

The Maggody Files: Hillbilly Cat

Joan Hess

I was reduced to whittling away the morning, and trying to convince myself that I was in some obscure way whittling away at the length of my sentence in Maggody, Arkansas (pop. 755). Outside the red-bricked PD, the early morning rain came down steadily, and, as Ruby Bee Hanks (proprietress of a bar and grill of the same name, and, incidentally, my mother) would say, it was turning a mite crumpy. I figured the local criminal elements would be daunted enough to stay home, presuming they were smart enough to come in out of the rain in the first place. This isn't to say they rampaged when the sun shone. Mostly they ran the stoplight, fussed and cussed at their neighbors, stole such precious commodities as superior huntin' dawgs, and occasionally raced away from the self-service station without paying for gas. There'd been some isolated violence during my tenure, but every last person in town still based their historical perspective on before-or-after Hiram Buchanon's barn burned to the ground.

I suppose I ought to mention that my sentence was self-imposed, in that I scampered home from Manhattan to lick my wounds after a nasty divorce. In that I was the only person stupid enough to apply for the job, I was not only the Chief of Police, but also the entirety of the department. For a while I'd had a deputy, who just happened to be the mayor's cousin,

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but he'd gotten himself in trouble over his unrequited love for a bosomy barmaid. Now I had a beeper.

That October morning I had a block of balsa wood that was harder than granite, and a pocket knife that was duller than most of the population. I also had some bizarre dreams of converting the wood into something that remotely resembled a duck—a marshland mallard, to be precise. Those loyal souls who're schooled in the local lore know I tried this a while back, with zero success. Same wood, for the record, and thus far, same rate of success.

So I had my feet on the corner of my desk, my cane-bottomed chair propped back against the wall, and an unholy mess of wood shavings scattered all over the place when the door opened. The man who came in wore a black plastic raincoat and was wrestling with a brightly striped umbrella more suited to a swanky golf course (in Maggody, we don't approve of golf—or any other sissified sport in which grown men wear shorts). He appeared to be forty or so, with a good ol' boy belly and the short, wavy hair of a used car salesman.

Strangers come into the PD maybe three times a year, usually to ask directions or to sell me subscriptions to magazines like *Field and Stream* or *Sports Illustrated*. I guess it's never occurred to any of them that some of us backwoods cops might prefer *Cosmopolitan*.

He finally gave up on the umbrella and set it in a corner to drip. Flashing two rows of pearly white teeth at me, he said, "Hey, honey, some weather, isn't it? Is the chief in?"

"It sure is some weather," I said politely, "and the chief is definitely in." I did not add that the chief was mildly insulted, but by no means incensed or inclined to explain further.

This time I got a wink. "Could I have a word with him?"

"You're having a word with *her* at this very moment," I said as I dropped my duck in a drawer and crossed my arms,

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idly wondering how long it'd take him to work it out. He didn't look downright stupid like the clannish Buchanons, who're obliged to operate solely on animal instinct, but he had squinty eyes, flaccid lips, and minutes earlier had lost a battle to an umbrella.

"Sorry, honey." His shrug indicated he wasn't altogether overwhelmed with remorse. "I'm Nelson Mullein from down near Pine Bluff. The woman at the hardware store said the chief's name was Arly, and I sort of assumed I was looking for a fellow. My mistake."

"How may I help you, Mr. Mullein?" I said.

"Call me Nelson, please. My great-grandaunts live here in Maggody, out on County 102 on the other side of the low water bridge. Everybody's always called them the Banebury girls, although Miss Columbine is seventy-eight and Miss Larkspur's seventy-six."

"I know who they are."

"Thought you might." He sat down on the chair across from my desk and took out a cigar. When he caught my glare, he replaced it in his pocket, licked his lips, and made a production of grimacing and sighing so I'd appreciate how carefully he was choosing his words. "The thing is," he said slowly, "I'm worried about them. As I said, they're old and they live in that big, ramshackle house by themselves. It ain't in the ghetto, but it's a far cry from suburbia. Neither one of them can see worth a damn. Miss Larkspur took a fall last year while she was climbing out of the tub; and her hip healed so poorly she's still using a walker. Miss Columbine is wheezier than a leaky balloon."

"So I should arrest them for being old and frail?"

"Of course not," he said, massaging his rubbery jowls. "I was hoping you could talk some sense into them, that's all, 'cause I sure as hell can't, even though I'm their only relative."

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It hurts me to see them living the way they do. They're as poor as church mice. When I went out there yesterday, it was colder inside than it was outside, and the only heat was from a wood fire in a potbelly stove. Seems they couldn't pay the gas bill last month and it was shut off. I took care of that immediately and told the Gas Company to bill me in the future. If Miss Columbine finds out, she'll have a fit, but I didn't know what else to do."

