winsor."

"I'm not blaming you," I reassured him. Part of the deal for my getting the apartment was that I kept the admiral's stuff there until his only living relative arrived from some distant port of call. Apparently there was no more storage space in the basement of the building. I'd managed to cram most of his furniture and personal stuff into the spare bedroom. But there was no way I could get all the rugs in there, too. As a compromise the management had agreed to have the rugs cleaned before I moved in.

After wishing me well with the unpacking, Banks returned to his post in the lobby. I should have gone back to work myself, but I looked at the postcards instead. There were four of them in the pile of mail Banks had brought up, each with the same view of the rundown hotel. They were all from his friend Charles, with a chess move at the end of each message. Two of them seemed normal enough, but the other two carried obvious replies and comments to events that had taken place *after* Admiral Penny's death.

What the hell was going on

here? Was there chess after death? Was the U.S. Postal Service a *whole* lot more far reaching than I'd ever given it credit for? I hadn't taken the one card all that seriously, but this was something else again. Charles had signed all of the cards "fraternally yours." I wondered how Admiral Penny was signing the cards he sent to Charles? *Eternally* yours?

I was too keyed up by then to go back to the painting. I grabbed my jacket instead and went downstairs. I needed a walk in the park, something to get my mind out of neutral. Maybe I could come up with a couple of notions that would clear the whole thing up. The worst part of it was that I was actually starting to *believe* what Karen had said. That Admiral Penny had been murdered and that it was up to me, if I wanted the "haunting" to stop, to bring his killer to justice.

One of the advantages of living on Gramercy Park is the park itself. It's a small, fenced-in square of immaculately maintained greenery, to the best of my knowledge the only private park in New York City. A neighborhood association handles the upkeep, and the park is strictly reserved for area residents only. Some people might find it a little on the snobbish side, but I wasn't complaining. Since I now lived there,

I intended to make the most of it.

My new key fitted perfectly in the park's wrought iron gate. I closed it firmly behind me and began to stroll the graveled paths, enjoying the autumn sunshine while I tried to think detective-like thoughts.

I almost knocked the girl over before I saw her. She spun around and glared at me, a tall, willowy blonde with the face of a Botticelli angel. "I didn't hear you coming," she sputtered angrily. "You really ought to learn to walk louder." Her wide blue eyes narrowed as she focused in on me. "You're Winsor, aren't you? The fellow who just moved into 3C."

"That's right," I smiled. "And you're Tana Devin, the star of *Maneuvers*."

The recognition and the way I'd phrased it brought on a full-wattage smile. She'd obviously mistaken me for a fan of the show. *Maneuvers* was a new and very popular daytime soap, and Tana Devin played the vixen, the one you *love* to hate. She couldn't act worth a damn, but it didn't matter. Nobody else on the show could, either.

"We're neighbors, you know," she informed me. "I live right next door to you in 3B."

"You must have known Admiral Penny then?" If I was going to do some detecting, now was the time to start.

Her smile did a fast fade, and I could almost see the smoke from the smoldering anger that backlit those bright blue eyes. "Penny," she seethed. "Dropping dead was the only thing that man ever did that made me happy. He was the nosiest old crock in creation. Always looking through the peephole in his door to see who was coming in and going out of the other apartments on the floor. I could hear his raspy breathing every time I walked by. It was getting so I hated to invite anyone over. No privacy at all in my own damned building." Her blue eyes narrowed a little more as she studied my face. "I hope you're not going to be manning the peephole like Penny? I won't stand for any more of that crap." Her soft voice was suddenly as cold and merciless as an Arctic winter.

"Not me," I assured her. "I'm far too busy for that kind of nonsense."

"Glad to hear it," she said. "Just keep it that way and we'll get along fine." On that cheerful note, she turned away and strode down the path without a word of goodbye.

Well, I'd certainly learned one thing about the late admiral. Tana Devin hated him. Now, no one likes being spied on, but it's basically a harmless pastime. What I couldn't figure out was why Tana Devin loathed

Penny with such *intensity*. There had to be more to it than that.

