

A CURE FOR THE LIVING

BY WILLIAM MAZANITIS

CHAPTER 1

The smell was always what bothered me most. The antiseptic detergent that failed to mask the musty reek of decomposing flesh; the eye-burning ammonia stench of formalin; the sweet, metallic smell of old blood; the fetor of a dissected bowel. But whatever odors I detected were not coming from the body on the metal slab, for it was intact. No cuts, bruises, abrasions, or any other signs of trauma. A white male in his early twenties, with dirty-blond hair, a somewhat swollen face with several days' stubble, and an athletic build with tan lines on the upper arms and legs. His had been a kind death, if such a thing existed. Nothing like my Annie's, which required a closed casket.

"Cause of death?" I asked.

"Found floating under the Hudson piers," said a familiar voice behind me. "Two kids spotted him from a passing boat. Presumed drowning, pending the autopsy." Detective James Drake of the NYPD was leaning against the wall. Tall and big boned, with a square jaw and the tired eyes of one who has seen it all. He was wearing his usual wrinkled gray suit and retro wide-brimmed fedora. "But that's not the interesting part." He pointed to the left upper arm, where I could barely make out a faded tattoo.

“So?”

“Look close. Here.” He handed me a magnifying glass. It felt slimy. Too late, I saw that he had latex gloves on. I bent over to peer at a barely recognizable image of a bulldog wearing a crumpled hat. Left of it was the number “69,” and on the right, “71.”

“Recognize it?” Drake asked.

I shrugged, then looked at the pathologist. Dr. Eugene Pendergast had a full beard and a belly that reflected many expensive evenings at *Chez Ducasse*. The cigarette dangling between his lips reaffirmed his fatalism as well as his disdain for morgue rules. His normally festive eyes now had a look of unease and also something else. Foreboding, maybe.

“The tattoo is obviously faded,” Pendergast said. “*Too* faded. And not from trying to remove it. That leaves very different marks.”

“So the great Pendergast can’t explain it?” I teased.

“No,” he said. “But I know it didn’t fade naturally.”

“Hey, Santelli, come take a gander,” Drake called to a woman who had just entered the autopsy room.

The new recruit had long brown hair put up in a bun, big dark eyes that pulled you in, and a figure that even a Kevlar vest couldn’t hide. I couldn’t help wondering whether Drake had hooked up with her yet.

“What do you make of this?” he asked her. Turning to me, he said, “Santelli’s an army brat. Spent her youth following her dad around from base to base—right, Gina?”

Gina Santelli peered down at the tattoo for a moment and said, “Marines, Vietnam era. My uncle has one, but it looks a lot better than this.”

“Vietnam?” I said. “That’s ridiculous! This kid wasn’t even born yet.”

“Maybe he put it there to honor his father,” Santelli said.

“There’s something strange about it, I tell you,” Pendergast said again.

“The lousy work, you mean?” Drake suggested.

“Maybe not,” Pendergast said. “We’ll take skin sections, analyze the ink, the depth, and so on. That should tell us something.”

I looked at Drake, who was peeling off the blue latex gloves.

“So you thought this worthy of me?” I said in the most bored tone I could muster.

He smirked in that way of his that said, *there’s more here than meets the eye*. “Look at the right forearm.”

Using a paper towel, I lifted the right arm and found another tattoo on the inside, a few inches above the wrist. This one looked much newer. It read “04-12-1950.”

“A date,” I said. “But it can’t be his birth date. That would make him sixty-six.”

“It could be his father’s birth date,” Santelli suggested. “That would square with the Vietnam dates. He’d have been nineteen when he went to Nam.”

“But this tattoo looks more recent,” I said. “And why would a kid tattoo his dad’s birth date on his arm? I assume you didn’t find any ID.”

“Just these,” Drake said, digging in his jacket pocket. He took out a clear plastic bag and handed it to me. It contained two medals on a silver chain. One was an old St. Anthony medallion, the other a Navy Cross. I handed the bag to Santelli.

“Yup,” she said, “this version of the Navy Cross was awarded to Marines during the Vietnam era.” She looked up to find all three of us staring at her. “What? I’ve had a collection since I was a kid. You won’t believe how many of these are for sale online.”

Drake sighed. “You’d think that’s the last thing they’d sell.”

“Not when you’re living on the streets and wondering how you’ll get your next fix,” Santelli said. “Some of these guys had it rough when they got back.”

I turned to Drake. “Anything else?”

“There’s the clothes.”

He pointed to another table, where several items of clothing were laid out. I walked over to have a look: white T-shirt, white long shorts with the kind of fabric belt you tie in front, cotton briefs, canvas Top-Siders.

“They look like clothes you wear on a boat,” I said. “One with a polished deck.”

“That’s how I see it,” Drake said. “Maybe he fell off a sailboat. I’ll check with missing persons, the local marinas, send fingerprints to local, state, and federal law enforcement—and, of course, the Defense Department.”

