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ON A
COLD TIN
ROOF

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ELI PAXTON MYSTERIES:

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AN ELI PAXTON MYSTERY

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*To Carol, as always,
and to Chip Hossler, Crown Prince of the Geek Squad*

1.

They say Cincinnati is in the Upper South. They say the winters are mild. They say it hardly ever snows.

Clearly they don't remember the Ice Bowl in 1982, when the Bengals won the AFC Championship in a minus-59 wind chill. Or if they were too young for that, all they had to do was look out my apartment window, always assuming that white was their favorite color. We'd had six inches during the day, with more coming.

I had other problems than the weather. No clients for more than a week was first and foremost among them. Either no one needed a detective, or, more likely, they didn't need one urgently enough to brave the weather and come to my office. And the beat-up Ford needed a new transmission, which was going to set me back a couple of thousand, once I got my hands on a couple of thousand to be set back.

I was sitting on my well-used couch in front of the television, watching—or mostly dozing through—an endless series of Falcon movies on Turner Classic Movies, with George Sanders turning into Tom Conway somewhere along the way, and wondering why the Falcon never lacked for clients *or* money. After a while I stopped dozing and began sleeping in earnest.

I dreamed that I was on a beach with Sophia Loren, who had magically lost about fifty years, and was kissing my ear. "Ah, Sophia, my sweet!" I whispered. It encouraged her, and she began kissing my ear more vigorously.

After another few seconds she began drooling in my ear and then growling in it, and I woke up and realized that she had morphed into Marlowe, my dog. They say he's a West Highland White Terrier, but he hasn't been white since the day I got him. I don't like him much, and he

likes me even less. But he has no more luck with lady dogs than I have with lady people, so we stay together.

It was only when he began barking, maybe an inch from my ear, maybe a little less, that I realized the phone was ringing. I looked at my watch: three in the morning.

Nobody calls me at three in the morning, especially during a blizzard, so I let it ring seven or eight times until it finally stopped, found that the Falcon had gone the way of all flesh, and I was now watching Chester Morris as Boston Blackie and had just about gone back to sleep when the phone began ringing again, and Marlowe barked in my ear about a tenth of a second later.

I brushed Marlowe off my shoulder, where he'd been sleeping before he began barking, got up, and trudged to the phone.

"Yeah?" I said, picking it up.

"Hi, Eli. It's Jim Simmons. I tried to call a minute ago, but I must have dialed a wrong number. Nobody goes out on a night like this."

"Nobody except cops," I answered. Jim was my closest friend on the Cincinnati police.

"True, true," he said.

"Okay," I said. "You didn't call me at three in the morning to talk about the Bengals."

"They looked really good last Sunday, didn't they?" he said. "Or at least not as bad as usual. But no, that's not it. I'm calling from the Grandin Road area." That's Cincinnati's answer to LA's Malibu or Chicago's Lake Shore Drive. "There's been a murder."

I frowned. "I'm sorry to hear it, but why the hell are you calling *me*? You've got a billion dollars' worth of stuff in your forensics lab, and God knows how many men on the force. Private detectives haven't been hired to solve murders since Sam Spade retired."

"I know."

"Well, then?"

"Shut up and listen," he said. "We'll take care of the murder. But something's missing, something that probably has nothing to do with the murder. The lady of the house—I guess I should call her the widow,

since that's what she's been for an hour or two—wants to hire a detective to get it back, and it's a field in which you seem to have specialized."

A field in which I've specialized? What the hell was that?

"If I give you the address, can you get here in twenty minutes?" continued Simmons.

"Jim, I don't even know if I can get to my car in twenty minutes," I answered. "Have you stuck your head out a window?"

"Damn it, Eli! I drove here myself! The plows are keeping up with it."

My first inclination was to say no. Then I figured he'd press me, and I'd tell him my transmission was on borrowed time. Then I figured, well, Grandin Road, what the hell, maybe this'll pay for it.

"All right," I said. "Give me the address, and I'll be there as soon as I can . . . but I guarantee it's going to take more than twenty minutes."

"That's okay," said Simmons. "Just so's you get here. The rest of us aren't going anywhere."