After a couple more turns around the park, the answer came to me. The lovely Miss Devin's name had been in the papers quite a lot these past few weeks. Not the *real* papers but those supermarket tabloids they sell at the checkout counters. I vaguely remembered the headlines on one of them, some kind of sex scandal that linked Tana Devin with a prominent but very married politician. I remembered somebody's mentioning that the liaison had very nearly cost Tana her part in *Maneuvers*. While the show portrayed this kind of bedhopping all the time, the chairman of the company that sponsored it was an *uncle* of the politician's wife. I guess rating points won out over family ties because Tana did manage to keep her job. But the way I heard it, it had been a *very* close thing.

What I remembered best about the whole business were the pictures that appeared under the headline. Pictures of Miss Devin and the politico that had that slightly off, distorted quality that tends to catch an artist's eye. Exactly the kind of pictures you'd get shooting through an old fashioned peephole . . . just like the one on the door of my new apartment.

I was positive that that's what

Penny had been doing. A few candid snaps of the two lovers as they passed by the door might have fetched a good price. They would also make an obviously secret affair as public as the corner library. Was that motive enough for murder? As far as Tana Devin was concerned, I believed it was motive enough and then some.

I told Karen all about it over dinner that night. After all, it's no good being a detective if you don't have a Watson around to bask in your reflected glory.

"It's a nice start," Karen said, patting my arm. Not exactly the complimentary outpouring I'd been expecting. "But what you need is a few more suspects. Not to mention the *how* part of a locked room murder."

"Details," I muttered. "I just need a couple more days to put it all together." Not necessarily true, but it *sounded* good.

"Glad to hear it," Karen smiled. "Remember, I'm counting on you. I imagine Penny's ghost would like to settle down, too. I doubt haunting is all it's cracked up to be."

"I'm working on it," I said testily. "I do have a few other things to do, too," I reminded her.

The next morning I did one of them, putting in three hours at the easel. It was a cool, gray day with a steady syncopation of rain that drummed on my

windows. Atmospheric mystery story weather, but not much good for strolling in the park. So when I finally took a break from painting, I stayed indoors and inspected the scene of the crime.

Feeling as though I should be brandishing a magnifying glass, I knelt down in front of the little Oriental rug on which Penny had tripped and died. The cleaners *had* gotten all the blood out. I couldn't find a trace. I did notice something, though. When they yanked the cleaning tag off, they left a little nylon loop still threaded through the fibers. I teased it free and slipped it in my pocket.

I figured out the *how* part of the murder when I shifted my attention to the door. The mail slot was the key. Visualize Penny standing at the door, staring out the peephole, while someone, the murderer, crouched out of sight on the other side of the door. All the murderer would have to do was quietly open the outside mail slot and shove a stick or a cane through, knocking Penny's legs right out from under him. It was as simple as that.

"Brilliant deduction," I murmured to myself. I thought about phoning the police right away but decided to spring my theory on Karen first. Besides, I still had to figure out the *who* part. Tana Devin was a good candi-

date for the killer, but I hadn't even talked to anyone else yet. Also, I needed that little thing they call *proof*.

Just past noon I heard the postman at the door. I put down my brush and went to check the mail. It had slid through the slot and was lying on the little rug. Two catalogues and, of course, another postcard. It looked exactly like the other ones except for the message, which read:

Miles,

*How did you guess
that the prime rate was
going to drop two days
before it happened?
What have you got? A
crystal ball? Thanks for
the tip. Bishop to C-6.*

*Fraternally yours,
Charles*

Now Penny was giving financial advice from the Great Beyond. The prime rate had dropped earlier in the week, and from the cheerful tone of the note it appeared that Charles had taken advantage of Penny's powers of prediction. Was it just a lucky guess, or did Penny have special, inside information from Up There? I don't know what bothered me more, the postcard or the fact that the admiral hadn't taken the time to write *me* about the shift in the prime. It was the

least he could have done. After all, I was the one trying to solve his murder. If there actually *was* a murder. In spite of my theory about the mail slot and cane, I still wasn't one hundred percent convinced.

I figured I ought to talk to the postman, though. He might be able to tell me something more about Penny. I swung open the door and caught him just before he reached the elevator.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'm Jeff Winsor, the new tenant in apartment 3C."

