



The Father Hunt

Rex Stout

REX STOUT

The Father Hunt

Introduction
by Donald E. Westlake



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THE FATHER HUNT

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Introduction

Some years ago I read an introduction to something or other by somebody or other, in which the introducer presented the idea—as fact—that all writers of fiction have completed their significant work by the age of forty-five. I was, I think, still in my early thirties at the time and so remained calm at this news. Somewhat later the suggestion did return to my mind, however, this time with teeth in it; and I admit I fretted, to the extent that I finally mentioned the gloomy fact to a friend who, taking pity on me, said, “Let me mention just two novelists who *began* to write at age forty-five. They are Joseph Conrad and Rex Stout.” After which I stopped worrying about introductions.

Rex Stout may have started late, after several other successful careers, but he hit the ground running. Nero Wolfe sprang full-grown from Stout’s forehead in that first book, and though in later years he would write non-Wolfe novels and even try his hand at another series character—from Wolfe to Fox should have been easy, after all—his doom was sealed (a melodramatic phrase Mr. Stout would never have employed) right from *Fer-de-Lance*.

Nero Wolfe has become one of those rare creations—like Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, Horatio Hornblower, and Jeeves—who both overshadow and outlive their authors; and I remember when I first met Mr. Stout, around 1965, being disappointed that he wasn’t Wolfe. (He was, instead, charming, open, witty, and wonderfully generous to a young writer.) Had Stout ever chosen to terminate one of Wolfe’s rare journeys to the outside world in the trusty old Heron by dropping him off at (or in) the Reichenbach Falls, no one could have blamed him, but I believe Stout submitted with good grace (a cliché he would never have employed) to Wolfe’s dominance, and they lived comfortably together for forty-three years.

That would be a long time for any association to last, and is even more remarkable since one of the associates was forty-five years old at its beginning; but what’s more interesting, at least to me, is that Nero Wolfe is not a very nice person. He’s self-absorbed, selfish, and self-satisfied. He’s arrogant and uncivil and socially a fright. He’s prissy and misogynistic. He orders people around and gets away with it; in one book he even orders J. Edgar Hoover around and gets away with it. How on earth did Rex Stout put up with the fellow all that time?

Maybe more important, why do we put up with him? Why did all of the Nero Wolfe novels sell so very well, and go on selling in edition after edition? Why, seventeen years after Rex Stout’s death, is his creation still alive in this freshly printed book you hold in your hands? Are we wrong to enjoy Nero

Wolfe so much?

No. We are right to enjoy Rex Stout's presentation of Nero Wolfe so much, through the brilliant prism of Archie Goodwin. Archie is ingratiation itself, an easy raconteur, an amiable chap who is bright without arrogance, knowledgeable without pretension, and quick-witted without brusqueness. If Nero Wolfe is the pill—and he is—Archie Goodwin is the sugar coating.

What makes Wolfe palatable is that Archie finds him palatable. What makes him a monster we can enjoy rather than flee from is that Archie stands between us and him. We like Archie, and Archie likes (tolerates, is amused by, is ironic toward, but serves) Nero Wolfe. It's a wonderful conception, strong enough to build a massive readership upon, yet flexible enough for Rex Stout to use over and over for decades, in story after story.

Not that *story* is the primary issue here. One doesn't drop in at the house on Thirty-fifth Street for the plot line but for the house itself and its denizens—lovingly described, familiar, comfortable, though with Nero Wolfe in charge and Archie Goodwin as Virgil never so comfortable as to bore.

That Wolfe really isn't that clever a detective hardly matters. (In the present book Archie even has fun over the fact that he and Wolfe can't tell one cigar ash from another; a nicely ironic reference to Sherlock Holmes, another infuriating madman made palatable by his ingratiating interpreter.) That most Nero Wolfe novels—not including *The Father Hunt*, be assured—depend on at least one thundering coincidence matters not at all. Even the occasional minor glitch, as though Stout had an affinity with those Indian tribes who deliberately include a flaw in their designs so as not to compete with the perfection of the gods, doesn't matter. (This time the glitch is extremely unimportant and occurs in [Chapter 12](#), where Archie assures a young lady that a certain man's name would mean nothing to her even though Archie and the young lady had met the man together in [Chapter 8](#); no matter, no matter.)

Stout had fun with Nero Wolfe. Well, he had fun with life. Having some years earlier written a Wolfe novel called *The Mother Hunt*, it was probably more than he could resist not to write one called *The Father Hunt*. It was written when he was seventy-nine, and it all still works. As time goes by, I increasingly find that another comforting thought.