He sounded so genuinely concerned that I forgave him for calling me "honey," and tried to recall what little I knew about the Banebury girls. They'd been reclusive even when I was a kid, although they occasionally drove through town in a glossy black Lincoln Continental, nodding regally at the peasants. One summer night twenty or so years ago, they'd caught a gang of us skinny-dipping at the far side of the field behind their house. Miss Columbine had been outraged. After she'd carried on for a good ten minutes, Miss Larkspur persuaded her not to report the incident to our parents and we grabbed our clothes and hightailed it. We stayed well downstream the rest of the summer. We avoided their house at Halloween, but only because it was isolated and not worth the risk of having to listen to a lecture on hooliganism in exchange for a stale popcorn ball.

"I understand your concern," I said. "I'm afraid I don't know them well enough to have any influence."

"They told me they still drive. Miss Columbine has macular degeneration, which means her peripheral vision's fine but she can't see anything in front of her. Miss Larkspur's legally blind, but that works out just fine—she navigates. I asked them how on earth either had a driver's license, and damned if they didn't show 'em to me. The date was 1974."

I winced. "Maybe once or twice a year, they drive half a

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mile to church at a speed of no more than ten miles an hour. When they come down the middle of the road, everybody in town knows to pull over, all the way into a ditch if need be, and the children have been taught to do their rubberneckin' from their yards. It's actually kind of a glitzy local event that's discussed for days afterwards. I realize it's illegal, but I'm not about to go out there and tell them they can't drive anymore."

"Yeah, I know," he said, "but I'm going to lose a lot of sleep if I don't do something for them. I'm staying at a motel in Farberville. This morning I got on the phone and found out about a retirement facility for the elderly. I went out and looked at it, and it's more like a boardinghouse than one of those smelly nursing homes. Everybody has a private bedroom, and meals are provided in a nice, warm dining room. There was a domino game going on while I was there, and a couple of the women were watching a soap opera. There's a van to take them shopping or to doctor appointments. It's kind of expensive, but I think I can swing it by using their social security checks and setting up an income from the sale of the house and property. I had a real estate agent drive by it this morning, and he thought he could get eight, maybe ten, thousand dollars."

"And when you presented this, they said . . . ?"

"Miss Columbine's a hardheaded woman, and she liked to scorch my ears," he admitted ruefully. "I felt like I was ten years old and been caught with a toad in the pocket of my choir robe. Miss Larkspur was interested at first, and asked some questions, but when they found out they couldn't take Eppie, the discussion was over, and before I knew what hit me, I was out on the porch shivering like a hound dog in a blizzard."

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“Their cat. In spite of the sweet-sounding name, it’s an obese yellow tomcat with one eye and a tattered ear. It’s mangy and mean and moth-eaten, and that’s being charitable. But they won’t even consider giving it away, and the residence home forbids pets because of a health department regulation. I went ahead and put down a deposit, but the director said she can’t hold the rooms for more than a few days and she expects to be filled real soon. I hate to say it, but it’s now or never.” He spread his hands and gave me a beseeching look. “Do you think you or anybody else in town can talk them into at least taking a look at this place?”

I suspected I would have more luck with my balsa wood than with the Banebury sisters, but I promised Nelson I’d give it a shot and wrote down the telephone number of his motel room. After a display of effusively moist gratitude, he left.

I decided the matter could wait until after lunch. The Banebury sisters had been going about their business nearly four score years, after all, I told myself righteously as I darted through the drizzle to my car and headed for Ruby Bee’s Bar & Grill.

“So what’s this about Miss Columbine and Miss Larkspur being dragged off to an old folks’ home?” Ruby Bee demanded as I walked across the tiny dance floor. It was too early for the noon crowd, and only one booth was occupied by a pair of truck drivers working on blue-plate specials and a pitcher of beer.

“And who’d pay ten thousand dollars for that old shack?” Estelle Oppers added from her favorite stool at the end of the bar, convenient to the pretzels and the rest room.

I wasn’t particularly amazed by the questions. Maggody has a very sturdy grapevine, and it definitely curls through the

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barroom on its way from one end of town to the other. That was one of the reasons I'd left the day after I graduated, and eventually took refuge in the anonymity of Manhattan, where one can caper in the nude on the street and no one so much as bothers with a second look. In Maggody, you can hear about what you did before you're finished planning to do it.

"To think they'd give up their cat!" Ruby Bee continued, her hands on her hips and her eyes flashing as if I'd suggested we drown dear Eppie in Boone Creek. Beneath her unnaturally blond hair, her face was screwed up with indignation. "It ain't much to look at, but they've had it for fourteen years and some folks just don't understand how attached they are."

I opened my mouth to offer a mild rebuttal, but Estelle leapt in with the agility of a trout going after a mayfly. "Furthermore, I think it's mighty suspicious, him coming to town all of a sudden to disrupt their lives. I always say, when there's old ladies and a cat, the nephew's up to no good. Just last week I read a story about how the nephew tried to trick his aunt so he could steal all her money."

I chose a stool at the opposite end of the bar. "From what Nelson told me, they don't have any money."