I wrote down the address. "I never heard of the street. How the hell do I get there?"

"Just tell your GPS where you're going."

"What's a GPS?"

"I forgot which century you're living in," said Simmons. "It figures that anyone who doesn't have a cell phone doesn't have a GPS. OK, go east on . . ."

He rattled off the directions, I scribbled them down, and then I hung up. I never wear a gun, but I pulled it out of the drawer and strapped on the shoulder holster, just in case my client watched all the same movies I watch. I was going to explain to Marlowe that I had to go out, and that his food was in his bowl in the kitchen, but he'd figured it out already and was snoring peacefully on my couch.

I got into my coat and galoshes—I suppose they're boots these days, but they *feel* like galoshes—and made my way to the car. No one had bothered shoveling the sidewalk, but the plows were out in force on the streets. So was the snow, and it was going to be a near thing to see which emerged victorious. Personally, my money was on the snow, but

I hadn't had a client in a week, so I got into the car, was mildly surprised when it started right off the bat, waited a minute while it warmed up, and I stopped shivering and finally edged out into the street.

Ordinarily there were at least a few cars out, even at three in the morning, but except for the plows I seemed to be the only person crazy enough to be on the street. I set off at maybe twenty miles an hour, skidded a couple of times, and slowed down to twelve miles an hour.

I hoped Jim's instructions were accurate, because every street sign was covered with snow, except for the few that were covered by ice. I crossed over Interstate 71, saw a bunch of flashing lights and what seemed to be a four-car pile-up, tried not to think about it, and kept heading east.

The Grandin Road area—I'm sure it has a classier name, but I've never spent enough time over there to learn it—is a couple of square miles filled to the brim with huge, elegant Tudor and Georgian mansions, each more impressive than the last, each expensively landscaped, just a few miles from downtown Cincinnati. You get the feeling that entire mahogany forests were decimated just to supply the wainscoting and window frames for the few hundred houses that lined the twisting streets.

Nobody parks on the street around there, not with every house sporting a three- or four-car garage—but if they did, there'd be an endless row of luxury sedans of which the Lincoln Town Cars and Cadillac Escalades were the poor cousins. I had a feeling that I was getting close to my destination, but all the mailboxes, which were up at the head of the driveways, were so covered with snow that I couldn't read the addresses—and if any of the houses had addresses on or above the front doors I couldn't see them from the street.

Then I saw a drive with five cop cars parked in it, a couple of them with their lights still flashing, and I figured to hell with the address, how many houses have got five cop cars in their driveways at three in the morning with a blizzard raging? So I pulled up—they'd left me just enough room to get my car off the street and out of the way of the plows—parked, got out of the car, and tried not to slip on the ice while walking to the front door. The drive was lined with snow-covered

shrubbery and towering oaks and maples, all of them glistening white in the moonlight.

I pressed the button, heard a musical chime, and a few seconds later a uniformed cop opened the door.

“Yes?” he said, eyeing me suspiciously.

“Eli Paxton,” I said, waiting for him to step aside so I could get in out of the cold.

He stared at me without moving.

“Jim Simmons sent for me,” I explained.

He looked suspicious. “Wait here,” he said. “I’ll check with Officer Simmons.”

He began closing the door, but I stuck my foot in before he could shut it.

“It’s freezing out here,” I said. “Why don’t you just pull your gun on me and march me to wherever the hell Simmons is?”

He stared at me again, then shrugged, stepped aside, and gestured for me to enter.

“Take off your boots,” he said.

The tile on the foyer practically glowed and looked like it cost more than the average house—and hanging down from the ceiling about forty feet above me was a crystal chandelier that I imagined wouldn’t have looked out of place in Buckingham Palace. I took my boots off.

“May I ask what your business is, sir?”

I shrugged. “Beats the hell out of me. Jim Simmons phoned an hour ago and told me to get the hell over here.”

He arched an eyebrow. “An hour?”

“You try driving through that shit,” I said.

He grunted, muttered, “Follow me,” and headed to the broad, winding staircase, the kind that Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers would dance down with a couple of chorus girls on each side of them.