—Donald E. Westlake

Chapter 1

It happens once or twice a week. Lily Rowan and I, returning from a show or party or hockey game, leave the elevator and approach the door of her penthouse on top of the apartment building on Sixty-third Street between Madison and Park, and there is the key question. Mine is, Do I stay back and let her do it? Hers is, Does she stay back and let me do it? We have never discussed it, and it is always handled the same way. When she gets out her key as we leave the elevator she gives me a smile which means, “Yes, you have one, but it’s my door,” and I smile back and follow her to it. It is understood that mine is for situations that seldom arise.

That Thursday afternoon in August we had been to Shea Stadium to watch the Mets clobber the Giants, which they had done, 8 to 3, and it was only twenty past five when she used her key. Inside, she called out to Mimi, the maid, that she was home, and went to the bathroom, and I went to the bar in a corner of the oversized living room, with its 19-by-34 Kashan rug, for gin and ice and tonic and glasses. By the time I got out to the terrace with the tray she was there, at a table under the awning, studying the scorecard I had kept.

“Yes, sir,” she said as I put the tray down, “Harrelson got three hits and batted in two runs. If he was here I’d hug him. Good.”

“Then I’m glad he’s not here.” I gave her her drink and sat. “If you hugged that kid good you’d crack a rib.”

A voice came. “I’m going, Miss Rowan.”

Our heads turned. The young woman in the doorway to the living room was a newcomer to the penthouse. I had seen her only twice, and she was easy to look at, with just enough round places, just round enough, properly spotted on her five-foot-four getup, and her warm dark skin just right for her quick brown eyes. Her dark-brown hair was bunched at the back. Her name was Amy Denovo and she had got a diploma from Smith in June. Lily had hired her ten days ago, at a hundred a week, to help her find and arrange material for a book a man was going to write about Lily’s father, who had made a pile building sewers and other items and had left her enough boodle to keep a dozen penthouses.

She answered a couple of questions Lily asked, and left, and we talked baseball, concentrating on what the Mets had, if anything, besides Tommy Davis and Bud Harrelson and Tom Seaver, and what they might have if we lived long enough. We dawdled with the drinks, and at six o’clock I got up to go, leaving Lily plenty of time to change for a dinner she had been hooked for, where people were going to abolish ghettos by making speeches. I had a

date, later, where I intended to abolish the welfare of some friends of mine by drawing another ace or maybe jack.

But down in the lobby I was intercepted. Albert, the doorman, was moving to open the door for me when a voice spoke my name and I turned, and Amy Denovo left a chair and was coming. She gave me a nice little smile and said, "Could you give me a few minutes to ask you something?"

I said, "Sure, shoot," and she glanced at Albert, and he took the hint and went outside. I said we might as well sit and we went to a bench at the wall, but the door opened again and a man and woman entered, crossed to the elevator, and stood.

Amy Denovo said, "It is rather public, isn't it? I said a few minutes, but I suppose ... it might be more than just a few. If you could? And I ... it's very personal.... I mean personal to me."

I hadn't noticed the dimples before. They are always more taking on a dark skin than on a light skin. "You're twenty-two," I said.

She nodded.

"Then maybe one minute will do it. Don't marry him now, you're too young to know. Wait a year at least, and—"

"Oh, it isn't that! It's *very* personal."

"Don't think marriage isn't personal. It's too damn personal, that's the trouble. If you mean a few hours, not a few minutes, I'm sorry; I have an eight o'clock date, but there's a place around the corner that sells drinks and makes good egg-and-anchovy sandwiches. If you like anchovies."

"I do."

The door opened and two women entered and headed for the elevator. That was not the place to discuss *very* personal matters.

She was all right to walk with, no leading or lagging and no silly step-stretching. At that time of day in August there was plenty of room in the back at The Cooler, and we got the corner table where Lily and I had often had a snack. When the waitress had taken our order and left, I asked if she wanted to put off being personal until we had something inside.

She shook her head. "I might as well ..." She let it hang ten seconds and then blurted, "I want you to find my father."

I raised a brow. "Have you lost him?"

"No. I haven't lost him ... because I never had him." She said it fast, as if someone was trying to stop her. "I decided I had to tell somebody—that was a month ago—and then I got this job with Miss Rowan and I found out that she knows you, and I met you, and of course I know about you and Nero Wolfe. But I don't want Nero Wolfe to do it, I want you to."

There were no dimples, and the quick brown eyes were fastened on me.