"I still say he's up to no good," Estelle said mulishly, which is pretty much the way she said everything.

Ruby Bee took a dishrag and began to wipe the pristine surface of the bar. "I reckon that much is true, but Eula said she happened to see him in the hardware store, and he had a real oily look about him, like a carnival roustabout. She said she wouldn't have been surprised if he had tattoos under his clothes. He was asking all kinds of questions, too."

"Like what?" I said, peering at the pies under glass domes and ascertaining there was a good-sized piece of cherry left.

"Well, he wanted to know where to go to have all their utility bills sent to him, on account of he didn't think they had

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enough money to pay 'em. He also wanted to know if he could arrange for groceries to be delivered to their house every week, but Eula stepped in and explained that the church auxiliary already sees to that.”

I shook my head and made a clucking noise. “The man’s clearly a scoundrel, a cad, a veritable devil in disguise. How about meatloaf, mashed potatoes and gravy, and cherry pie with ice cream?”

Ruby Bee was not in her maternal mode. “And wasn’t there an old movie about a smarmy nephew trying to put his sweet old aunts in some sort of insane asylum?” she asked Estelle.

“That was because they were poisoning folks. I don’t recollect anyone accusing the Banebury girls of anything like that. Miss Columbine’s got a sharp tongue, but she’s got her wits about her. I wish I could say the same thing about Miss Larkspur. She can be kind of silly and forgetful, but she ain’t got a mean bone in her body. Now if the cat was stalking me on a dark street, I’d be looking over my shoulder and fearing for my life. He lost his eye in a fight with old Shep Humes’s pit bull. When Shep tried to pull 'em apart, he liked to lose both of his eyes and a couple of fingers, and he said he cain’t remember when he heard a gawdawful racket like that night.”

“Meatloaf?” I said optimistically. “Mashed potatoes?”

Still wiping the bar, Ruby Bee worked her way towards Estelle. “The real estate agent says he can sell that place for ten thousand dollars?”

“He didn’t sound real sure of it, and Eilene said Earl said the fellow didn’t think the house was worth a dollar. It was the forty acres he thought might sell.” Estelle popped a pretzel in her mouth and chewed it pensively. “I took them a basket of cookies last year just before Christmas, and the house is in such sad shape that I thought to myself, I’m gonna

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sit right down and cry. The plaster's crumbling off the walls, and there was more than one window taped with cardboard. It's a matter of time before the house falls down on 'em."

Aware I was about to go down for the third time, I said, "Meatloaf?"

Ruby Bee leaned across the bar, and in a melodramatic whisper that most likely was audible in the next county, said, "Do you think they're misers with a fortune buried in jars in the back yard? If this Mullein fellow knows it, then he'd want to get rid of them and have all the time he needs to dig up the yard searching for the money."

"Them?" Estelle cackled. "There was some family money when their daddy owned the feed store, but he lost so much money when that fancy co-op opened in Starley City that he lost the store and upped and died within the year. After that, Miss Larkspur had to take piano students and Miss Columbine did mending until they went on social security. Now how are they supposed to have acquired this fortune? Are you accusing them of putting on ski masks and robbing liquor stores?"

"For pity's sake, I was just thinking out loud," Ruby Bee retorted.

"The next thing, you'll be saying you saw them on that television show about unsolved crimes."

"At least some of us have better things to do than read silly mystery stories about nephews and cats," Ruby Bee said disdainfully. "I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't have a whole book filled with them."

"So what if I do?" Estelle slapped the bar hard enough to tump the pretzels.

It seemed the only thing being served was food for thought. I drove to the Dairee Dee-Lishus and ate a childog in my car while I fiddled with the radio in search of anything

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but whiny country music. I was doing so to avoid thinking about the conversation at Ruby Bee's. Nelson Mullein wasn't my type, but that didn't automatically relegate him to the slime pool. He had good reason to be worried about his great-grandaunts. Hell, now I was worried about them, too.

Then again, I thought as I drove out County 102 and eased across the low-water bridge, Estelle had a point. There was something almost eerie about the combination of old ladies, cats, and ne'er-do-well nephews (although, as far as I knew, Nelson was doing well at whatever he did; I hadn't asked). But we were missing the key element in the plot, and that was the fortune that kicked in the greed factor. Based on what Estelle had said, the Banebury girls were just as poor as Nelson had claimed.

The appearance of the house confirmed it. It was a squatty old farmhouse that had once been white, but was weathered to a lifeless gray. What shingles remained on the roof were mossy, and the chimney had collapsed. A window on the second floor was covered with cardboard; broken glass was scattered on the porch. The detached garage across the weedy yard had fared no better.

Avoiding puddles, I hurried to the front door and knocked, keenly and uncomfortably aware of the icy rain slithering under my collar. I was about to knock a second time when the door opened a few cautious inches.

