

BEAR BONES
MURDER AT SLEEPING BEAR DUNES

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A BURR LAFAYETTE MYSTERY

Charles Cutter

MISSION POINT PRESS

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For
Charlie, Tom and Kathryn

*Was this the face that launch'd
a thousand ships
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium—
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss*

Christopher Marlowe
"Doctor Faustus"



PROLOGUE

Years and years ago, in the great forest that covered the place that is now named Wisconsin, lived Mishe Mokwa (Mother Bear) and her two cubs. One day, a raging fire swept through the woods, burning everything in its path. It drove Mishe Mokwa, her cubs and all the animals before it. Soon they came to a place where they could go no further, the great Lake Michigan.

Mishe Mokwa knew there would be no food after the fire was spent. Like all bears, Mishe Mokwa and her cubs were powerful swimmers. They plunged into the lake and swam east, keeping the light and smoke of the fire behind them. They swam through the day and the night.

Late the next day, Mishe Mokwa saw the tall white dunes on the lake's eastern shore. When she reached the place now called Michigan, her cubs were nowhere to be seen. She called to them with no answer, finally climbing the dunes to look back. As the sky turned red with sunset, she saw her cubs struggling far offshore through the cold waters. Her heart broke as first one and then the other slipped beneath the waves.

Heartbroken and exhausted, she lay upon the dune for days and days, watching the place where her cubs had perished.

Gitche Manitou, the Great Spirit Manitou, saw Mishe Mokwa watching. He was moved by her sorrow and faithfulness. While Mishe Mokwa watched for her cubs, Gitche Manitou slowly raised two beautiful islands, North and South Manitou, to mark the watery graves of the cubs.

Knowing that the Mother Bear's heart would never mend, Gitche Manitou laid a slumber upon Mishe Mokwa and drew the sand over her like a blanket, creating a solitary dune that marks the place where she keeps her eternal vigil.

CHAPTER ONE

Achilles crept down the Leland River, past the shanties, the charter boats and, finally, the ferry. At the mouth of the river, *Achilles* left the breakwater to port and nosed into Lake Michigan, on her way to Sleeping Bear Bay. There was weather in the forecast, but Helen Lockwood wanted to look up toward her orchards from the lake before heading to South Manitou.

She had gotten up at first light, and by the time she put the top down on her cherry-red Benz, Tommy was already out in the orchards. She drove up M-22 to Leland in the early morning sunshine, parked on the north side of the river and walked down to her boat.

She climbed on board, went down below, lit the alcohol stove and made coffee. She lit a cigarette from the blue flame and smoked it while she waited for the coffee to perk. After her second cup of coffee, she lit the other burner and scrambled eggs. After breakfast, she went up to the nav station, checked the logbook, ran the blower and started the engines. Twin Gray Marine diesels.

After she cast off the bow line, the current caught the bow and pushed it downstream. She cast off the stern line, put the engine in gear and headed downriver. When she passed the shanties, she saw gulls circling and heard them crying, waiting for the fishmongers to finish cleaning the whitefish. She passed the ferry and nosed into the big lake. The wind blew about fifteen knots from the southwest, right on the nose. The sun was gone, and the seas were building.

Helen stood at the helm, both hands on the wheel. The waves broke over the bow and sprayed the windshield. The single wiper beat back and forth but didn't keep up with the spray.

It's going to be a rough ride.

Twenty minutes later, she was halfway across Good Harbor Bay. The wind had picked up, and now there were whitecaps and rain. The windshield wiper tick-tocked back and forth. She couldn't tell the difference between the spray and the rain on the windshield.

Helen reached into the hanging locker and pulled out the foul weather jacket that had been her grandfather's. The coat hung down to her knees, and she had to roll up the sleeves. The musty smell of the oiled canvas reminded her of him.

Helen Lockwood, at forty-six, was striking, even in her grandfather's raincoat. She was a tall woman with long legs and moved like a dancer. She had straw-colored hair that hung past her shoulders. In the summer, her skin was the color of wheat just before the harvest. She had blue eyes that could look right through whomever she was talking to. If her lips were a little too full and her nose a little too long, no one noticed.

The boat slowed when it crawled up a wave and wallowed when it came down the other side. She gave the engines another 200 RPMs, and the boat pounded through the waves.