"Lew Drayton," he introduced himself. "I'm sorry, Mr. Winsor, but there's nothing for you today. It usually takes a week or so for the forwarded stuff to start coming through." He smiled as if to say the delay was a shame but there was nothing he could do about it. He was a short, pudgy, moonfaced man with thick, rain-misted glasses. His postman's slicker glistened with moisture, and his bulging leather mailbag fitted the contours of his body as though it were a part of it.

"I'm not worried about my mail," I told him. "But I was wondering about Admiral Penny's. Are you going to keep on delivering it here? He died, you know."

"Yes, I heard," Drayton sighed. "A real loss to the community. As for his mail, there are a couple of ways to go. You

could mark it 'deceased, return to sender.' Or you could read-dress it to his next of kin, but Tom Banks told me the admiral's only living relative is out of the country at the moment. If you want my opinion, the easiest thing for you to do is just keep it here until the next of kin arrives to claim it. But that's entirely up to you," he added quickly. "I'll be glad to arrange it any way you want, Mr. Winsor. Just say the word."

His eagerness to oblige threw me for a moment. After all, this was New York, a city hardly noted for its zealous public servants. I'd forgotten that Banks had called Drayton "the perfect postman."

"Let me think about it," I said finally.

Drayton nodded. "Take all the time you want. Besides, most of Penny's mail is catalogues, like this one from Pitt's up in Maine." He reached out and tapped the catalogue I'd carried out into the hall with me, ignoring the postcard that rested on top of it. "Those Pitt brothers make a sweet rod and reel," he grinned, "but a little too pricey for me. If there's nothing else, Mr. Winsor, I'd better get back to work."

"Did you know the admiral well?" I pressed him. "Get along with him okay?"

"I just delivered his mail," Drayton shrugged. "And I get

along fine with *everyone* on my route. Got to get moving," he tipped his cap. "Don't like to keep my customers waiting." He waved and stepped into the waiting elevator where his bulky form was quickly concealed by the closing doors.

Feeling a little deflated, I wandered back into the apartment and spent a couple of minutes contemplating the park through my rain-streaked bay window. I guess after Tana Devin, I'd been anticipating something a little more meaty. But then everyone couldn't be a suspect. Drayton was just the postman. Like the fraternal Charles, an unknowing helpmate, a bearer of haunted mail.

I decided that if I really wanted to learn more about Penny, I should talk to Tom Banks. New York legend has it that doormen know everything about their tenants, all the little details ranging from shoe size to sexual preference. I hadn't thought about Banks before, but if there was any truth to the legend, he could be a regular well-spring of information.

On my way down to the lobby I was nearly bowled over by a big, gray-haired man who came catapulting out of the elevator.

"Sorry about that," he said as I regained my balance. "I guess my mind was somewhere else. I only wish the rest of me was, too," he added with sudden bit-

terness. He had the look of a businessman gone to seed. His tailor-made gray suit was wrinkled and stained. There were dark circles under his eyes, and the hand that gripped his ebon-wood walking stick was white-knuckled with tension. He blinked at me and frowned. "I don't remember seeing you before? Are you visiting someone in the building?"

"Just moved in," I told him. "I'm the new tenant in 3C."

"Penny's place," he said in a harsh whisper, as if the name itself was almost too painful to pronounce. "If I could have spared the time and the shoe-leather, I would have danced on the old bastard's grave. If anyone ever deserved to die, he was the one."

"What do you mean?"

"Mind your own damn business," he muttered, pushing past me. He stomped down the hall, cutting at the air with the gleaming ebon stick as though he were slashing away at some imaginary foe. He paused at the door of apartment 3A, unlocked it, and disappeared inside, slamming the door behind him with a thunderous crash that echoed through the hallway.

"Well now," I said to myself. "The suspect shortage is certainly over." Even death hadn't lessened the man's obvious hatred of Penny. And that gleaming ebon-wood walking

stick? I could practically see it cannonading through the mail slot to shove the old admiral's legs right out from under him. But who was this guy? I didn't even know his name yet. And why did he loathe the recently departed Penny?

I found Tom Banks at his post in the lobby, staring moodily out at the rainswept street. "Mr. Winsor," he turned and smiled at me. "Surely you're not thinking of going out in that downpour without so much as an umbrella?"