"I'm Arly Hanks," I said, trying not to let my teeth chatter too loudly. "Do you mind if I come in for a little visit?"

"I reckon you can." Miss Columbine stepped back and gestured for me to enter. To my astonishment, she looked almost exactly the same as she had the night she stood on the bank of Boone Creek and bawled us out. Her hair was white and pinned up in tight braids, her nose was sharp, her cheekbones prominent above concave cheeks. Her head was tilted

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at an angle, and I remembered what Nelson had said about her vision.

“Thanks,” I murmured as I rubbed my hands together.

“Hanks, did you say? You’re Ruby Bee’s gal,” she said in the same steely voice. “Now that you’re growed up, are you keeping your clothes on when you take a moonlight swim?”

I was reduced to an adolescent, “Yes, ma’am.”

“Do we have a visitor?” Miss Larkspur came into the living room, utilizing an aluminum walker to take each awkward step. “First Nelson and now this girl. I swear, I don’t know when we’ve had so much company, Columbine.”

The twenty years had been less compassionate to Miss Larkspur. Her eyes were so clouded and her skin so translucent that she looked as if she’d been embalmed. Her body was bent, one shoulder hunched and the other undefined. The fingers that gripped the walker were swollen and misshapen.

“I’m Arly Hanks,” I told her.

“Gracious, girl, I know who you are. I heard about how you came back to Maggody after all those years in the big city. I don’t blame you one bit. Columbine and I went to visit kin in Memphis when we were youngsters, and I knew then and there that I’d never be able to live in a place like that. There were so many cars and carriages and streetcars that we feared for our very lives, didn’t we?”

“Yes, I seem to recall that we did, Larkspur.”

“Shall I put on the tea kettle?”

Miss Columbine smiled sadly. “That’s all right, sister; I’ll see to it. Why don’t you sit down with our company while I fix a tray? Be sure and introduce her to Eppie.”

The room was scantily furnished with ugly, battered furniture and a rug worn so badly that the wooden floor was visible. It smelled of decay, and no doubt for a very good reason. Plaster had fallen in several places, exposing the joists and

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yellowed newspaper that served as insulation. Although it was warmer than outside, it was a good twenty degrees below what I considered comfortable. Both sisters wore shawls. I hoped they had thermal underwear beneath their plain, dark dresses.

I waited until Miss Larkspur had made it across the room and was seated on a sofa. I sat across from her and said, "I met Nelson this morning. He seems concerned about you and your sister."

"So he says," she said without interest. She leaned forward and clapped her hands. "Eppie? Are you hiding? It's quite safe to come out. This girl won't hurt you. She'd like the chance to admire you."

An enormous cat stalked from behind the sofa, his single amber eye regarding me malevolently and his tail swishing as if he considered it a weapon. He was everything Nelson had described, and worse. He paused to rake his claws across the carpet, then leapt into Miss Larkspur's lap and settled down to convey to me how very deeply he resented my presence. Had I been a less rational person, I would have wondered if he knew I was there to promote Nelson's plan. Had I been, as I said.

"Isn't he a pretty kitty?" cooed Miss Larkspur. "He acts so big and tough, but him's just a snuggly teddy bear."

"Very pretty," I said, resisting an urge to lapse into baby talk and tweak Eppie's whiskers. He would have taken my hand off in a flash. Or my arm.

Miss Columbine came into the room, carrying a tray with three cups and saucers and a ceramic teapot. There were more chips than rosebuds, but I was delighted to take a cup of hot tea and cradle it in my hands. "Did Nelson send you?" she said as she served her sister and sat down beside her. Eppie snuggled between them to continue his surly surveillance.

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“He came by the PD this morning and asked me to speak to you,” I admitted.

“Nelson is a ninny,” she said with a tight frown. “Always has been, always will be. When he came during the summers, I had to watch him like a hawk to make sure he wasn’t tormenting the cat or stealing pennies from the sugar bowl. His grandmother, our youngest sister, married poor white trash, and although she never said a word against them, we were all of a mind that she regretted it to her dying day.” She paused to take a sip of tea, and the cup rattled against the saucer as she replaced it. “I suppose Nelson’s riled up on account of our Sunday drives, although it seems to me reporting us to the police is extreme. Did you come out here to arrest us?”

Miss Larkspur giggled. “What would Papa say if he were here to see us being arrested? Can’t you imagine the look on his face, Columbine? He’d be fit to be tied, and he’d most likely throw this nice young thing right out the door.”

“I didn’t come out here to arrest you,” I said hastily, “and I didn’t come to talk about your driving. As long as you don’t run anybody down, stay on this road, and never ever go on the highway, it’s okay with me.”

“But not with Nelson.” Miss Columbine sighed as she finished her tea. “He wants us to give up our home, our car, our beloved Eppie, and go live in a stranger’s house with a bunch of old folks. Who knows what other fool rules they’d have in a house where they don’t allow pets?”