Achilles was a forty-foot sedan, long and narrow, built at the Chris Craft factory in Holland, two hundred miles south. Oak ribs, Honduran mahogany planks and teak decks. White hull, varnished cabin. *Achilles* cruised at fifteen. She could plane but didn't like it. Helen's father had given it to her when she was twenty-five, when he knew the cancer was going to take him. Tommy didn't like boats and that was just fine with her.

She looked behind her and saw the ferry running the rhumb line to South Manitou. It ploughed through the waves, spray blowing all the way to the stern.

Off the port bow, Pyramid Point towered out of Lake Michigan, a massive dune that marked the southern entrance to Sleeping Bear Bay. The lake got choppier when she reached the point, the waves upset and confused by the shoal water. When *Achilles* rounded Pyramid Point, she was broadside to the seas and started to roll. Helen heard glass break down below.

I hope it wasn't the gin.

Once the boat was in Sleeping Bear Bay and in the lee of Sleeping Bear Point, the seas flattened out. Five minutes later *Achilles* was abeam of Port Oneida, where her great-grandfather had built the dock that once jutted into the lake. The steamers had stopped there for firewood for their boilers and for lumber to build Chicago. The waves and the ice tore up the dock every year, and every year he rebuilt it. But that was almost a hundred years ago. All that was left of the dock were a few rotting pilings, broken off at the waterline.

She saw what was left of the pilings in the troughs of the waves. She passed the ruined deck, came around and headed for South Manitou.

She lit another cigarette and looked back at the waves rolling on the beach at Port Oneida. When the timber ran out, her great-grandfather, Lars Erickson, had tried farming farther up Port Oneida Road, over the dunes toward M-22, long before M-22 became famous. The ground had been clear cut, and he bought a section. Almost four hundred acres were tillable, the rest of it, marsh and cedar swamp. But the soil was too sandy, the crops failed, and the land went for taxes during the Depression.

After Lars died, Helen's grandfather Carl found a way to buy it back. As wild as Lake Michigan could be, it moderated the temperatures and kept the frost away in the spring and the fall. Carl tried fruit trees, starting with ten acres of apples, but there was more money in tart cherries.

Port Oneida Orchards made good money in cherries. Carl ran out of help and brought in migrant workers to pick his cherries. He built cabins for them behind the barns.

When Helen's father, Robert, took over the orchards, he bought the first shaker in Leelanau County. That was the end of the cherry pickers. Port Oneida Orchards added more trees. Robert and Marjorie had three daughters.

When Robert died, Helen, the oldest, took over the farm with her husband, Tommy. She was going to keep it going no matter what the Park Service tried to do.

She took one last drag on her cigarette, slid back the starboard window in the steering station and flicked it out into the lake. She closed the window, brought *Achilles* around through the wind and made for South Manitou. When the boat came out from the lee of the point, it started rolling again.

Tommy won't be able to work outside in this weather.

Helen looked off the stern at the dunes towering almost five hundred feet above the lake. She pictured the mother bear at the top of the dune, watching for her cubs, forever waiting and watching. The trees and brush did look like a bear lying down, especially in the rain.

It's beautiful, but that doesn't mean the Park Service can take my orchards.

She turned back to the bow. She couldn't see South Manitou through the rain and the spray, so she set a compass course, correcting for the drift. A half-hour later she saw the lighthouse at the southern tip of South Manitou.

The wind gusted to twenty-five and blew *Achilles* off the waves. A wave broke over the side and flooded the cockpit, the scuppers washing the water

over the side. When a wave rushed underneath *Achilles*, the boat rolled to starboard then lurched to port. Helen had to turn the wheel to port then back to starboard to keep her boat from broaching. The compass, mounted on gimbals, was the only thing that stayed even with the horizon.

Forty minutes later, Helen passed the abandoned lighthouse. The seas flattened, and she motored up into the crescent-shaped harbor at South Manitou.

Achilles passed the ferry tied up at the Park Service dock, headed into the wind and anchored in twenty feet of water.

Helen opened the lazarette and took out the inflatable. She pulled the cord and the CO2 cartridge inflated the rubber raft. It took up most of the cockpit. She launched it, then mounted the two-horse outboard.

Helen retired to the main salon and poured herself three fingers of Tanqueray over ice.