“I’ve taken tissue samples for DNA analysis,” Pendergast said.

“Why do I have the feeling you won’t find anything?” I asked. “Let me know what the autopsy shows. Come on, Detective, let’s get some coffee. This guy’s yanking our chain.”

* * *

As Drake leaned back in his chair sipping his police department coffee, I noted, not for the first time, how much his face resembled the angular features of the cartoon Dick Tracy. He’d been wearing a fedora for years, even though men’s hats were long out of fashion. But Bogie was the actual inspiration, when Drake first saw *The Maltese Falcon*. At least, that was how he told it. He was twelve at the time, a tall kid even then, the son of Greek immigrants. His grandfather’s name, Drakamoulis, had been shortened on Ellis Island by the nice immigration officer who cared not a lick for heritage or pride of ancestry—concepts that didn’t reach the public’s consciousness until half a century later. I had different origins but a similar outcome, the Romanian Darinescu having been changed to the more recognizable Darius. My mother added Christian as my first name to balance the ancient Persian reference. “Christian Darius, *New York Times*

reporter”—I rather liked the sound of it.

“Hell of a riddle,” Drake said, holding his coffee under his desk as he added a shot of bourbon from his flask.

“Ockham’s razor,” I said. “The simplest explanation is usually the right one. Like Santelli said, he was probably honoring his father.”

Drake took a slug of spiked coffee and gave a satisfied grunt. “I just wanted to see your ugly mug. You haven’t been around.”

“Working on another book. I’ve been holed up in the library.”

“The *public* library? Jesus, do people still use that?”

“You might as well ask if people still read books.”

“Okay, I’m asking.”

“They read more than ever—in eBook form—but who cares.”

“Are you angling for another Pulitzer? It’s not an easy thing to repeat.”

“It’s about the various theories of the afterlife invented by humans over the millennia—bullshit mythology meant to ease the spirit. It’ll never see the light of day.”

Drake’s face twisted in a show of disappointment. “Ah, hell, you gotta let it go, pal. How long’s it been now—three years?”

“Three years, four months, and twelve days,” I said. “But who’s counting?”

“Annie’s in a better place. We’ll all be there soon enough.”

There it was again, the usual consoling platitude to the grieving.

“How do you know?” I said. “It could be a worse place, or no place at all. No one’s ever come back to tell us.”

“*Practically* no one.”

“Oh, don’t tell me you still believe that God sent some lone Jew—in the middle of a Roman occupation, no less—to spread the word. Hell, why not send a *hundred* prophets, a thousand? Why not come himself, if he’s

so almighty?”

Drake drained his coffee and poured more third-shelf bourbon into the empty cup. “He did, in the flesh of Christ.”

“Tell me something. If all these billions of faithful—Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, or whatever—believe in the afterlife, why do they still want to beat death? Why the quest for the fountain of youth, which we’ve been looking for since recorded history?”

“They’re scared shitless of the unknown,” Drake said.

“Yeah, because they know it’s all horseshit—stories told to children to keep them from crying in the night as they imagine the abyss of non-existence.”

Drake shook his head sadly. “You’re obsessed with death, you know that? Normal people don’t think about these things.”

“The SaatusTech case proved they do.”

It had been a ruse from the beginning: a start-up company that sprang up out of nowhere shortly after the human genome was mapped, claiming to be able to predict your life expectancy by analyzing your genome. The ten-thousand-dollar-a-pop price tag didn’t seem much of a deterrent, even for those who couldn’t afford it. Of course, it was no more accurate than Tarot at the time, since they didn’t know what any of the genes actually did. By the time the company was forced to shut down, thirty thousand people from all over the world had ponied up to take a peek at their fate. It turned out that the owners were two twenty-something Estonian PhD candidates from Cal Tech (*saatus* means “fate” in Estonian) who saw an opportunity to make a killing. They got a slap on the wrist: a ten-million-dollar fine, and five years’ probation. They each walked away with 145 million dollars minus legal costs, tucked safely away in offshore accounts. The one good outcome had been that I wrote a book on it, which won me a Pulitzer and made my journalistic career. It also earned me a

nice chunk in royalties—nothing compared with Wall Street fortunes, but hey, I wasn't stealing old ladies' pensions, either. Ever since then, the team of Drake and Darius had been reconstituted whenever an interesting case came up. But I wasn't sure this one made the list.

“So what else you working on?” I asked in my usual bored voice.

And it was with that throwaway question, that dismissive wave of my hand that said *Give me something more interesting than this case*, that the story came to life.

“I have to talk to a woman about a ghost,” Drake said in a tone that sounded a lot like *Okay, you asked for it*.

“Now, that sounds more interesting. Mind if I tag along?”

Please add your comment on 'A CURE FOR THE LIVING' here.

<http://blog.billmaz.com/>