“Uh . . . is there someplace I can leave my coat?” I said, as the house was quite warm and comfortable, which meant that I was feeling warmer and more uncomfortable by the second.

He shook his head. “You’ll need it.”

I frowned. What the hell was I going to need my coat for?

“Come on,” he continued, starting to climb the stairs again. We passed four beautifully framed oil paintings that were hanging on the walls as we ascended. I didn’t know who’d done them, but I’d have bet my bottom dollar he or she was pretty damned famous if you knew expensive art. That left me out, as my own taste in art was pretty much limited to Playmates and old pulp magazine covers.

As we reached the top of the stairs the cop turned left, and I saw half a dozen more uniformed cops lining the forty-foot corridor. The double door at the end of it was open, leading to a huge master suite, and my guide headed off toward it.

He stopped at the doorway, held up a hand to indicate I was to stop too, and he called out, “Officer Simmons?”

A moment later Jim Simmons, looking elegant compared to me but a little rumpled compared to the other plainclothesmen, walked over to me.

“Hi, Eli. I’d ask what kept you, but I was just standing outside a minute ago.”

“Must be another staircase,” I said. “I know this one’s big, but I never saw you come up.”

He smiled grimly. “Come on in,” he said, turning and walking into the suite, which was about twice the size of my entire apartment, with a four-poster bed that could have accommodated a small army.

“It’s cold in here,” I noted.

“Door’s open,” replied Simmons.

“Door?”

He nodded and pointed to a sliding door that led out to what looked like a deck.

“What’s all this about, Jim?” I asked.

“Like I said on the phone,” he replied, “there’s been a murder. Ever hear of Malcolm Pepperidge?”

I shook my head. “If this is his house, I suspect we traveled in different social circles.”

“Not quite as different as this place makes it seem,” said Simmons.

"I had a feeling you never heard of Pepperidge. How about Big Jim Palanto?"

"Sounds like a wrestler or a mobster," I replied.

Simmons nodded. "Close. He was the financial advisor to Chicago's biggest Mafia family, the man who invested their money for them." He paused, pulled out a thin, Clint Eastwood spaghetti Western cigar, considered it for a few seconds, then frowned and put it back in his pocket. "Trying to quit," he explained. "Anyway, Palanto never broke the law himself, but he knew most of the mob's secrets, and he decided to walk away from the business while he was still alive. That was about fifteen years ago. He came away with an estimated ten million, and since he knew how to invest it, he's probably worth two or three times that today."

"Okay," I said. "Pepperidge is dead and Palanto is rich. What's the connection?"

"Palanto *became* Pepperidge when he left the mob and moved here. He's been a model citizen ever since."

"Then it wasn't the mob that hit him?"

"Of course it was," said Simmons.

I frowned. "I'm missing something here. I thought you said he came away clean and stayed clean."

"He did," replied Simmons. "But some of his old buddies have a trial coming up, and he was subpoenaed to testify against them. It figures they were just making sure he couldn't show up. After all, how loyal could he be after fifteen years?"

"If he's worth ten million or more, all thanks to them, and no one can prove the money's dirty after all this time, what could he gain by siding with the prosecution?" I asked.

"Probably nothing," said Simmons. "But if you were up for seven murders and half a hundred other felonies, would you take the chance on someone who cut out fifteen years ago?"

I exhaled deeply. "No, I suppose it makes sense."

"We haven't got much time to catch the guy," added Simmons. "They'd never use a local shooter. He'll be out of town the second the roads are clear or the airport re-opens."

“They probably wouldn’t send one of their own from Chicago, either,” I agreed. “If you’re right about who’s behind it, they probably imported one from either coast.”

Simmons nodded. “Yeah, I know.”

“Okay,” I said. “I know who got killed, I know who he really was, and I probably know why he was killed. What I don’t know is what *I’m* doing here at four in the morning in the middle of the worst blizzard of the year.”

“The grieving widow’s got a job for you.”

“What kind of a job?”

“Follow me for a minute,” he said, heading off toward the sliding doors. He pulled one aside and stepped out onto the balcony, where two uniformed cops and two homicide detectives were already gathered.