Thank God it didn't break.

She sat on the settee and looked out the plate glass windows at the ribbon of beach and the forest beyond. There were swells in the harbor, but the anchor was holding. She thought about putting out a second anchor but decided she didn't need one. She poured herself a second three fingers and lit another cigarette.

* * *

The storm blew through the night. By morning the wind died. The sky was a clear, deep blue, and the lake was starting to lay down. By afternoon, a light wind had come up from the north, and there were catspaws on the lake. An old wooden powerboat drifted about two miles off Sleeping Bear Dunes, drifting broadside to the wind.

The boat was still there the next day.

And the day after that.

Finally, a charter boat trolling for lake trout off Manitou Shoals pulled her lines and took a look.

There was no one aboard.

Not a soul.

CHAPTER TWO

Burr Lafayette tap, tap, tapped his yellow, Number 2 pencil on the defense table in the Federal District Court for the Western District of Michigan. David C. Powers, an assistant U.S. attorney, droned on. And on. Fifty-five years old. Five-ten with a slouch and a belly that hung over his slacks. Burr couldn't see Powers' belt. Powers had a pasty face and two chins. Burr thought he looked like forty pounds of air in a thirty-pound tire.

But Powers was a good lawyer. Dogged. Powers was dogged. He stayed with it and he paid attention to the little things, which was important in a condemnation case. Which Powers was doing at this very moment. Droning on and on about a fine point that Powers was convinced would have a bearing on the fate of Port Oneida Orchards.

Burr stopped tapping and yawned. He had driven from East Lansing to Grand Rapids early in the morning. Much too early. He knew Powers had filed his emergency motion just to make Burr get up before dawn. Burr hated to get up early, except for duck hunting, which was still three months off. Whatever this motion was about, it surely wasn't an emergency. He started tapping again.

Powers looked over at him. "Mr. Lafayette, would you please stop that tapping."

"Not if it bothers you."

"I beg your pardon."

Burr smiled at Powers, tapped with a flourish, then stopped. He had been fighting with Powers and the Department of the Interior for three years, all of it here in the Federal District Court in downtown Grand Rapids. Burr thought that was about to change.

Powers started up again, but the judge stopped him. "I've heard enough. Motion denied. And, Mr. Powers, this was surely not an emergency. In the future do not take advantage of this court with frivolity. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Your Honor," Powers said.

“Merciful heavens,” Burr said under his breath. He started to gather up his papers.

“Not so fast, Mr. Lafayette,” Judge Harold G. Cooper said. In his late 60s, tall, thin and tough, Cooper did not suffer fools gladly. “Approach the bench.”

Burr stood before the judge.

Judge Cooper took off his glasses. “Having disposed of Mr. Powers’ emergency motion that wasn’t, I turn my attention to your pending motion to stay this proceeding.”

Burr nodded.

The judge folded his hands in front of him. “I am not going to grant a stay in these proceedings while you fiddle-faddle around because you can’t find one of your clients.”

“Your Honor...”

The judge raised a hand and cut Burr off. “To review, the federal government began acquiring land for the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore about 1970. Some years after that, the National Park Service through the Department of the Interior tried to purchase your clients’ property. When that failed, the Park Service brought a condemnation action to acquire the subject property, which you have most ably opposed. For almost seven years.” Judge Cooper paused. He took off his glasses and tapped them on his desk. “So far. And if your current motion is a harbinger of things to come, it will take at least another seven years to dispose of this case.” The judge folded his hands together and cleared his throat. “I am not going to let this case become your life’s work.” He paused again. “Or mine.”

Burr looked down at his shoes. Cordovan loafers with tassels. Italian. They needed polishing, and the soles were worn.

I love these shoes. I wish I could afford a new pair.

Burr looked up at the judge. “Your Honor, my client has been missing for over a year. According to the terms of the partnership agreement, she is the manager and the only person who can make decisions when it comes to this condemnation action. We are powerless to defend ourselves without a manager.”

The judge peered down at Burr. “Mr. Lafayette, for all I know, you have her in hiding just to create such a stalemate.”

Burr pulled down the cuffs of his baby blue, button-down, pinpoint oxford shirt, which did not need pulling down. He straightened his red foulard tie

with black diamonds, which did not need straightening. He unbuttoned the one button on his thousand-dollar charcoal suit, slightly threadbare. “Your Honor,” he said again, “Helen Lockwood has not been seen or heard from since she took her boat to South Manitou Island.”