“But, Columbine,” Miss Larkspur said, her face puckering wistfully, “Nelson says they serve nice meals and have tea with sandwiches and pound cake every afternoon. I can’t recollect when I last tasted pound cake—unless it was at Mama’s last birthday party. She died of influenza back in September of fifty-eight, not three weeks after Papa brought the new car all the way from Memphis, Tennessee.” She took

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a tissue from her cuff and dabbed her eyes. "Papa died the next year, some say on account of losing the store, but I always thought he was heartsick over poor—"

"Larkspur, you're rambling like a wild turkey," Columbine said sternly but with affection. "This girl doesn't want to hear our family history. Frankly, I don't find it that interesting. I think we'd better hear what she has to say so she can be on her way." She stroked Eppie's head, and the cat obligingly growled at yours truly.

"Is Eppie the only reason you won't consider this retirement house?" I asked. I realized it was not such an easy question and plunged ahead. "You don't have to make a decision until you've visited. I'm sure Nelson would be delighted to take you there at tea time."

"Do you think he would?" Miss Larkspur clasped her hands together and her cloudy eyes sparkled briefly.

Miss Columbine shook her head. "We cannot visit under false pretenses, Larkspur, and come what may, we will not abandon Eppie after all these years. When the Good Lord sees fit to take him from us, we'll think about moving to town."

The object of discussion stretched his front legs and squirmed until he was on his back, his claws digging into their legs demandingly. When Miss Columbine rubbed his bloated belly, he purred with all the delicacy of a truck changing gears.

"Thank you for tea," I said, rising. "I'll let myself out." I was almost at the front door when I stopped and turned back to them. "You won't be driving until Easter, will you?"

"Not until Easter," Miss Columbine said firmly.

I returned to the PD, dried myself off with a handful of paper towels, and called Nelson at the motel to report my failure.

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“It’s the cat, isn’t it?” he said. “They’re willing to live in squalor because they won’t give up that sorry excuse for a cat. You know, honey, I’m beginning to wonder if they haven’t wandered too far out in left field to know what’s good for them. I guess I’d better talk to a lawyer when I get back to Pine Bluff.”

“You’re going to force them to move?”

“I feel so bad, honey, but I don’t know what else to do and it’s for their own good.”

“What’s in it for you, Nelson?”

“Nothing.” He banged down the receiver.

“My shoe’s full of water,” Ruby Bee grumbled as she did her best to avoid getting smacked in the face by a bunch of soggy leaves. It wasn’t all that easy, since she had to keep her flashlight trained on the ground in case of snakes or other critters. The worst of it was that Estelle had hustled her out the door on this harebrained mission without giving her a chance to change clothes, and now her best blue dress was splattered with mud and her matching blue suede shoes might as well go straight into the garbage can. “Doncha think it’s time to stop acting like overgrown Girl Scouts and just drive up to the door, knock real politely, and ask our questions in the living room?”

Estelle was in the lead, mostly because she had the better flashlight. “At least it’s stopped raining, Miss Moanie Mouth. You’re carrying on like we had to go miles and miles, but it ain’t more than two hundred feet to begin with and we’re within spittin’ distance already.”

“I’d be within spittin’ distance of my bed if we’d dropped in and asked them.” Ruby Bee stepped over a log and right into a puddle, this time filling her other shoe with cold water and forcing her to bite her tongue to keep from blurting out

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something unseemly. However, she figured she'd better pay more attention to the job at hand, which was sneaking up on the Banebury girls' garage through the woods behind it.

"I told you so," Estelle said as she flashed her light on the backside of the building. "Now turn out your light and stay real close. If that door's not locked, we'll be inside quicker than a preacher says his prayers at night."

The proverbial preacher would have had time to bless a lot of folks. The door wasn't locked, but it was warped something awful and it took a good five minutes of puffing and grunting to get it open far enough for them to slip inside.

Ruby Bee stopped to catch her breath. "I still don't see why you're so dadburned worried about them seeing us. They're both blind as bats."

"Hush!" Estelle played her light over the black sedan. "Lordy, they made 'em big in those days, didn't they? You could put one of those little Japanese cars in the trunk of this one, and have enough room left for a table and four chairs. And look at all that chrome!"

"This ain't the showroom of a car dealership," Ruby Bee said in the snippety voice that always irritated Estelle, which was exactly what she intended for it to do, what with her ruined shoes and toes nigh onto frozen. "If you want to stand there and admire it all night, that's fine, but I for one have other plans. I'll see if it says the model on the back, and you try the interior."

She was shining her light on the license plate and calculating how many years it had been since it expired when Estelle screamed. Before she could say a word, Estelle dashed out the door, the beam from the flashlight bobbling like a ping-pong ball. Mystified but not willing to linger on her own, Ruby Bee followed as fast as she dared, and only when she caught Estelle halfway through the woods did she learn

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what had caused the undignified retreat.

According to Estelle, there'd been a giant rat right in the front seat of the car, its lone amber eye glaring like the devil's own. Ruby Bee snorted in disbelief, but she didn't go back to have a look for herself.

