TILL DEATH DO US PART
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Story by Robin Allen

A Golden Mystery Puzzle™
“Police?” Mrs. Crone gasped.

Her reaction to Simon’s suggestion spread throughout the group like a shock wave. They had all gathered in the dining room to calm each other. But it wasn’t working. No matter what they said, Henry was still dead in the upstairs bathtub. And the mention of the word police didn’t help matters one bit.

“Yes, of course,” Simon said calmly. “We have to call the police.”

“What do you want to drag THEM in for?” Bill Meekam said. He seemed more annoyed than nervous about the idea. “It was an accident. Your basic common household accident.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Simon answered.

The group’s initial surprise turned into tense silence. Suspicious glances shot back and forth between all those present. Simon watched their faces carefully but could not pick up any further clues.

“Surely you don’t think that one of us...” Mrs. Crone began, hoping one of the others would fill in the rest. But no one did. Not out loud at least.

“Is that what you think?” Jenny finally asked.

“Let’s put it this way,” Simon answered, trying to be as diplomatic as possible. “I don’t think Henry had any kind of household accident. I think he died of household murder.”
Murder. When the word finally came out, it sounded almost trite. Like a cliche from a grade B movie. It was even accompanied by the standard drumbeat on the soundtrack when Meekam accidently dropped his wrench on the floor. Simon himself laughed at the corny effect.

"Murder," Jenny cracked. "Give me a break."

"Why do you say that?" Mrs. Crone asked. Sweating, she mopped her face with the dish towel she had been using in the kitchen. The gesture deposited a smear of wedding cake across her brow. "Who on earth would do such a thing to Henry?"

"Look, if it weren't for divorce, more marriages would end in murder," Simon said, trying to lighten the mood. That didn't work either. During the glum silence that followed, Mama Thorn rolled her wheelchair into the room where they were all standing.

"I'll tell you who did it," the old lady barked. "It was this one."

Mama Thorn's bony finger was tapping something that was lying in her lap. Simon edged over to see what she was pointing to. In her lap were three instant photos. They had been taken an hour earlier, during the anniversary party but before Henry's so-called accident. Everyone present, except Henry, could be seen in one or another of the three photographs. But Mama Thorn wasn't pointing to any particular person. She was simply tapping at one of the photos.

"You have to figure out which picture was taken after this one," she said hoarsely. "The person missing from it is the murderer."

"And what makes you so sure about that?" Simon asked.

But before she could answer, Bill Meekam, Mrs. Crone and Jenny broke in with their own opinions. Accusations and deductions flew back and forth. It struck Simon that the debate sparked more passion than Henry's death itself. With the exception of Carla—who was lying down in the bedroom unable to face anyone—no one was particularly upset about Henry's untimely demise. Alibis, not condolences, were being offered.

Simon started to intervene, but he stopped himself. He was the one who brought up murder in the first place. And the police. It occurred to him that he'd better have a clear idea about things before pursuing it any further. So he sat down and went over the events of the day to make sure he wasn't overlooking anything.

It all began at three o'clock that afternoon, as everyone arrived for the party. It was Henry and Carla's first anniversary. They had planned a small get-together to celebrate it. Not that their first year together had been so rosy. It hadn't. Their personalities clashed right from the start. Still, despite arguments and slammed doors, they had
reached some kind of truce over the year. The anniversary party was meant to celebrate the fact that they had somehow gotten through twelve months together.

Simon felt responsible for their tenuous match. He was the one who had introduced them. He knew Henry from work. Henry was a big man, built thick like a mule. And with a mule's character—simple, steady, and stubborn. Yet Simon knew that beneath this blunt manner, there was a decent guy lonely for companionship.

The first woman who came to mind was Carla. She lived in the house right next door to Simon. Carla was a trim woman in her forties. Chatty and vivacious. And devoted, above all else, to her own unique path of enlightenment. Namely, shopping. She was a devout student of it. The mall was a kind of shrine for her. Buying shoes, her form of prayer.

Theirs was a match made, not in heaven, but in the parking lot outside of Jewelry World. Simon had his doubts, but he introduced them anyway. And it seemed to work. At least, until today.

By the time Simon arrived for the party, the others were already in the kitchen. Carla was wearing a new outfit she had bought just for the occasion and was taking a cake out of the freezer. According to custom, she had saved the top tier of her wedding cake for a whole year. She began cutting it up with a large kitchen knife as Simon walked in.