I shook my head. "I just came down to pass the time of day. I wanted to ask you about one of my neighbors, a big, gray-haired man in A? What's he got against Penny?"

"That would be Mr. Campbell." Banks sighed and shook his head. "He'll be leaving us at the end of the month. Some recent financial setbacks are forcing him to relocate."

"Why do I have the feeling that Penny is somehow involved in that?" I prodded him.

"Mr. Campbell isn't too good at hiding his feelings," the doorman nodded. "I guess there isn't any harm in telling you about it now. Mr. Campbell and his partner own a computer company. A few weeks back, the two of them were planning to take over another firm, a small company that unknowingly held a patent that would

give Campbell and his partner a virtual lock on a big, upcoming defense contract. Campbell sold off all his assets at a loss to raise the necessary capital, but before he could put in a bid, a rival firm bought the company right out from under them."

"How does Penny figure into it?"

"Well," Banks hesitated, "Mr. Campbell can't prove anything, but he and his partner were discussing the takeover when they walked by Penny's door. They had a longish wait for the elevator, so they pretty well covered it all. No one else knew about the deal, and with Penny's reputation for spying on his neighbors, he seemed like the only person who could and *would* have alerted the rival company."

"I could see why Campbell would hate him," I sympathized. "What about you, Tom? How did you get along with the admiral?"

"It's my job to get along with all the tenants," Banks replied with quiet dignity. "But now that he's gone, I have to admit that Penny was a hard man, the only one I've ever met who would go out of his way to make someone else's life miserable."

"You sound as though you might be speaking from personal experience," I said. The sad, regretful tone of his voice

gave him away more than any words could.

"It happened a few months back," Banks said softly. "Like the admiral, I'm a retired navy man myself. Now, I'm not one to ask for favors, but I have a grandson, a fine boy with all the makings of a naval officer. Ever since he was a lad he's wanted to go to the Academy. He has all the grades, the qualifications. All he needed was a recommendation, a little pull at the top to get him in. I asked Penny if he'd be willing to put in a word for the boy. All it would have taken was one phone call, a few minutes of his time. Well, first he said yes, then no, then yes again. By the time I realized he never intended to do it, it was too late to ask anyone else. It seemed as though he took a kind of perverse pleasure in keeping me dangling like that."

Although I'd never met Penny I was beginning to hate the man myself. "What happened to your grandson?" I asked Banks.

"He went into the navy as an enlisted man," Banks said bitterly. "There's no shame in that," he added, "but he would have done the Academy proud. He never had his chance, thanks to Penny."

There wasn't anything I could say to that. I left Banks staring out at the rain and went back

to the apartment. I was beginning to wonder how Admiral Penny had lived as long as he had. If he hadn't been murdered, he certainly should have been. I'd never come across anyone who was a more suitable candidate for homicide. I was also beginning to regret my own attempt at amateur sleuthing. *If* Penny had been murdered, his killer almost deserved to get away with it. I say *almost* because I still intended to solve the crime if I could. Penny had done some pretty horrible things in his life, but none of them as terrible as murder itself.

I spent the rest of the day and all that evening at the easel, finishing up my assignment. While my hand wielded the brush, my mind arranged and rearranged all the bits and pieces I had about Penny and his death. I had started out with no suspects, not even a proper murder. None of this would have come about if it hadn't been for the postcards and Karen's insistence that I investigate.

Now I had three suspects. Tana Devin and Campbell were the more obvious ones, but Tom Banks was also a possibility. He seemed quiet and friendly enough on the surface, but who could really tell what was going on inside? As for the murder part of it, my cane-

through-the-mail-slot theory eliminated the whole locked room element. It should have put Campbell at the head of my suspect list, but it didn't. Any one of them could have bought a cane and shoved it through the slot. And after Tana Devin's description of Penny's "raspy" breathing, any one of them could have easily ascertained if he was at his post on the other side of the door.

I had suspects, motives, and method. I had everything I needed except for the most important thing: a solution to the crime.

It was still raining when I turned in at midnight. The rumble of thunder and the crack of lightning punctuated my futile attempt to sleep. When I finally did doze off, I had the craziest dream. I was being chased through Gramercy Park by a giant postcard. And it would have caught me, too, if it hadn't been for the lifesized chessman. He was a white knight who poked a hole through the postcard with his uptilted lance. The postcard fell to the ground, but then the knight started bearing down on me, with his lance aimed straight at my heart.