"That won't work," I told her. "I'm on full time with Mr. Wolfe, twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week when they're needed, and I don't take jobs on my own. But I have a loose hour"—I looked at my watch—"and twenty minutes, and if you want a suggestion I might possibly have one. No charge."

"But I need more than a suggestion."

“You’re not in a position to judge. You’re too involved.”

“I’m involved all right.” The eyes stayed at me. “I couldn’t tell this to anybody but you. Not *anybody*. When I met you last week, the first time, I felt it then, I knew it, that you were the one man in the world that I could trust to do it. I never had that feeling about a man before—or woman either.”

“That’s just dandy,” I said, “but save the soap. Did you say you never had your father?”

Her eyes darted away as the waitress came with the drinks and sandwiches. When we had been served and were alone again she tried to smile. “That wasn’t just figurative.” She kept her voice low and I needed my good ears. “I meant that literally. I never had a father. I don’t know who he was. Is. I don’t know what my name is, what it should be. Nobody knows about it—*nobody*. Now you know. I don’t think Denovo was my mother’s real name. I don’t think she was ever married. Do you know what Denovo means? Two Latin words, *de novo*?”

“Something about new. A nova is a new star.”

“It means ‘anew.’ ‘Afresh.’ She started anew, afresh, she started over, and she took the name Denovo. I wish I knew for sure.”

“Have you asked her?”

“No. I wanted to, I was going to, and now I can’t. She’s dead.”

“When did she die?”

“In May. Just two weeks before I graduated. By a car. A hit-and-run driver.”

“Did they get him?”

“No. They haven’t found him. They are still looking; they say they are.”

“What about relatives? A sister, a brother ...”

“There aren’t any.”

“There must be. Everyone has relatives.”

“No. None. Of course there might be some under her real name.”

“Have you got any? Cousins, uncles, aunts ...”

“No.”

It was getting messy. Or rather, it was getting too damn pure and simple. I knew people who liked to think of themselves as loners, but Amy Denovo really was one; with her it wasn’t just thinking. I suggested that we might try the sandwiches, and she agreed and took one, and took a bite. Naturally, when I am eating with someone, male or female, for the first time, I notice the details of his or her performance, since it tells a lot about the person, but that time I didn’t because the way she took a bite, or chewed, or swallowed, or licked her lips, had no bearing on the fix she was in. I did observe that there was nothing wrong with her appetite, and she proved that she liked the egg-and-anchovy combo by taking her full share. She asked if it was on Nero Wolfe’s list of favorites, and I said no, he would probably sneer at it. When the platter was empty she said she hadn’t thought it would make her hungry, telling someone the secret she had kept bottled up so long, but it had. She gave me a little smile, the dimples coming, and said, “We don’t really know ourselves, do we?”

“It depends,” I said. “Some of us know too much, and some not enough. I don’t want to know why I get out of bed mornings in a fog, I might never sleep again. To hell with it, I always find my way out. As for you, you’re not in a fog, you’re under a spotlight that you turned on yourself. Why don’t you just turn it off?”

“I did *not* turn it on myself. Other people did it, especially my mother. I *can’t* turn it off.”

“Well, then. What’s your biggest question? Your mother’s real name and so on, or your father?”

“My father, of course. After all, I have lived with my mother all my life, and I suppose my wanting to know her real name and things about her is just ... well, curiosity. But I *must* know about my father. Is he alive? Who is he? What is he? His genes made me!”

I nodded. “Yeah, you went to Smith. You learned too much about genes. Mr. Wolfe said once that scientists should keep their findings strictly to themselves; by spilling it they just complicate things for other people. Would you like some coffee?”

“No, thanks.”

“They have good sweet things.”

She shook her head. “I admit I could eat anything, it’s really amazing, my being so hungry, but I’d rather not. What do you ...? You said you might have a suggestion.”

“I know I did.” I turned a hand over on the table. “You’ve got a tough one. I’m afraid you need more than a suggestion, even from the one man you can trust. Sure, I filed that. To get what you want—there’s one chance in a million that a week or so of poking around would crack it, but it would probably be a long and very expensive job. How much money have you got?”

“Not much. Of course I would want to pay you.”

“Not me. I explained that. But Nero Wolfe has inflated ideas about fees; that’s why I would have to know exactly how you are fixed. If you care to tell me.”

“Certainly I’ll tell you. I have never earned any money, not enough to mention, and anyway I’ve spent it. I only have what my mother left, after paying the ... for the cremation. She left instructions about that. There’s a little more than two thousand dollars in the bank, that’s all. There are no debts and I don’t owe anyone anything.”