“The balcony wasn’t originally part of the house,” continued Simmons. “It’s just a tin roof over the garage. But about four years ago he became interested in astronomy, so he had the sliding doors put in, and covered the tin with some kind of decking. We won’t know exactly what kind until the damned snow melts—not that it matters anyway.”

The cops had roped it off, which didn’t make much sense, since it was fifteen or twenty feet above the ground. But they’d also put a tarp over the top of it at a height of maybe eight feet, as if to stop the snow from covering up any evidence. It was already starting to sag from the weight.

Stretched out face-down on the balcony, right next to a telescope that had been attached to the railing, was the dead man.

“We hate to leave him like this,” said one of the detectives, “but the forensics guys asked us to keep the scene pristine until they got here.” He chuckled sardonically. “Pristine!” he repeated, shaking his head. “That tarp’s gonna collapse under the weight of the snow in another twenty minutes or so.”

“So where are they?” I asked.

“Sleeping, at least ’til we called them,” was the reply. “This isn’t Chicago, with three or four murders a day. I doubt we average as many as one a week.”

“As you can see,” Simmons said, pointing to the corpse, “all he’s got on is his robe, his pajamas, a pair of unbuckled boots, and an overcoat that he threw on to protect himself from the cold. According to his wife and his staff, he was an avid stargazer. There are two bullets in his back. Clearly the killer nailed him while he was looking at something, though what the hell he could see in this snowstorm is beyond me.”

“According to the weather reports, it let up from one-thirty to almost two o’clock, sir,” said one of the uniformed men. “It’s up to the coroner to fix the time of death if he can, but it’s a fair guess that he came out during the pause in the storm to see if it was done or if there was more coming.”

“Makes sense,” agreed Simmons. “I don’t know if it’s right, but it makes sense.”

I looked for a long moment as the wind whipped across the balcony, then started getting very cold. “Okay,” I said, “I’ve seen him. I’ve seen the balcony. I’ve seen the bedroom. And I still don’t know what this has to do with me.”

“Take a closer look,” said Simmons.

“At what?”

He pointed to some small tracks around the corpse’s head, leading to the edge of the balcony.

I looked and I shrugged. “Squirrel?” I suggested, but I knew that made no sense. Why would a squirrel leave the safety of a tree to leap onto an open balcony in a snowstorm?

“Cat,” said Simmons.

“So where is it?” I asked, looking around.

“Beats the hell out of me.”

I took another look at Pepperidge. There wasn’t much blood, but if the bullets had gone through him, gravity was probably pulling it out of the exit wounds. And if not, well, maybe he died instantly, the heart wasn’t pumping any blood after a few seconds, and it was pooled somewhere inside his body. I shrugged; it wasn’t my business anyway.

Which reminded me that I *did* have some business to transact, no one had told me what it was yet, and I was freezing my ass off.

I turned to Simmons. “Okay, you got a dead man. But you also got a bunch of cops and detectives, and probably more on the way, plus a top-notch forensics crew—so what am I here for?”

“It’s Mrs. Pepperidge,” replied Simmons.

“Oh?”

He nodded. “She was playing in a bridge tournament all evening, and is the one who found the body.”

“So?”

He smiled. “I think I’ll let her tell you.”

“Is she in any condition to talk?” I asked. “I mean, she just lost her husband.”

“Tough broad,” said Simmons. “If I was a betting man . . .”

“You are,” I interrupted.

“Only on horses and football,” he answered. “Anyway, if I was inclined to bet on people, I’d say that she has a lot more in common with the Chicago Palantos than the Cincinnati Pepperidges.”

“Somehow I don’t picture mob girls playing in bridge tournaments,” I said.

“She hasn’t been a girl in thirty years, and the tournament just shows that she’s good at adapting to her surroundings.”

“Okay, she’s not a teenager, if she was ever a floozy she outgrew it, and she likes to play bridge.”

“She likes cats, too,” added Simmons.

“Fine,” I said. “She likes cats too.”

“Come on,” he said, walking through the massive room and heading to the hallway.

I followed him, we walked past three empty rooms and still more paintings by artists who were probably known to everyone who could afford a house like this, and came to a closed door with a uniformed cop standing guard. Simmons knocked on it.