The next morning, sweet inspiration slapped me up the side of the head like a two by four. It had to be the car. I lunged for the telephone so hastily that my poor duck fell to the floor, and called Plover, a state cop with whom I occasionally went to a movie or had dinner. "What do you know about antique cars?" I demanded, bypassing pleasantries.

"They're old. Some of them are real old."

"Did you forget to jump start your brain this morning? I need to find out the current value of a particular car, and I assumed you were up on something macho like this."

He let out a long-suffering sort of sigh. "I can put gas in one at the self-service pump, and I know how to drive it. That's the extent of my so-called macho knowledge."

"Jesus, Plover," I said with a sigh of my own, "you'd better get yourself a frilly pink skirt and a pair of high heel sneakers. While you're doing that, let me talk to someone in the barracks with balls who knows about cars, okay?"

He hung up on what I thought was a very witty remark. State cops were not renowned for their humor, I told myself as I flipped open the telephone directory and hunted up the number of the Lincoln dealer in Farberville. The man who answered was a helluva lot more congenial, possibly (and mistakenly) in hopes he was dealing with a potential buyer.

Alas, he was no better informed than Plover about the current market value of a '58 Lincoln Continental, but his attitude was much brighter and he promised to call me back as soon as possible.

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Rather than waste the time patting myself on the back, I called Plover, apologized for my smart-mouthed remark, and explained what I surmised was going on. "It's the car he's after," I concluded. "The house and land are close to worthless, but this old Lincoln could be a collector's dream."

"Maybe," he said without conviction, "but you can't arrest him for anything. I don't know if what he tried to do constitutes fraud, but in any case, he failed. He can't get his hands on the car until they die."

"Or he has them declared incompetent," I said. "I suppose I could let him know that I'm aware of his scheme, and that I'll testify on their behalf if he tries anything further."

We chatted aimlessly for a while, agreed to a dinner date in a few days, and hung up. I was preparing to dial the number of Nelson's motel room when the phone rang.

The dealer had my information. I grabbed a pencil and wrote down a few numbers, thanked him, and replaced the receiver with a scowl of disappointment. If the car was in mint condition (aka in its original wrapper), it might bring close to ten thousand dollars. The amounts then plummeted: sixty-five hundred for very good, less than five thousand for good, and on down to four hundred fifty as a source for parts.

It wasn't the car, after all, but simply a case of letting myself listen to the suspicious minds in Ruby Bee's Bar & Grill. I picked up the balsa wood and turned my attention to its little webbed feet.

It normally doesn't get dark until five-thirty or so, but the heavy clouds had snuffed out the sunset. I decided to call it a day (not much of one, though) and find out if Ruby Bee was in a more hospitable mood. I had locked the back door and switched off the light when the telephone rang. After a short debate centering around meatloaf versus professional obliga-

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tions, I reluctantly picked up the receiver.

“Arly! You got to do something! Somebody’s gonna get killed if you don’t do something!”

“Calm down, Estelle,” I said, regretting that I hadn’t heeded the plea from my stomach. “What’s the problem?”

“I’m so dadburned all shook up I can barely talk!”

I’d had too much experience with her to be overcome with alarm. “Give it your best shot.”

“It’s the Banebury girls! They just drove by my house, moving real smartly down the middle of the road, and no headlights! I was close enough to my driveway to whip in and get out of their way, but I’m thanking my lucky stars I saw ’em before they ran me over with that bulldozer of a car.”

I dropped the receiver, grabbed my car keys, and ran out to the side of the highway. I saw nothing coming from the south, but if they were driving without lights, I wouldn’t be the only one not to see them coming . . . relentlessly, in a great black death machine.

“Damn!” I muttered as I got in my car, maneuvered around, and headed down the highway to the turnoff for County 102. Miss Columbine couldn’t see anything in front of her, and Miss Larkspur was legally blind. A dynamite duo. I muttered a lot more things, none of them acceptable within my mother’s earshot.

It was supper time, and the highway was blessedly empty. I squealed around the corner and stopped, letting my lights shine down the narrow road. The wet pavement glistened like a snakeskin. They had passed Estelle’s house at least three or four minutes ago. Presuming they were not in a ditch, they would arrive at the intersection any minute. Maybe Nelson had a justifiable reason to have them declared incompetent, I thought as I gripped the steering wheel and peered into the darkness. I hadn’t seen any bunnies hopping outside my

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window, and if there were chocolate eggs hidden in the PD, I hadn't found them.

It occurred to me that I was in more than minimal danger, parked as I was in their path. However, I couldn't let them go on their merry way. A conscientious cop would have forbidden them to drive and confiscated the keys. I'd practically given them my blessing.

My headlights caught the glint of a massive black hood bearing down on me. With a yelp, I changed the beam to high, fumbled with a switch until the blue light on the roof began to rotate, grabbed a flashlight, and jumped out of my car. I waved the light back and forth as the monster bore down on me, and I had some sharp insights into the last thoughts of potential roadkill.

