

...ONE

“Are you ever going to answer either one of your phones?”

Cleo Rule leaned against the casing of the open outer screen door after pushing open the inside door. There was no response from her husband who remained seated at his desk.

Hank’s back was to her and the open doorway. She tried again a little louder. “This persistent *tag-team* ringing is disrupting my morning news!”

“Close the door! You’re letting in cold air.”

Cleo shivered slightly despite her heavy sweatshirt and sweatpants. Still looking at the back of her husband of thirty-eight years, grinning she nudged the inside door open farther.

Professor Rule swung completely around, his antique oak chair squeaking. “I’m trying to think. I can’t think with interruptions—in the cold!” He patted one side of his graying, black curly hair.

“Really?” Cleo crossed from the doorway to Hank’s roll top desk. She returned the cordless phone to its cradle then dropped his cell phone onto a stack of copy paper. “Me either.”

“What is all the fuss?”

“I have no idea, but these two,” Cleo indicated with one delicate hand, “started taking turns an hour ago. And now you have the new sheriff of Estes Park waiting for you on the house phone. So get off your butt.”

Hank stood and retied the belt around his green plaid robe. “Shit, it’s not even eight o’clock!” Curious, but puzzled he followed his wife out through the doors of his office above their garage, down the stairs and along the brick walk to the side kitchen door.

“When did Estes Park get a new sheriff?” He searched his memory. “And why does he want to speak to me?”

“Estes Park got a new sheriff when the old sheriff retired then moved to Arizona last fall.” Cleo opened the back door. “And I have no idea why *she* wants to speak to you.”

Heading straight for the coffee pot she topped up her cup. “Let me know if you need bail money.” Then Cleo disappeared through the swinging door to the front hall carrying her giant polka-dot mug.

“Hello, this is Hank Rule speaking. I’m sorry I kept you waiting.”

“Professor Rule, this is Claire Gage.”

The light and lively voice at the other end of the call took Hank by surprise.

“I doubt that you remember me, but I was one of your students when you were still a TA for Dr. Rupert. You had just published your Masters’ thesis on *Leadership - The Influence of Historically Flawed Command*. My maiden name was Parker. I graduated from CSU, May 1983, so it’s been a while.”

Hank opened Cleo’s laptop on the kitchen island. “Yeah - 1983? That’s about thirty-plus whiles ago.”

He stalled for time as he signed on then checked Colorado State University’s alumni list. “But fortunately, your alumni profile has your graduation photo. I remember you now. I heard from someone that you went on to law school after leaving Colorado?”

“Yes, OU in Norman, Oklahoma and then I joined the FBI. I only retired from the FBI two years ago. After twenty years on the east coast, I still missed the Rockies, so from DC, my husband Ken and I moved to Estes Park for a quiet, relaxing mountain retirement.”

“Oh? My wife got the idea you were the new sheriff.”

“I am. I’ve been in office a whole five months. Ken was a pediatrician in DC and got bored soon after we settled with so much time on his hands and he began writing and illustrating children’s books.”

“About six months after that when I was well beyond stir-crazy, a neighbor talked me into running for local sheriff. Obviously fifty-six was too young to retire. But Dr. Rule, I didn’t call you to catch up.”

“Okay?”

“I realize it’s a grey, miserable March, day, but would it be possible for you to drive up to Estes now to Baldpate Inn? I have a dead body behind the inn and we found one of your business cards tucked in with his other personal effects.”

Silence.

“Professor Rule? I understand it’s extremely short notice, but I’d prefer not to move the victim or disturb the surrounding area until you’ve been here. Sending you a photo really isn’t the same as seeing the site firsthand.

Hank was still trying to collect himself. What else was in... You said him?”

“Yes the deceased is an elderly male, Hugo Lanze,” Claire spelled his name, “L-A-N-Z-E, age 97. His ID address is, 1010 Liberal Park Lane, Reading, Pennsylvania. Does *any* of that mean anything to you?”