“Mrs. Pepperidge?” he said.

“Come in,” said a strong female voice, stronger than I’d have expected from a newly widowed woman.

He opened the door, and I followed him into a paneled study with

a carpet so thick you got the feeling they had to mow it every few days. She was sitting at an antique wooden desk, drinking from an expensive-looking glass while an even more expensive-looking bottle sat on the desk next to her.

She was maybe five-foot-five or six, and she may have been slim and sexy once, but these days she looked more like a linebacker. She wore a tailored pantsuit, her face had been lifted at least once and probably a couple of times, and her auburn hair had some beautiful white streaks through it. I don't know from hair, but I'd have bet whatever my fee for this gig was that those weren't its real colors. The most lasting impression was that she wore enough gold and diamond jewelry to make your pupils contract once the light hit them.

She looked me up and down, and finally got to her feet.

"I am Evangeline Pepperidge," she said, almost hiding the Chicago twang from her voice. "And you are . . . ?"

"Paxton, ma'am," I said, extending my hand. "Eli Paxton. I want to offer my condolences for your loss."

She looked at my hand as if it was diseased, and finally I let it drop to my side.

"Mr. Simmons has recommended you," she said.

"Lieutenant Simmons," Jim corrected her.

She glared at him for a moment, then turned back to me.

"Are you available to begin work immediately, Mr. Paxton?"

"First thing in the morning," I assured her.

"I said *immediately*," she repeated harshly.

"Yes, ma'am," I replied. "Immediately."

"Good. I'm not going to quibble about your fee. This is much too important." She reached down behind the desk, opened a drawer, pulled out a wad of bills, and handed it to me.

"That's fifteen hundred dollars, Mr. Paxton," she said. "It will serve as your retainer. I will pay you two hundred dollars a day plus all expenses while you are working for me, and a thousand-dollar bonus when you successfully complete your assignment."

Yeah, I decided, it was worth coming out in the snow. My usual fee

was a hundred and a half a day, and as often as not I let it be negotiated downward when I was hard up for clients, which was usually the case. As for the retainer, it was the biggest I'd seen in three years.

"I assume these terms are acceptable?" she said when I was still doing the math and seeing how soon I could get the Ford its transmission.

"Perfectly, Mrs. Pepperidge, ma'am," I said.

"Good," she said, opening another desk drawer, pulling out a bunch of four-by-six photos, and handing them to me.

I thumbed through them. It was a normal, unexceptional-looking cat. A mackerel tabby, I think they call it, with a distinctive white spot over its left eye. It was lying on the dead man's lap in a couple of them.

"Looks like a cat," I said.

"Of course she's a cat!" she snapped. "*My* cat."

"Okay," I said. "It's your cat. What's its name?"

"*Her* name is Fluffy," she said somewhat distastefully. "My husband named her." She paused. "She's gone missing, and I want her back."

I had an almost irresistible urge to tell her that what she wanted was an animal warden, not a detective. Then I thought about the transmission and the overdue rent, and managed to resist the urge after all.

"We know from the prints that she was on the roof when her husband . . . when . . . ah . . ." said Simmons uncomfortably.

"I want that cat back, Mr. Paxton," she said, ignoring Simmons. She handed me a card. "The top number is my cell phone, the bottom is my landline. I'll expect a daily progress report. Mr. Simmons tells me that you once found a missing show dog."

"True," I replied. I decided not to tell her that the dog was dead when I found it a couple of thousand miles from home.

"Good. I assume that this is your *métier*." She pulled one more sheet of paper out of the desk while I was trying to figure out what a *métier* was. "This is the phone number and address of her vet, and below it is the kennel we board her at when we're abroad."

"Thank you," I said. I wondered what the odds were of finding a very small, nondescript cat in very deep snow, especially in the dark. A

thousand-to-one against sounded about right. “That spot above its—*her*—eye should make her easy enough to identify.”

“Well?” she demanded. “You’re on my payroll now. Get to work.”

I nodded and began backing out of the room. “Yes, ma’am. And let me say once more how sorry I am about your husband.”

“Forget him!” she yelled, all trace of wealthy Cincinnati sophistication departed. “Just find the fucking cat!”