All I could see was the reflection on the chrome as the car came at me, slowly yet determinedly. The blue light splashed on the windshield, as did my flashlight. "Miss Columbine!" I yelled. "Miss Larkspur! You've got to stop!" I retreated behind my car and continued yelling.

The car shuddered, then, at the last moment, stopped a good six inches from my bumper (and a six-hour session with the mayor, trying to explain the bill from the body shop).

I pried my teeth off my lower lip, switched off the flashlight, and went to the driver's window. Miss Columbine sat rigidly behind the wheel, but Miss Larkspur leaned forward and, with a little wave, said, "It's Arly, isn't it? How are you, dear?"

"Much better than I was a minute ago," I said. "I thought we agreed that you wouldn't be driving until this spring, Miss Columbine. A day later you're not only out, but at night without headlights."

"When you're blind," she said tartly, "darkness is not a factor. This is an emergency. Since we don't have a tele-

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phone, we had no choice but to drive for help.”

“That’s right,” said Miss Larkspur. “Eppie has been cat-napped. We’re beside ourselves with worry. He likes to roam around the yard during the afternoon, but this evening he did not come to the back door to demand his supper. Columbine and I searched as best we could, but poor Eppie has disappeared. It’s not like him, not at all.”

“Larkspur is correct,” Miss Columbine added. Despite her gruff voice and expressionless face, a tear trickled down her cheek. She wiped it away and tilted her head to look at me. “I am loath to go jumping to conclusions, but in this case, it’s hard not to.”

“I agree,” I said, gazing bleakly at the darkness surrounding us. It may not have been a factor for them, but it sure as hell was for me. “Let’s go back to your place and I’ll try to find Eppie. Maybe he’s already on the porch, waiting to be fed. I’ll move my car off the road, and then, if you don’t object, I think it’s safer for me to drive your car back for you.”

A few minutes later I was sitting in the cracked leather upholstery of the driver’s seat, trying to figure out the controls on the elaborate wooden dashboard. There was ample room for three of us in the front seat, and possibly a hitchhiker or two. Once I’d found first gear, I turned around in the church parking lot, took a deep breath, and let ’er fly.

“This is a daunting machine,” I said.

Giggling, Miss Larkspur put her hand on my arm and said, “Papa brought it all the way from Memphis, as I told you. He’d gone there on account of Cousin Pearl being at the hospital, and we were flabbergasted when he drove up a week later in a shiny new car. This was after he’d lost the store, you see, and we didn’t even own a car. We felt real badly about him going all the way to Memphis on the bus, but he and Cousin Pearl were kissin’ cousins, and she was

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dying in the Baptist Hospital, so—”

“The Methodist Hospital,” Miss Columbine corrected her. “I swear, some days you go on and on like you ain’t got a brain in your head. Papa must have told us a hundred times how he met that polite young soldier whose mother was dying in the room right next to Cousin Pearl’s.”

“I suppose so,” Miss Larkspur conceded, “but Cousin Pearl was a Baptist.”

I pulled into the rutted driveway beside their house. The garage door was open, so I eased the car inside, turned off the ignition, and leaned back to offer a small prayer. “Why don’t you wait in the house? I’ll have a look out back.”

“I can’t believe our own kin would do such a thing,” Miss Columbine said as she took Miss Larkspur’s arm. I took the other and we moved slowly toward the back porch.

I believed it, and I had a pretty good idea why he’d done it. Once they were inside, I went back to the car, looked at the contents of the glove compartment to confirm my suspicions, and set off across the field. I’d had enough sense to bring my flashlight, but it was still treacherously wet and rough and I wasn’t in the mood to end up with my feet in the air and my fanny in the mud: I could think of a much better candidate.

I froze as my light caught a glittery orb moving toward me in an erratic pattern. It came closer, and at last I made out Eppie’s silhouette as he bounded past me in the direction of the house. His yowl of rage shattered the silence for a heart-stopping moment, then he was gone and I was once again alone in the field with a twenty-year-old memory of the path that led to Boone Creek.

Long before I arrived at the bank, I heard a stream of curses and expletives way too colorful for my sensitive ears. I followed the sound and stopped at a prudent distance to shine my light on Nelson Mullein. He was not a pretty picture

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as he futilely attempted to slither up the muddy incline, snatching at clumps of weeds that uprooted in his hands. He was soaked to the skin. His face was distorted not only by a swath of mud across one cheek, but also by angry red scratches, some of which were oozing blood.

“Who is it?” he said, blinking into the light.

“It’s traditional to take your clothes off when you skinny-dip in the creek.”

“It’s you, the lady cop.” He snatched at a branch, but it broke and he slid back to the edge of the inky water. “Can you give me a hand, honey? It’s like trying to climb an oil slick, and I’m about to freeze to death.”