That's when I woke up. Not only had I escaped the sinister pursuers of my dream but I'd come up with the solution to the mystery. And it was so simple

that I should have seen it right away. I still had some checking to do, though, just to make absolutely certain I was right.

The rain tapered off around six, the last of it disappearing with the dawn of a bright, autumn day. After an early breakfast I went downstairs for another talk with our friendly doorman.

"Who plays chess around here?" I asked after we'd exchanged good morning pleasantries.

The question seemed to take him by surprise. "Well now," he hesitated. "I play a little chess. Strictly amateur stuff. Drayton, the postman, and I often have a game on Sundays. Then there's Mr. Campbell. He's won a couple of local championships, and I know he spends a lot of his free time over at the Marshal Chess Club."

"What about Tana Devin?"

Banks frowned thoughtfully and nodded. "Now that you mention it, I believe she's a player, too. She once starred in an off-Broadway show called *The Chess Match*. So she must know at least the rudiments of the game, though I don't think she has much time for it. Are you looking for a game?"

"No," I said smiling. "I'm looking to *end* one."

Leaving Banks more confused than ever, I paid a brief visit to a local shop. After that

I returned to the apartment where I spent the rest of the morning experimenting at the scene of the crime.

When the postcard slid through the mail slot at a little past twelve, I was ready and waiting. I didn't bother to bend down and pick it up. I swung the door open instead, startling the mailman so much that he stumbled back, nearly losing his balance.

"Mr. Winsor," Drayton grinned. "I'm sorry but there's nothing for you today."

"That's okay," I told him. "I was wondering if you could mail this for me," I asked, handing him a postcard.

"No problem," he said eagerly. "I used to mail cards for the admiral all the time."

"I know you did."

He must have sensed something, either in my face or in the tone of my voice. "Now, what do you mean by that?" he asked quietly. He wasn't grinning any more.

"I figured it all out last night. The whole thing started with the postcards, but I got sidetracked for a while, never realizing that the answer was right there under my nose."

Drayton forced a smile. "You're talking in riddles, Mr. Winsor. I still can't figure out what you're trying to say."

"You're the perfect postman, right?"

"The best in the business," Drayton agreed.

I shook my head. "When I asked you what I should do with the admiral's mail, you listed several options, all of them dependent on the mail's being delivered *here*. You never once mentioned the routine procedure of having the post office *hold* it or putting in a change of address that would have sent it directly to Penny's next of kin. It would have been easier on both of us, but you never said a word. Because you wouldn't have seen the postcards any more. After all that time on the sidelines, you were finally in the game. You just couldn't bear to give it up, could you?"

"Are you accusing me of tampering with the U.S. mail?" Drayton bristled.

"I'm accusing you of reading some postcards," I said softly. "The ones Penny gave you to mail for him and the ones you delivered from his friend, Charles. You're a chess player yourself. It's only natural that you'd become interested in a game, especially if it were a good one. I didn't suspect you at first. But last night I realized that somebody else must be carrying on the game with Penny's friend Charles. You were the only one besides me with access to all the incoming postcards. And since Penny was an elderly man who spent most of his time

eavesdropping from behind the door, it seemed only logical that he'd give the outgoing cards to you to mail for him. It all came down to your being the one, the *only* person who could keep the chess game going after Penny's death. Charles must be a worthy opponent," I suggested. "Are you enjoying the game?"

"All right," Drayton said with a sheepish grin. "You caught me at it. Charles Fairfield is a top-ranked player just like the admiral was. I couldn't resist the challenge. After all these years of trying to second-guess them, I had to see if I could beat Fairfield myself." The heavysset postman shrugged. "All I did was write a few postcards and sign Penny's name to them. No harm in that, right?"

"No harm if the admiral hadn't caught you reading the cards in the first place," I corrected him. "These past few days I've learned just what kind of man he was. What you did was only a minor infraction of the rules. After all, postcards aren't *meant* to be private. But Penny would have complained just the same, ruining your standing as the 'perfect postman,' spoiling your chance to be named mail carrier of the year. But first he would have let you dangle for a while, enjoying the prolonged agony. The sight of you sweating it out, never knowing exactly when your

spotless reputation would be shattered beyond repair. He waited too long this time," I said quietly. "Long enough for you to kill him."