I had a brow up. “What did your mother do for—no, that’s immaterial. She made enough to send you to an expensive college. Unless someone helped?”

“No. She did it all. You were going to ask what she did for a living. She was with a television producer, the same one from as far back as I can remember. I suppose she got fifteen thousand a year, maybe more. She never told me.” The quick brown eyes were straight at me. “If I paid Nero Wolfe the two thousand dollars he would have you work on it, wouldn’t he?”

I shook my head. “He wouldn’t even discuss it. He would know it might take a year, and he thinks nothing of billing a client five grand for a one-week

job. You said you know about him, but apparently you don't. He's pig-headed and high-nosed and toplofty, and he thinks he's the best detective in the world, and so do I, or I would have moved out long ago. I think you deserve some help with your problem, and you certainly need it, and I like your dimples, but if I told him about you and suggested an appointment he would just glare at me. He would think I had a hinge loose. I do have one idea that you might want to consider. Miss Rowan likes to do things for people, and she has a stack, and if you—"

"Don't you dare tell her about me!"

"Keep your seat. I wouldn't dream of telling her, or anyone. I merely thought you might tell her yourself, and—"

"I wouldn't tell *anybody!*"

"Okay, I won't either. Your eyes have a fine flash." I regarded her. "Look, Miss Denovo. I'm shutting the door only because I have to. Myself, I would like to tackle it because it would probably have some interesting angles and twists and it would be nice to have a client it is a pleasure to look at. Besides, there would be the possibility of having to deal with a murder. When you hear about—"

"Murder?"

"Certainly. It's only a bare possibility, but it popped up because when you hear of a hit-and-run death and the driver hasn't been tagged, it does pop up. I mention it only because it's one of the reasons why I would like to tackle it. But there's not a sliver of a chance with Mr. Wolfe, and there you are. I'm sorry, I really am."

She shook her head, with her eyes staying at me. "But Mr. Goodwin. This leaves me helpless." Apparently the murder possibility hadn't fazed her. "What can I do? I can't tell somebody else."

That was that. I wasn't feeling particularly cocky twenty minutes later, as I flagged a taxi headed downtown on Park Avenue and gave the hackie Saul Panzer's address. Working for and with the best detective in the world—which you don't have to swallow—is fine, but when you have been told by a pretty girl that you are the one man in the world she can trust, even if it was pure soap, and you have stiff-armed her, you are not on your high horse. I slouched in the taxi and tried to steer my mind back to baseball and the Mets.

It was six minutes to eight when I got out at the corner of Thirty-eighth and Park. As for what happened to my friends' welfare, not to mention mine, I'll skip it. Sometimes the cards simply will not cooperate.

Chapter 2

For Friday's program I merely had to follow the script. At a quarter to ten I let myself out of the old brownstone on West Thirty-fifth Street, went to the garage around the corner on Tenth Avenue for the Heron sedan, which Wolfe owns and I drive, and headed for Long Island, where he had been spending three days as the guest of Lewis Hewitt, who has ten thousand orchids in two 100-foot greenhouses. Driving back to Manhattan, with him in back keeping a hold on the installed-on-order strap as usual because, according to him, no automobile can be trusted for a second, I had to be careful about bumps and jerks. Not on account of Wolfe, since I had a theory that jostles were good for him, but because of the pots of orchid plants in the trunk, which were not crated, and two of them were new *Laelia crosses* of *schroederi* and *ashworthiana*. They were worth maybe a couple of grand, but the important point was that nobody in the world but Hewitt and now Wolfe had any. As I pulled to the curb in front of the old brownstone I blew the horn, and Theodore Horstmann came out and down, as arranged, and helped me take the pots in and up in the elevator to the plant rooms on the roof. Wolfe took his bag himself. On that I have not a theory but a rule. He needs the exercise. By the time I got down to the office he was behind his desk, in the only chair he considers satisfactory for his weight and spread, looking through the accumulated mail, and Fritz came right behind me to announce lunch.