“Oh, my goodness,” I said as I scanned the ground with the light until it rested on a shapeless brown mound nearby. “Could that be a gunny sack? Why, I do believe it is. I hope you didn’t put Eppie in it in an unsuccessful attempt to drown him in the creek.”

“I’ve never seen that before in my life. I came down here to search for the cat. The damn thing was up in that tree, meowing in a right pitiful fashion, but when I tried to coax him down, I lost my footing and fell into the water. Why don’t you try to find a sturdy branch so I can get up the bank?”

I squatted next to the gunnysack. “This ol’ thing’s nearly ripped to shreds. I guess Eppie didn’t take kindly to the idea of being sent to Cat Heaven before his time. By the way, I know about the car, Mr. Mullein.”

“That jalopy?” he said uneasily. He stopped skittering in the mud and wiped his face. “I reckoned on getting six, maybe seven thousand for it from an ol’ boy what lives in Pine Bluff. That, along with the proceeds from the sale of the property, ought to be more than enough to keep my great-grandaunts from living the way they do, bless their brave souls.”

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“It ought to be more than enough for them to have the house remodeled and pay for a full-time housekeeper,” I said as I rose, the gunnysack dangling between my thumb and forefinger. “I’m taking this along as evidence. If you ever again so much as set one foot in Maggody, I’ll tell those brave souls what you tried to do. You may be their only relative, but someone might suggest they leave what’s going to be in the range of half a million dollars to a rest home for cats!”

“You can’t abandon me like this.” He gave me a view of his pearly white teeth, but it was more of a snarl than a smile. “Don’t be cruel like that, honey.”

“Watch me.” Ignoring his sputters, I took my tattered treasure and walked back across the field to the house. Miss Columbine took me into the living room, where her sister had swaddled Eppie in a towel.

“Him was just being a naughty kitty,” she said, stroking the cat’s remaining ear and nuzzling his head.

I accepted a cup of tea, and once we were settled as before, said, “That polite young soldier gave your papa the car, didn’t he?”

Miss Columbine nodded. “Papa didn’t know what to think, but the boy was insistent about how he’d gone from rags to riches and how it made him feel good to be able to give folks presents. Papa finally agreed, saying it was only on account of how excited Mama would be.”

“It was charity, of course,” Miss Larkspur added, “but the boy said he wanted to do it because of Papa’s kindness in the waiting room. The boy even told Papa that he was a hillbilly cat himself, and never forgot the little town in Mississippi where he was born.”

Eppie growled ominously, but I avoided meeting his hostile eye and said, “He was called the Hillbilly Cat, back in the earliest stage of his career. The original paperwork’s in the

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glove compartment, and his signature is on the bill of sale and registration form.” I explained how much the car would bring and agreed to supervise the sale for them. “This means, of course, that you won’t be driving anymore,” I added.

“But how will we get to church on Easter morning?” Miss Larkspur asked.

Miss Columbine smiled. “I reckon we can afford a limousine, Larkspur. Let’s heat up some nice warm milk for Eppie. He’s still shivering from his . . . adventure outside.”

“Now that we’ll be together, will you promise to never run away again?” Miss Larkspur gently scolded the cat.

He looked at her, then at me on the off chance I’d try to pet him and he could express his animosity with his claws.

I waved at him from the doorway, told the ladies I’d be in touch after I talked with the Lincoln dealer, and wished them a pleasant evening. I walked down the road to my car, and I was nearly there before I realized Eppie was a nickname. Once he’d been the Hillbilly Cat, and his death had broken hearts all around the world. But in the Banebury household, Elvis Presley was alive and well—and still the King.

“Give me that shovel,” Estelle hissed. “All you’re doing is poking the dirt like you think this is a mine field.”

Ruby Bee eased the blade into the muddy soil, mindful of the splatters on the hem of her coat and the caked mud that made her shoes feel like combat boots. “Hold your horses,” she hissed back, “I heard a clink. I don’t want to break the jar and ruin the money.”

Estelle hurried over and knelt down to dig with her fingers. “Ain’t the Banebury girls gonna be excited when we find their Papa’s buried treasure! I reckon we could find as much as a thousand dollars before the night is out.” She daintily blotted her forehead with her wrist. “It’s a darn shame about

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the car, but if it ain't worth much, then it ain't. It's kinda funny how that man at the Lincoln dealership rattled off the prices like he had 'em written out in front of him and was wishing somebody'd call to inquire. Of course I wasn't expecting to hear anything different. Everybody knows just because a car's old doesn't mean it's valuable."

A lot of responses went through Ruby Bee's mind, none of them kindly. She held them back, though, and it was just as well when Estelle finally produced a chunk of brick, dropped it back in the hole, stood up, and pointed her finger like she thought she was the high and mighty leader of an expedition.

"Start digging over there, Ruby Bee," she said, "and don't worry about them seeing us from inside the house. I told you time and again, they're both blind."

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