“I read your brief, Mr. Lafayette.”

“Of course, Your Honor, but the partnership agreement calls for the spouse of a deceased member to succeed, but we don’t know if Mrs. Lockwood is deceased. She’s missing and we can’t act.”

Judge Cooper wagged his finger at Burr. “If you’ll forgive my cynicism, this is all too convenient. Especially for the most contested condemnation case I have ever had the misfortune to preside over. Surely you can find a way to name a successor.”

“Your Honor...”

“Mr. Lafayette, if you have a missing client, I suggest you find her. There will be no stay.”

“Your Honor...”

The judge waved his glasses at Burr. “Mr. Lafayette, our own Senator Philip Hart sponsored the legislation that created the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. It’s over thirty-two thousand acres, and there’s over fifty miles of shoreline on Lake Michigan. It is a very special place. It is altogether fitting that the public good outweighs the property interests of a few in-holders.”

“Your Honor...” Burr said again.

The judge waved his glasses at Burr again. “Surely a lawyer as clever as you can find a way to overcome this deadlock.”

Burr ran his hand through his hair, front to back, which he did when he was flummoxed. He had too-long, acorn hair with a few gray hairs mixed in. Whenever he found a gray hair, he pulled it out. He had clear, sky blue eyes. A hawk nose. At one time he had been six foot. Late forties. Medium build. A handsome man who knew it.

He took a step toward the judge. “Your Honor, Port Oneida Orchards are two miles up the road from Lake Michigan. It’s not on the water. You can’t even see the water from the orchards. They are the most successful orchards in Leelanau County. They have nothing to do with the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore.”

“Mr. Lafayette, there is nothing I’d rather do than have a trial on the merits. Shall we begin right now?”

Burr took a step back.

We can’t have that.

A trial was the last thing he wanted right now. What he wanted to do was what he had been doing. Delay, obfuscate and wear out Powers and Cooper. Which hadn’t happened yet. “Your Honor, as much as I’d like to start the trial this very moment, I don’t have a client who has the authority to act.”

Judge Cooper picked up his gavel. He studied it. Then he stared down his nose at Burr. He started tapping his gavel, ever so softly.

This can’t be good.

“Here’s what you do, Mr. Lafayette. You go and get yourself a death certificate. That’s what you do. Go get yourself a death certificate and bring it back to me. Then you’ll have a client who can act, and we’ll have ourselves a trial. Is that clear?”

Burr nodded. *I was afraid he’d think of that.*

“Take a drive up M-22. It’s the prettiest road in the state.”

M-22 began just north of Manistee and ended in Traverse City. It followed the shoreline for over a hundred miles, all the way around the Leelanau Peninsula. It was one of the most scenic roads in Michigan and famous in its own right.

“Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“Good. And be quick about it. We are adjourned.” The Honorable Judge Harold G. Cooper slammed his gavel and walked out.

* * *

“Is she dead? Or isn’t she?”

“Yes, Your Honor, she is dead,” Burr said.

“That’s why we’re here. Because she’s dead. And because this is a probate court.” The judge paused. “Because we deal with dead people here. In probate court.” The judge paused again. “Among other things.”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

Judge Bill Weeks peered over his reading glasses, which put his chin almost on top of the worn-out desk in his courtroom. He was a short man

who could barely see over his desk even when he was sitting up straight. He sat on the leather cushion from the chair in his office and that helped. Weeks had a bald, round head that was almost as big as the rest of him. He had black, bushy eyebrows that looked like squirrel tails, a pushed-in nose, a large mouth with bright white teeth framed by ruby red lips. All in all it looked like his face had been painted on an ivory-colored bowling ball, which was why he was known as Bowling Ball Bill, behind his back, of course. That and the awe that the local lawyers had because not only had he managed to graduate from law school, he had also been elected probate judge in Leelanau County, over and over again. At sixty-nine, he showed no signs of slowing down. Or speeding up. Or becoming the slightest bit competent.

Judge Weeks smiled. "Counsel, now that we are in agreement that poor Helen Lockwood is, in fact, deceased, please present the death certificate and I will open her estate for probate."