At table, in the dining room across the hall, business talk was out, as always, and anyway there was no business to discuss, and I had no intention of mentioning Amy Denovo's problem, then or ever. The talk may be of anything and everything, usually of Wolfe's choosing, but that time I started it by remarking, as I helped myself from the silver platter, that a man had told me that shish kebab was just as good or better if it was kid instead of lamb. Wolfe said that any dish was better with kid instead of lamb, but that fresh kid, properly butchered and handled, was unattainable in the metropolitan area. Then he switched from meat to words and said it was miscalled shish kebab. It should be seekh kebab. He spelled it. That was what it was called in India, where it originated. In Hindi or Urdu a seekh is a thin iron rod with a loop at one end and a point at the other, and a kebab is a meatball. Some occidental jackass, he said, had made it shish instead of seekh, and it would serve him right if the only seekh kebab he ever got was old tough donkey instead of lamb. He was still commenting on people who garble foreign words when we finished the raspberries, stirred into a mixture, made by Fritz in a double boiler, of cream and sugar and egg yolks and sherry and almond

extract, and went across to the office, where he got at his desk with the mail, and I got at mine with the plant records to enter the items he had talked Lewis Hewitt out of.

At four o'clock, when he took the elevator to the roof for his regular two-hour afternoon session with Theodore and the orchids, I took the stairs for the two flights to my room to do some little personal chores, like inspecting socks and changing the ribbon on my personal typewriter. Those operations always take longer than you expect, and when I heard the doorbell, which has a connection to my room, and glanced at my wrist, I was surprised to see that it was twenty to six. I left it to Fritz, who goes when I am not downstairs, but in a couple of minutes the house phone buzzed, and when I got it Fritz said that a young woman who said her name was Denovo wanted to see me, and I asked him to put her in the front room.

When, after mounting the stoop of the old brownstone, you enter, the second door down the hall on your left is the office. The first is to what we call the front room, which isn't used much, mostly for parking people who aren't wanted in the office. Its furniture is nothing much, not like the office or the kitchen, because Wolfe is seldom in it and doesn't give a damn. When I entered, Amy Denovo was on a chair by a window. She stood up and said, "Well, here I am."

"So I see." I crossed to her. "It's nice to see you and I don't want to be rude, but I thought I made it clear yesterday."

"Oh, you made it clear enough." She started a smile but it didn't quite come. "But I decided I had to see you again, and see Nero Wolfe, I suppose, and so I ... I did something." She had her bag, brown leather with a big clasp, under her left arm. She sat down and opened it, and took out a parcel wrapped in newspaper with rubber bands around it. She held it out and I took it, not wanting to be rude. "That's twenty thousand dollars," she said, "in hundred-dollar bills." Now the smile came. "You would call it twenty grand. Of course you'll want to count it."

No suitable words seemed to be ready for the tongue, so I gave them time by removing the rubber bands, and unfolding the newspaper for a look. It was centuries, some new and some used, in batches fastened with paper clips, and they looked real when I flipped through some. There were ten in the batch I counted, and there were twenty batches. I rewrapped them in the newspaper and replaced the rubber bands.

"At five grand a week," she said, "that's enough for four weeks anyway."

From the hall the sound came of the elevator rattling to a stop. Wolfe was down from the plant rooms.

"The five grand was just the fee," I said. "It didn't include expenses. But that was a little special, it isn't always five grand a week. Are you telling me that you want to hire Nero Wolfe and you offer this as a retainer?"

"Yes. Certainly. Provided you're in charge."

"He's always in charge. I merely do the work."

"All right, if you do the work."

“I will. He only does the thinking. I’ll explain it to him and then call you in. If you’ll wait here?”

She frowned and shook her head. “I don’t want to talk about it to anybody but you.”

“Then it’s out. He wouldn’t take a client he hasn’t seen. He never has and he never will.”

She pressed her lips tight and took a couple of breaths, and finally said, “I guess I can. All right.”

“Good. You won’t cotton to him, but you can trust him as far as me.” I tapped the package. “Do you want to tell me anything about this?”

“No, I don’t. There’s nothing to tell except there it is.”

“I can assume it’s in your possession legally?”

“Of course.” She was still frowning. “I didn’t rob a bank.”

“It’s still in your possession until he takes the job.” I handed her the parcel. “It may take me five minutes or it could be half an hour. If you get tired waiting, there are magazines on the table.” I started for the connecting door to the office but decided to go around, and went to the door to the hall instead.

Wolfe was at his desk with his current book, *Incredible Victor*, by Walter Lord. He probably hadn’t got much reading in at Hewitt’s and would have to catch up. I went to my desk, sat facing him, and waited for him to finish a paragraph. It must have been a long one. He looked up and growled, “Something?”