“Not a damn thing. Unless some of my former students have moved to Pennsylvania. I don’t know anyone there and I’m pretty sure my wife doesn’t either. With that man’s name I’m drawing a complete blank. I have no idea why he’d have one of my business cards.”

“Well the card is an old one. It’s at least as old as the one I kept from my years in Fort Collins at CSU.”

“Now I’m really stumped.” Hank scrolled through the *Ls* still accessing the university website student lists. “There isn’t a Lanze or any name even close to that spelling in the alumni records or current student enrollment. But at ninety-seven I wouldn’t expect death to come as a surprise.”

“Professor Rule, Hugo Lanze was shot in the back.”

“If I don’t shave, I can leave in ten minutes and be there by nine.”

“Sir, that’s perfect. Thank you.”

...TWO

By most standards it was a dreary day, but Colorado had always been home to Dr. Harrison Franklin Rule and regardless of the weather, Hank never seemed to care. Neither did he mind the forty-one mile drive from Fort Collins to Estes Park. He welcomed the time to think.

From his Terry Lake neighborhood north of Fort Collins, he took a winding back road to Horsetooth Reservoir. From the reservoir his direction remained steadily west along a rural county road that connected acreages, to the farms in Eden Valley and then the village of Masonville that led to state highway 34.

Climbing steadily higher in altitude from the Front Range at 5000 feet, his ears began to pop with every other sharp turn of the, two lane Thompson Highway. Moisture that hung in the air at his house only threatening snow became a sure event the higher up in altitude he got.

As curious as Hank was to learn more about the deceased mystery man, he searched his memory, to no avail. Someone he knew or who knew him must have given his card to the late Mr. Lanze. If that was what had happened then that created yet another mystery.

Around the last curve and from the top of a slight rise at an altitude of 7500 feet, Estes Park came into view, but before entering the town he turned left. From the main highway the inn was another seven miles deeper into undisturbed forest.

Baldpate Inn on a sunny day was enigmatic and imposing.

On this, day overcast, with a mist of tiny snowflakes falling, the historical landmark inn looked formidable almost haunting.

Tucked into the base of a steep slope on the side of the Twin Sisters Mountain, the wood and log architecture of the early Twentieth Century was obvious.

Far off the road, at the end of a narrow tree lined drive the original logs harvested to build the inn had easily stood the test of time. Even the river rock for the massive stone fireplaces built for much of the inn's heat had been provided by nature.

Little had changed since it was opened by the Mace family in 1917 that proudly advertising electricity and indoor plumbing. Baldpate still had its original four outlying cabins. The main lodge of twelve rooms still prided itself on a book-packed library and a dining room view that left everyone who ate there feeling as if they and their meal were perched out on a tree branch.

As he turned up Fish Creek Road, Hank thought of the inn's rich history, its parade of famous and not so famous guests. Now the Baldpate Inn had a murder - with a victim to whom he was somehow linked.

The figure of a tall slender woman dressed in a calf-length navy wool coat with a grey knitted hat and gloves stood outside under the open entrance portico.

There was no wind so the dime sized dry flakes fell softly straight down steadily accumulating again on ploughed roads and the steep driveway.

Hank counted three police cars stopped on the far, east edge of the parking area. One car was from the Larimer County Sheriff's office and the other two were Estes Park police cruisers.

After Hank brought his aging Jeep to a stop beside the Larimer County police car, Sheriff Claire Gage walked toward him. Through rapidly falling flakes she left deep boot prints through the new snow.

The longer sand colored hair of her youth was now layered short to her chin and with blue rimmed glasses - from across a street Hank wouldn't have paired her with her alumni graduation photo. However, her years in federal investigation hadn't hardened her features and when she smiled her hazel eyes were relaxed.

The air was crisp and thick with the scent of evergreen. Close to where Hank parked an eighty-year-old spruce and neighboring pine tree towered overhead, protective and comforting.

"Professor, thank you again for making the drive in this weather," she looked up briefly at the sky. "I truly appreciate your taking this block of time away from your day."