"Are you crazy?" Drayton sputtered. "Penny tripped on a rug behind a locked door. No way that could be murder."

I shook my head. "There are a couple of ways, but I didn't figure out the right one until last night." I dug the little loop of nylon cord out of my pocket and held it out for Drayton to see. "I found this knotted through the rug. The rug Penny tripped on when he fractured his skull." Involuntarily both of us glanced down at the faded Oriental. "At first I thought the loop was left over from a cleaners' tag. But then I remembered Tom Banks's comment that the cleaners had spent 'all afternoon' on them. They'd done the work right here. No reason to tag them if the rugs weren't leaving the apartment."

I prodded the nylon loop in my open palm. "I took this over to a sporting goods store this morning. The man in the fishing department identified it as a piece of deep sea fishing line, strong enough to withstand the pull of a fighting marlin. And I know you're a fisherman. You told me as much yourself when you talked about not being able to afford a rod and reel from the Pitt catalogue."

"What does that prove?" Drayton demanded. Behind his thick glasses his eyes had taken on a narrow, almost glowing intensity. Casually he slipped his mailbag off his shoulder and put it down on the floor. "It's real interesting," he said with a slow smile. "But it still doesn't add up to murder."

"Sure it does," I insisted. "I spent a lot of time this morning standing on that little rug with the door closed. Right off I noticed how the rug gets bunched up from shifting your feet around. It gets pushed up against the door and a little edge of it gets shoved *between* the door and the bottom of the frame. Not much," I emphasized. "Just enough to knot a line in it."

"Go on," Drayton prompted me. He was still smiling, but there was no pleasure at all in his voice.

"You must have done that part of it quietly," I continued. "Keeping well below the sight-line of the peephole. It would have been easy. Most of the tenants aren't around this time of day. Then you make your normal appearance, dropping the mail through the slot. When you hear Penny picking it up, you hurry away. The other end of the line was secured to something heavy and tough. Your mailbag is my best guess. It's perfect for the job. The sudden

pull on the line yanks the rug against the door and Penny with it. It was a pretty sure bet that something like that would fracture an old man's brittle skull. After you hear the crash, you just walk back and cut the line with scissors or a knife."

"You mean a knife like this?" The short but lethal looking blade suddenly appeared in Drayton's hand.

"Just like it," I gulped.

"I thought he was my friend," he continued with quiet intensity. "He used to meet me at the door every day. I'd hand him his mail and he'd give me the cards to post for him. Then one day he caught me reading one of Charles's postcards. I guess he must have been suspecting it for a while. He wouldn't open the door after that. He'd just stand on the other side and taunt me, telling me over and over again that everyone would find out that I really wasn't perfect. I had to kill him. Don't you see? I *am* perfect. The perfect postman!"

He lurched toward me, the blade upraised. As he crossed the doorstep and stepped onto the rug, I gave the line hidden in my hand a tug. His feet went flying out from under him. The knife fell from his hand. He cracked his head against the doorjamb and sagged to the floor, unconscious but still very

much alive.

"Well, that's one ghost laid to rest," I said to myself. I reached behind a pile of boxes and switched off the tape recorder. Then I phoned the police.

Karen came over that night, long after they'd taken the raving postman away in a strait-jacket. I felt sorry for him but not *all that* sorry. He'd tried to kill me, too. I'd told her all about it on the phone, rubbing it in just a little when I reminded her about restless ghosts and hauntings by mail.

I wasn't surprised when she showed up with a peace offering. "Housewarming gift?" I asked, accepting the brightly wrapped package.

"Open it up," she smiled.

I did just that. "But I don't need a chess set," I protested. "I don't know how to play and I'm certainly not going to learn now. I don't believe in chess."

"What about ghosts?"

"I don't believe in them, either."

"Then what do you believe in?" Karen demanded.

I looked around me, taking in the endless stacks of cartons and crates, untouched since the movers had left them there except for the addition of a faint coating of dust. "The scarcity of good apartments in New York City," I said firmly. "That's what I believe in . . . I think."