“Somebody,” I said. “A girl in the front room named Amy Denovo. I believe I mentioned a while back that Miss Rowan was collecting material for a book about her father, and she hired this girl to help, and I met her there last week. As I was leaving there yesterday afternoon she—the girl—stopped me down in the lobby and we went to a place and had egg-and-anchovy sandwiches which I have told Fritz about but he wasn’t interested. She wanted me to do a job for her because I am the one man in the world she can trust, and I told her I couldn’t because I already had a job, and she said then she would hire you if I would do the work, and I explained that I always do the work. Of course the next question, my question, was about money, and I asked it. She said she had two thousand dollars in the bank, left to her by her mother, and that’s all. No other resources and no prospects. Since the job would be complicated and might take months and no telling what expenses, I told her nothing doing, I wouldn’t even mention it to you. I was sorry because—”

“Pfui.” He grunted. “Why do you mention it now?”

“I’ll finish the sentence. I was sorry because the job would probably be interesting, and tough, and it has none of the aspects that you won’t touch. I mention it now because she is in the front room with a package wrapped in newspaper containing two hundred hundred-dollar-bills, twenty thousand dollars, which she wants you to take as a retainer.”

“Where did she get it?”

“I don’t know. She says it’s in her possession legally.”

He put his bookmark, a thin strip of gold that was a gift from a client, at his page and put the book down. "What was said yesterday. In full."

I had expected that. He hates to take on a job; anything to hold off a commitment. Also, there was the chance that there might be one or more details that he could find unacceptable. I reported. It had taken a lot of practice to get to where I could give a long conversation verbatim, but it was a cinch now, even with three or four talking. As usual, he leaned back and closed his eyes, and didn't interrupt. There was no reaction even to the "pigheaded and high-nosed and toplofty." I omitted nothing except the irrelevant chatter while we were eating. When I finished he stayed put for a minute and then opened his eyes and straightened up.

He regarded me. "That's not like you, Archie. It's hardly even a sketch. Barely a start."

"Certainly. There was no point in going deeper with a poor little poor girl."

He looked up at the wall clock and back at me. "You could have—no matter. Very well. Bring her."

I went and opened the connecting door. She was still in the chair by the window, and hadn't returned the parcel to her bag; it was in her lap. I told her to come.

Wolfe seldom rises when someone enters the office, and never if it's a woman. His expression is always the same if it's a woman, no matter who or what she is; he is concentrating on not making a face. There is no telling what he notices or doesn't; for instance, whether he noticed that the skirt of Amy Denovo's brown-striped summer dress wasn't really a mini; it was only about two inches above her knees. Certainly he didn't notice that the knees were worthy of notice, though they were, since that had no bearing on her acceptability as a client. The seat of the red leather chair near the end of his desk was too deep for her to settle back, so she sat on the front half, straight, and put her bag on the stand at her elbow, with the parcel in her lap.

Wolfe, his chair swiveled to face her, his fingers curled over the arm ends, spoke. "So Mr. Goodwin impressed you at first sight."

Her eyes, meeting his, widened a little. "Yes. He did."

"That may be a point for you and it may not. It is nothing new for him to impress a young woman. He has reported his conversation with you yesterday, to its conclusion. He says that you now have in your possession, you say legally, twenty thousand dollars in cash, and you offer it to me as retainer for the job you want me to do. Is that correct?"

"Yes, if Mr. Goodwin does the work."

"He would do his share, directed by me except when urgency forbids. The money is in that parcel? May I see it?"

She got up and handed it to him and returned to the chair. He removed the rubber bands and wrapping and took a look at each batch, all twenty of them, stacking them neatly on his desk. He turned to me. "I see no indication of source. Did you?"

I said no.

He turned to her. "Did Miss Lily Rowan supply it?"

"Of course not!"

"But of course someone did. In view of what you told Mr. Goodwin yesterday, I would have to know the source of this money. Where and how you did get it."

Her lips were tight. She opened them to say, "I don't see why you have to know that. There's nothing wrong with the way I got it. It's mine. If I went to a store to buy something and gave them one of those bills they wouldn't ask me where I got it."

He shook his head. "Not a parallel, Miss Denovo. Yesterday you told Mr. Goodwin that two thousand dollars in the bank was all you had, and you rejected his suggestion that you ask Miss Rowan to help you." He tapped the desk. "This is ten times two thousand. If it was a loan or a gift I would have to know from whom. If you sold something I would have to know what you sold and to whom. You may not know, at your age, that that is merely reasonable prudence. To accept a substantial retainer for a difficult and complicated operation without assurance of its legitimacy would be asinine, and if you won't tell me where you got this money I won't take it. If you do tell me it will have to be verified, with proper discretion, but to my satisfaction."

She was frowning again, not at him, at me, but it wasn't really for me; it was for the problem she had been handed. But when she spoke it was to me and for me, a question: "Is he right, Mr. Goodwin? Or is he just shutting the door, as you did?"