She tilted her head to one side. "Except for some grey hair you haven't changed."

They shook hands.

"You're very generous to an aging school teacher." He rubbed the facial stubble that grew from his chocolate-colored skin.

"Sorry about the sprouting beard. I was up at five, but got so involved rewording a new final exam for my fourth-year class that I was still in my robe when you called."

"Bullshit! Hank, you were born in a bathrobe!" The voice of Larimer County Sheriff Juan Mendoza boomed from behind them.

"And Claire if your former teacher thought he could go finishing in public, wearing his old robe - he would."

"Mendi, you old sock!"

The men embraced warmly.

The mature high school friends though a contrast in cultures and build came from grandparents born in the same latitude. There was only four hundred sea miles between Kingston, Jamaica and Ponce, Puerto Rico.

Professor Rule towered over Sheriff Mendoza by six inches and outweighed him by fifty pounds.

Mendoza pointed toward an area cordoned off by yellow tape tied from tree to tree. “Our unfortunate tourist is over there just beyond the last cabin.”

Hank followed both officers as they crossed over a narrow stream no wider than Hank’s normal stride. Claire introduced Hank to her deputy who had just finished taking photos while a second officer noted measurements on a sketch of the crime scene and area.

A prone body lay face down almost covered by falling snow with the victim’s head turned slightly to the right. The victim’s feet were higher than his head as if he’d fallen face first with the shooter uphill from the target.

Professor Rule was struck by how empty and *still* the body was. Even a nearby fallen tree trunk seemed to have more substance.

Claire turned toward the parking area. “The morning chef parked her car here,” she began pointing.

“When she got out she spotted two deer by the stream just where it curves, there. When the deer ran up the slope toward a walking path, that’s about fifteen feet further up, she stated that she saw one of the deer leap over something. The odd shape made her look closer and that’s when she discovered the body.”

Hank had seen death before, too many times in Vietnam and then much later a car accident two summers before when he and Mendi returned from a day of fishing with two other buddies. But somehow at this crime scene and this death felt different.

“We found an original, first edition of this book “*The Seven Keys To Baldpate*”. Your old CSU business card was stapled to a cover page from your doctoral thesis, folded between two of the book’s pages. We found all of it sewn inside the lower lining of his coat.”

“Then over there,” Claire indicated a stand of aspens that grew on a slight rise. “Juan found a small skull carved from what looks to be anthracite coal. We’ll have that confirmed of course.”

Juan gestured making a circle of his thumbs and finger tips with both hands touching. “It’s about this size. When we walked the area during a routine search I noticed an almost

perfect hole in the snow where it looked like something heavy was either dropped or thrown. The carving was fairly deep partially covered by twigs and wet leaves below new snow.”

An ambulance arrived. There was no siren, only flashing lights. Printed on the side doors was the logo of Denver’s University Hospital. The two attendants retrieved a stretcher with a body bag and then removed the physical remains that once contained the breath, the memories and the laughter of Mr. Hugo Lanze.

Inside the inn at a corner table in the quaint dining room of the Baldpate Inn Sheriff Mendoza, Sheriff Gage and Professor Rule warmed up. Cupping large mugs of strong coffee at a corner table they sat far from curious guests.

A dancing fire filled the room with the scent of sizzling pine sap along with the intermittent pop and snap of dried bark yielding to heat.

Heavy dark beams made the open ceiling appear lower. Small paned windows wrapped around the large cozy room letting in forest views and light from three sides.

From her brief case Claire Gage retrieved a stained hardcover book inside a plastic evidence bag. She placed it in the center of the table. Then again from her briefcase she pulled a shiny black, finely carved replica of a human skull. Secure in an evidence bag as well, she set the heavy carving, the size of a large grapefruit beside the book.

Both recovered clues captured Hank’s interest, but he reached for the bag containing the book first. “May I look at this?”

Through the decades, the Baldpate Inn routinely sold copies of this book that shared its name as a form of co-promotion. Hank had heard about the book, but knew nothing about the plot. However, to see an older copy that had been deliberately hidden sent his innate historical interest on alert.