"Your Honor, we don't have a death certificate."

"Don't waste my time, young man. Come back when you have it." He banged his gavel. "Case dismissed." If the Federal District Court in Grand Rapids was near the top of the legal pecking order, the Leelanau County Probate Court was surely near the bottom, from the courtroom to the furniture and, most importantly, to the judge.

"Your Honor," Burr said, "the very reason we are here is to ask you to issue a death certificate."

"I'll do no such thing. If Helen Lockwood is dead, the medical examiner will issue a death certificate. If he hasn't issued a death certificate, then she's not dead, and I will not be the one to declare her so. I am a powerful man, but not that powerful." Bowling Ball Bill took off his glasses and waved them toward the heavens. "Only God has that power. Now, shoo."

"Respectfully, Your Honor, you have more power than perhaps you think you have."

"I said shoo." The round-headed judge paused again. "I do?"

"Yes, Your Honor. Indeed, you do," Burr said.

This clearly piqued Judge Weeks' interest. Burr had made a career of flattering judges. When it suited his purpose. Most of the time he argued, fought, persuaded, cajoled and did whatever he had to do to get what he wanted from whomever was in his way, but he flattered when he needed to.

Even so, he could not quite fathom how he found himself in the Leelanau County Probate Court. He had been head of the litigation department at Fisher and Allen in Detroit. Two hundred lawyers strong and Burr one of the finest litigators in the city. But he had been a knight of commerce. He saved rich companies on behalf of his rich clients. But he had given it up or lost it all, depending on the day, over a younger woman who happened to work for his rich client. He thought he loved her. Maybe he had, but it cost him his practice not to mention his wife.

And here he was in the Leelanau Probate Court arguing about whether Helen Lockwood was dead. Or not.

“Continue, Mr. Lafayette. About my power.”

Burr approached the bench. “Your Honor, as I pointed out in my brief, Helen Lockwood has been missing for over a year. She disappeared without a trace. Not a soul has seen her.”

“Is that so?”

Burr looked down at his shoes, the same cordovan loafers he had worn in Judge Cooper’s courtroom. They still needed polishing.

The old fool hasn’t read my brief, and he must be the only person in Leelanau County who didn’t know that Helen Lockwood had disappeared.

Burr looked up at the judge. “Your Honor, the settled law in Michigan provides that if a person has not been seen for one year, the probate court may declare the person dead and issue a death certificate.”

“I see,” said Judge Weeks, who didn’t. He opened the file in front of him, which Burr assumed was his unread brief. He shuffled through it. Then looked at down at Burr.

“Your Honor, the legislature codified the common law which favors the living over the dead and the need to get on with the business of living.”

“Of course, it does.” The judge nodded knowingly. “And what business of living would that be?”

“Your Honor, the deceased...”

“I didn’t say she was dead yet.”

“Yes, Your Honor.” Burr pulled down the cuffs of his charcoal suit, still his favorite suit and slightly threadbare.

“Helen Lockwood, the missing person, is – was – a principal in Port Oneida Orchards. The Park Service is trying to condemn the farm. I represent the family in federal court in Grand Rapids and I...”

“Would you please get to the point?”

Save me from fools.

“Your Honor, it has become impossible to represent my client with Mrs. Lockwood’s status in limbo. We need a death certificate in order to proceed.”

“Young man, you seem to have made it this far without me.”

“Your Honor, the law makes provision for just this sort of eventuality.”

“Just who is it that you represent, Mr. Lafayette?”

“Today I am here on behalf of Helen Lockwood’s husband, Thomas Lockwood.”

“Is that him?” Judge Weeks pointed to the lean, fiftyish man sitting at the plaintiff’s table. Burr walked back to his client. Tommy Lockwood had jet black hair, a tan face, lined from a lifetime spent outside. He had soft, black eyes and a smile that made you want to give him all your money.

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“And what do you want, young man?”

“I want my wife back. I hate the thought that she might be dead.”

“And how is her being dead going to help?”

“Your Honor,” Burr said, “the affairs of the farm are impossible to manage with Mrs. Lockwood’s status unresolved.”

“Mr. Lafayette, while I am sympathetic to the problems faced by a lawyer in a thousand-dollar suit, I don’t give a hoot about what happens in the Federal District Court for the Western District of Michigan.”