"No," I said, "I'm afraid he's right. As he said, just reasonable prudence. And after all, if it's yours legally, as you told me, and if there's nothing wrong with the way you got it, as you told him, why not spill it? It can't be a deeper secret than the one we already know."

She looked at Wolfe and back at me. "I could tell *you*," she said.

"Okay, tell me, and we'll pretend he's not here."

"I guess I was being silly." Her eyes were meeting mine. "After what you already know, you might as well know this too. That money came from my father. That and a lot more."

Both of my brows went up. "That makes a liar of you yesterday. Yesterday you had never had your father and didn't know who or what he was, and the two thousand—"

"I know. That was true, I never had a father. This is what happened. When my mother died I came to New York, of course, but I had to go back for graduation, and anyway Mr. Thorne had her instructions, about cremation, and that there was to be no funeral, and he attended to all the ... the details. Then when I came to New York after the graduation he came—"

"Mr. Thorne?"

"Yes. He came—"

"Who is he?"

"He's the television producer my mother worked for. He came to see me, to the apartment, and he brought things—papers and bills and letters and other

things from my mother's desk in her room at the office. And a box, a locked metal box with a label glued on it that said *Property of Amy Denovo*. And a key with a tag that said *Key to Amy Denovo's box*. It had been—"

"Was your mother's name Amy?"

"No, her name was Elinor. The key had been in a locked drawer in her desk. The box had been in the office safe. It had been there for years—at least fifteen years, Mr. Thorne said. It's about this long." She held her open hands about sixteen inches apart. "I waited until he had gone to open it, and I was glad I did. There were just two things in it: money, hundred-dollar bills—the box was more than half full—and a sealed envelope with my name on it. I opened the envelope and it was a letter from my mother, not a long one, just one page. You want to know what it said?"

"I sure do. Have you got it?"

"Not here, it's at home, but I know it by heart. It's on her personal letterhead. It isn't dated. It says: *Dear Amy, This money is from your father. I have not seen him or heard from him since four months before you were born but two weeks after you were born I received a bank check for one thousand dollars in the mail, and I have received one every month since then, and it now amounts to exactly one hundred thousand dollars. I don't know what it will be when you read this. I didn't ask for it and I don't want it. I want nothing from your father. You are my daughter, and I can feed you and clothe you and give you a place to live, and I will. And see that you are properly educated. But this money came from your father, so it belongs to you, and here it is. I could put it in a bank to draw interest, but there would be taxes to pay and records of it, so I do it this way. Your mother.* And below *Your mother* she signed her name, Elinor Denovo—only I don't think that was her name. And it must have kept coming right up to the time she died, because it's two hundred and sixty-four thousand dollars. Of course I can't put it in a bank or anything like that because I would have to tell them how I got it. Wouldn't I? And I won't."

I looked at Wolfe. He was looking, not at her or at me, but at the stack of lettuce on his desk. Another man could have been thinking that life certainly plays cute tricks, but he was probably reflecting that that was just one-thirteenth of what a father had paid for the privilege, or something similar.

I said, to him, "So it wasn't a loan or a gift and she didn't sell anything, but we'll have to concede that it's legally in her possession. Of course the Internal Revenue Service and the New York State Income Tax Bureau would like to take a whack at it, but that's not our lookout and what they don't know won't hurt her. What else shall I ask her?"

He grunted and turned to her. "Is the money still in the box?"

"Yes, all but that." She gestured toward his desk. "The box is in my apartment—on Eighty-second Street. And the letter. But I don't want ... Mr. Goodwin mentioned the Internal Revenue Service."

"We are not government agents, Miss Denovo, and are not obliged to disclose information received in confidence." He swiveled his head to look at the clock. "It is ten minutes to our dinnertime. May Mr. Goodwin call on you

at your apartment at ten tomorrow morning?”

“Yes. I don’t go to Miss Rowan on Saturday.”

“Then expect him around ten o’clock. He will want to see the box and its contents, and the letter, and he will want all the information you can give him. What you told him yesterday is a mere prologue.” He turned. “Archie. Give her a receipt for this money. Not as a retainer; that can wait until you have seen the box and the letter, and you will verify the handwriting of the letter. Just a receipt for the amount, her property, entrusted to me for safekeeping.”

I turned my chair, pulled the typewriter around, and opened a drawer for paper and carbon.