“Certainly, here.” Sheriff Gage gave Hank evidence gloves she retrieved from her coat pocket. “We hope to find more than just Mr. Lanze’s finger prints on the cover or inside pages.”

The book had no dust-jacket. Studying the leather spine it was fixed to stained linen fabric that was glued to paper board. Checking the date, Hank guessed the original 1913 publishing run never had a dust jacket. Further inside on the title page was a handwritten inscription: *To Simon and Sylvia - Good Luck – Great Uncle Hugo – November 5, 1978.*

The printed paper was slightly yellowed at the edges and felt brittle even through the gloves, so he turned the pages carefully. After checking several pages at random it struck Hank that someone had used the book as a form of reference. Several small, yellow post-its were fixed to pages with notes neatly printed in pencil.

Both police officers silently watched Dr. Rule as if he were preparing to remove a sliver with surgery tweezers.

Hank closed the book after checking more pages inside that contained notes and then the back cover. “Interesting. Was Hugo Lanze a guest at the inn?”

Juan Mendoza shook his head. “No, but housekeeping reported that the third cabin,” he pointed out the window. “That one, second from the far end was slept in last night.”

“We found evidence that someone climbed in through a small, rear bathroom window. When I checked inside the cabin, it looked like whoever broke in just laid on top of the bed cover because nothing else around the bed or in the room was disturbed.”

Claire waved to the server then raised her mug indicating a refill. “The manager stated that only two local people from town and three couples from out of state, who are also guests of the inn, ate in the dining room last night.”

Smiling the waiter returned to their table with their coffee refills.

“Do you have a last name for Steven and Sylvia?”

Claire shook her head, stirring cream in her coffee. “Not yet, it might be Lanze too. Fortunately Juan and I can count on support and cooperation from the FBI office in Denver for any additional resources we might need.”

“I’ve got my sergeant Anna Chavez, checking with Reading police. She’ll call me as soon as she has anything.” Mendoza held up his cell phone.

Claire added Anna’s name to the contact list in her phone then looked up at Dr. Rule. “What did you mean when you said *interesting*? If my memory serves me correctly I remember in class when you used to say that, you were thinking out loud while trying to connect some *mental* dots.”

Hank took a large swallow of his coffee. “You do have a good memory. I didn’t realize any of the kids were paying such close attention, or did you know even then you wanted to work for the FBI?”

“Well we were all kids then really. You were only ten years older than most of the other students in my class year. But yes I knew then where I wanted my career to go.”

“What I thought as interesting was the contrasts in handwriting.” Hank pointed. “The style on the title page is large and flowing. The letters on the post-its printed in uppercase block letters are small and precisely formed, so a second person made these notes. Also, it looked to me as if the person who wrote the printed notations used the book almost as a form of study like it was more for research and not just for leisure entertainment.”

“I didn’t check every chapter, but there are locations, dates and names printed with comments on all of the places that have been bookmarked. So it looks like this book contained more than just a mystery plot to someone.”

Claire looked at Juan then back to Professor Rule. “Would you have the time to go through each chapter that has flagged pages and see what you can make of the notes referenced?”

“I will in a couple of days. Is that soon enough? I’ve just got to get the last of my questions worded properly for the final exam. After I’ve used a test four or five times over eight or so years I give it a thorough revamp.”

Juan and Claire exchanged another look then they both nodded.

Hank reached for the carved skull. Without taking it out of the evidence bag he studied it carefully holding it close to the light of the window. “So this is coal? The carving is amazingly detailed. It’s a miniature, but it looks to scale.”

“Just open the bag and take a sniff.” Claire pushed her empty coffee mug aside.

“Oh yeah, it smells a little like tar, but it looks polished.”

“Anthracite is shiny and harder because it’s less porous than bituminous coal.”

“Well, that’s impressive.”

Both Juan and Hank looked at Claire with a quizzical expression.

“I once dated a geology major and paid attention, some of the time.”