If only I could still afford thousand-dollar suits.

“Your Honor...”

Weeks pointed a stubby arm at Burr, chubby palm out. “Mrs. Lockwood is either dead or she isn’t. Which is it?” The judge folded his hands on the desk in front of him.

Burr looked to his right, where his opponent would normally be sitting. Today, though, he had no opposition. Except Judge Bill Weeks, who was supposed to go right along with what Burr wanted.

“Which is it, Mr. Lafayette?” Judge Weeks said again.

Burr looked down at his shoes again. He put his hands in his pants pockets and pulled up the cuffs of his slacks. His socks matched.

That’s something.

Without Eve here to check on him, he was never quite sure what was

going to happen with his socks. “We’re right back where we started. This old fool hasn’t heard a word I’ve said,” he said to his shoes.

“What did you say?”

Burr took his hands out of his pockets and looked up at the judge. “Your Honor, I said, please don’t make a decision until you’ve heard the proofs.”

“The proofs?” The judge laughed. “You actually have something to support your case?”

Burr walked back to his table and rummaged through his files, his back to the judge.

This would have been a good time to have Jacob here.

“Turn around and look at me, young man,” the judge said. “Your backside is not particularly compelling. Although, so far, it makes more sense than your front side.” The judge laughed.

Burr ignored Weeks. He looked up at Helen’s two sisters sitting in the back row. He had told them they didn’t need to come today, but he was glad to see them. It was looking like he could use all the help he could get. He nodded at them and turned around to face the cranky judge whose word was law at least as far as the Leelanau Probate Court was concerned.

“May it please the court, Your Honor,” he said in his most supplicating voice, a voice he used only when he didn’t think anything else would work. Like now. “Your Honor, the petitioner would like to present its proofs.”

Judge Weeks shook his fingers at him, like he was shooing a cat off the dining room table.

Burr took that as a yes. “Your Honor, we submit four files. The missing-person report filed by the petitioner on June 12th of last year, the report of the Coast Guard search, the Leland County Sheriff’s report and the petition of Thomas F. Lockwood, Mrs. Lockwood’s husband, asking that Mrs. Lockwood be declared deceased.”

“You mean dead.”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

Surely Weeks knows what ‘deceased’ means.

“Let me see those.” Burr handed him the files. The judge made a show of studying them, but Burr didn’t think he was actually reading. The judge put the files in a neat pile in front of him. “So, what exactly happened?”

“Your Honor, Helen Lockwood was last seen leaving Leland Harbor on the morning of June 9th. She piloted her boat, *Achilles*, a forty-foot cabin

cruiser, to the anchorage at South Manitou. There was a storm that day and into the night. For the next two days there were reports of a boat matching *Achilles* off Sleeping Bear.”

“*Achilles*?”

“*Achilles* was the name of Mrs. Lockwood’s boat, Your Honor.”

“Funny name for a boat.” Weeks shooed at Burr again.

Burr gritted his teeth. “On the third day, a commercial fisherman near Manitou Shoals pulled up alongside *Achilles*. He said the boat was adrift.”

“Adrift?”

“Drifting in Lake Michigan. The engines were off.”

The judge leaned toward Burr. “And?”

“There was no one aboard. The key was in the ignition, but the engines were off. The gas tanks were half full.” Burr paused. “There was no sign of Mrs. Lockwood.”

“Anything suspicious?”

“Your Honor, I’m not sure if this is suspicious, but there was a half-empty bottle of Tanqueray rolling back and forth across the cockpit.”

“That’s expensive gin.”

Burr gritted his teeth again. “Your Honor, the Coast Guard and the sheriff both concluded that Mrs. Lockwood fell overboard and drowned.”

“Where’s her body?”

“It hasn’t been found.”

“Maybe she ran away.”

“Your Honor, her purse was on board. Her car was where she left it.”

“What kind of car?”

“A Mercedes.”

“What model?”

“A 150 convertible, Your Honor.”

“She was pretty well fixed for blades,” the judge said.

Burr was tired of the round little judge and his obsession with the wealth of Helen Lockwood. “Your Honor, Mrs. Lockwood’s bank accounts have been untouched since she went missing. There have been no financial transactions and no one has seen her.” Burr looked back at the two sisters, over at Tommy and then at the judge. “Your Honor, in light of the disappearance of Helen Lockwood for over twelve months, and in compliance with the

state statutes, we respectfully request that you declare Mrs. Helen Lockwood deceased.”