Chapter 3

I was interested, naturally, in Elinor Denovo's apartment. We were probably going to need to know everything about her that was knowable, and a woman's home can have a hundred hints, two or three of which you may get if you have any savvy at all and are lucky. So before settling down with Amy and my notebook in the living room I took a tour, with Amy along. There was a small foyer, a medium-sized living room, two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a small kitchen. If the foyer or kitchen or bathroom had any hints they weren't for me; for instance, there was nothing in the bathroom to indicate that it had ever been used by a man, but of course Elinor hadn't been there for nearly three months.

I gave Amy's bedroom just a glance; for her I had a better source of hints, herself. She said she hadn't changed anything in her mother's bedroom. It might have told a woman, especially a Lily Rowan, a lot, but all I got was that she had liked pale green for drapes and the bed cover, she used three different scents, all expensive, and she didn't mind if the rug had a big spot near the bathroom door. The living room did have a few hints which might help or might not. There were five pictures on the walls, and they were all color reproductions of paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe—data supplied by Amy. I would have to check on O'Keeffe. The only piece of furniture that was upholstered was the couch, and there were only two cushions on it. I have seen couches with a dozen. The four chairs didn't match one another, and none of them matched the couch. The books, seven whole shelves of them, were such a mixture, all kinds, fiction and non-fiction, that after I had looked at twenty or thirty titles I quit.

The one really good hint, if someone would tell me what it meant, was that there were no photographs. Except for those in Amy's room, which belonged to her, there wasn't a single photograph in the place, not one, of anyone or anything. That was hard to believe, but Amy said that as far as she knew there had never been any, and she had none of her mother, not even a snapshot, which was a setback, since we would certainly want to know what Elinor Denovo had looked like. I would probably have had to look long and far to find another middle-aged women who had died, or would die, absolutely photographless.

There were papers, letters, and paid bills and miscellaneous items, including the stuff from her room at the office, but there was no diary or anything resembling one, and there was nothing that seemed likely to be of any help. If it got too tough I might have to have another go at it or put Saul Panzer on it. I did use a few of the items, in Elinor's handwriting, to check the

writing on the letter that was in the box with the money. It geed.

When I finally sat on the couch with my notebook, with Amy on one side and the box on the other, it was getting on toward noon. Amy looked two years younger; she hadn't bunched her hair and it was dancing around when she moved her head. I got a piece of folded paper from my breast pocket.

"Here's a receipt," I said, "signed by Mr. Wolfe, which he told me to give you if the box and its contents checked, and I admit they do. You are now a client in good standing." I handed it to her. "Now a suggestion. We discussed you after dinner last evening. You have been damned lucky; a closet shelf is no place for a quarter of a million dollars' worth of skins. If you get the thought that what we're concerned about is the fact that some of it may be needed for the job if it drags on, that's all right, but it's also a fact that we're concerned with a client's interests from every angle, not just the job. So we have a suggestion. Banks are closed today and tomorrow. When I leave I'll take the box along and put it in the safe in our office. Monday morning I'll take it to your bank and meet you there. Which bank is it?"

"The Continental. The Eighty-sixth Street branch."

"That's fine. Mr. Wolfe's is the Thirty-fourth Street branch and so is mine. We'll get twelve bank checks for twenty grand each, payable to you, and I'll have with me letters to twelve different savings banks in New York, ready for your signature, opening savings accounts. You'll endorse the bank checks and we'll enclose them in the letters. The interest will come to a thousand dollars a month, which is a nice coincidence. You'll deposit the remaining four grand in your account at the Continental."

She was frowning. "But ... what will happen? How will I explain ...?"

"You won't have to explain anything. If at some time in the future the Internal Revenue Service gets nosy and tries to hook you, you owe them nothing because it was gifts from your father, stretched out over twenty-two years, and Mr. Wolfe is sure that they'll have to lump it, and so am I. They couldn't claim it was used for your support because it wasn't, not a cent of it. If you stash it in a safe-deposit box and peel off twelve grand a year, it will last twenty years. If you do what we suggest, you'll get twelve grand a year and there will be no peeling off. And of course you could withdraw it any time and buy race horses or something."

She gave me a smile. "I'd like to think about it a little. I knew I could trust you. I'll decide before you go."

"Good. A question. Have there been any bank checks in the mail for your mother since she died? Either here or at the office?"

"No, not here. If there had been any at the office of course Mr. Thorne would have told me."

"Okay. I should mention that I no longer think it may take a year. A week may do it, or even less. Your mother made a mistake in that letter. If she didn't want you to find out who your father was, and obviously she didn't, she shouldn't have mentioned that it came in bank checks. There was and is a trail, there has to be, between those checks and the sender, and she probably