Judge Weeks fumbled around with his gavel. ”As much as I don’t like you, you are convincing.” He picked up his gavel. “I grant the petitioner’s motion and declare Helen Lockwood to be deceased...”

“Your Honor,” said a voice from the back of the courtroom.

Weeks stopped his gavel in midair. It slipped out of his hand and landed at Burr’s feet.

“For the love of Mike, who said that?”

“I did, Your Honor.” This from one of Helen’s sisters in the back of the courtroom.

“Don’t you know better than to interrupt a judge?” Weeks looked around for his gavel. Burr bent over, picked it up and set it in front of the judge.

“I lost my grip.”

“I should say so.” Burr turned around. “In more ways than one.”

“I heard that,” Judge Weeks said. He picked up his gavel and pointed at the two women, one standing, one sitting. “And who might you be?”

One of the sisters stood. “My name is Lauren Littlefield and this is Karen Hansen. Helen is our sister.”

“Was,” Burr said.

“Be quiet,” Weeks said to Burr. “Until this gavel comes down, Helen Lockwood still ‘is’.” He looked at Lauren. “What would you like to say, Mrs. Littlefield?”

Lauren Littlefield smoothed a wrinkle in her dress, a black knit knee-length cotton dress with a scooped neck, three-quarter length sleeves and a thin black belt. An altogether appropriate dress for a visit to a probate court. She had on two-inch black heels. If Helen Lockwood was tall, her sister was not. Five-four in heels and too round for Burr’s taste. But curvy in a pleasant way. She had mousey brown hair pulled back in a bun that didn’t do much for her, but she had a pretty face, green eyes, a small nose with full lips. She didn’t wear any makeup.

“Your Honor, my sister and I don’t believe our sister is dead.”

“Why ever not?”

Burr gritted his teeth for a third time.

“She’s missing, not dead. We know she’s going to turn up.”

“Your Honor,” Burr said, “all of the family, Mr. Lockwood and Helen’s

two sisters, agreed that it would be best to have Helen declared dead. I ask that you rule on my motion.”

Weeks ignored him. “What about you young lady?” The judge pointed at the sitting sister.

She stood. How the three of them could be sisters was beyond Burr. Karen Hansen was medium height and rail thin. Burr had never seen her eat. She had wild black hair that covered her shoulders. A long nose with thin lips and a strong jaw that made her look like she knew what she wanted.

It was Karen Hansen’s turn to smooth her equally black dress. “Your Honor, we don’t want Helen to be dead.”

Judge Bill Weeks smiled at her. “I’m sure you don’t. But no one has seen hide nor hair of her for a year. She must be dead.”

“She’s not dead,” Lauren said.

“What could have happened?” the judge said.

The two sisters didn’t say anything.

“Your Honor,” Burr said. “This is upsetting for all of us, but we must move on. This is what the family decided they wanted to do.”

“It doesn’t seem that way to me.” Then to the two sisters, “What could have happened?”

“I don’t know, but that doesn’t mean she’s dead,” Lauren said.

“Maybe she fell overboard?” the judge said.

“Helen spent her whole life around boats. She would never fall overboard or drown,” Karen said.

Lauren nodded.

“Maybe she ran away,” the judge said. “What do you think, young man?”

“Helen would never run away. She loved the orchards too much,” Tommy said.

“Well then, where is she for God’s sake?”

“I don’t know.” Tommy bit his lip. “I think she must have fallen overboard and drowned.”

“Your Honor,” Burr said, “this is an upsetting time, but the wheels of justice must grind forward.”

“Mr. Lafayette, I’m not sure that’s what your clients want.”

“They want you to issue a death certificate. We can keep looking for Helen, but we simply must move on.” Burr said. “This is what they all want, Your Honor.”

CHARLES CUTTER

“No, it’s not,” Karen said.

Bowling Ball Bill rubbed his bald head.

Burr leaned down to Tommy. “What is going on?”

Tommy shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Come back when you’ve made up your minds.”

“Your Honor, this has nothing to do with making up our minds. This has to do with the facts.”

Judge Weeks crashed his gavel. “We are adjourned.”