"Congratulations," Simon said brightly.

"Sweetheart," Carla said, kissing a phony cheek in the air next to Simon's face.

As she turned back to the cake, the knife slipped, cutting the head off the tiny bridegroom on top of the cake. But Carla dismissed it with a giggle and Simon thought nothing of it. At least not right away.

"Ah, the man of the hour," Simon said as Henry lumbered into the kitchen a minute later. "Looks like you've made it through a whole year."

"I'd be the first," Henry said.

"How's that?" Simon asked.

"Should I tell him?" Henry asked Carla.

"Oh no, let's not bring THAT up again," she fluttered.

"Tell me what?" Simon asked.

"He wants to tell you about my former husbands," Carla said, with great drama. "You didn't know them, Simon. You hadn't moved in next door yet. Henry seems to think I DID THEM IN."

"No I don't," Henry said. "But it's some damn coincidence. You have to admit that."

"What is?" Simon asked.

"The Curse," Carla said, waving the knife around dangerously. "I was married twice before. Both of my former marriages lasted exactly one year. But not one
minute past it. Neither husband made it through our first anniversary. That’s what’s got Henry so upset.”

“You’re kidding,” Simon said.

Henry didn’t answer. Instead he collapsed onto one of the stools, as though unable to bear the weight of the past. That, and the fact that he didn’t have a sense of humor, clinched it. He wasn’t kidding.

“What happened to them?” Simon asked.

“Household accidents,” Carla said. “My first husband bashed his head while fixing the boiler in the basement. He was terribly clumsy. Hubby Number Two fell off the roof.”

“The Anniversary Curse, my favorite topic,” announced a creepy voice at the door.

They had been joined in the kitchen by Jenny, Carla’s daughter from her first marriage. Jenny was a sarcastic kid of twenty-one, annoyed about everything and everyone.

“Did you clean the bathroom, like I told you?” Henry said to her, raising his hand in a mock slap.

“Please! That kind of work is quite beneath me,” she said, making like a princess.

“I’ll check it out later,” Henry warned.

“Sure. If you last that long,” Jenny cracked.

“Will you two stop it?” Carla broke in. “This is a party. Can’t you try to get along for one afternoon?”

“I guess so, considering it’s his last,” Jenny said.

“I can’t listen to this,” Carla said, waving her hand

and jangling bracelets as she left the room.

“How terrible for her,” Simon said, once Carla was gone.

“Not really,” Jenny concluded. “She didn’t really love them anyway. Either of them. In a way, he did my mother a favor.”

“Who did?” Simon asked.

“Jennifer thinks Bill Meekam killed both of Carla’s husbands,” Henry said blantly. “She thinks Meekam’s in love with Carla and killed them during fits of jealous rage.”

“Somebody call me?” said a man entering the room. It was Bill Meekam, a long-time friend of Carla’s. He was tall and thin, with the rugged face of a repairman, which is precisely what he was. Carla had invited him to the celebration and also to fix a leak in the roof, since Henry refused to take any chances. But the moment he entered, Jenny marched out of the room in protest.

“I don’t think she likes me,” Meekam said casually.

“She thinks you killed Carla’s husbands,” Henry said.

“What? Ridiculous. They were accidents.”

“Were you at both of the other parties?” Simon asked, getting hooked into the rumor.

“Yes. But so was Jenny,” Meekam responded. “And Mama and Carla, for that matter. And—if you’re looking for a cold-blooded killer—so was Mrs. Crone.”

He announced the name as though he were reading it
from a mystery script. And at that moment, right on cue, Mrs. Crone herself walked into the room. She had been in the dining room, setting out the food for the gathering. Mrs. Crone was a plain woman in her fifties. Quiet and reserved. She had been Carla’s housekeeper for years.

“Everything is ready,” she said to Henry.

“It’s about time,” Henry said, watching the clock like a condemned man. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Carla was just telling me about the two tragedies,” Simon said to Mrs. Crone.

“The only tragedy was that they each lasted a whole year,” she said.

“You didn’t like her husbands?” Simon asked, surprised by her tone.

“She doesn’t like anybody. Especially MEN,” Henry offered.

“Carla has a habit,” Mrs. Crone said, her voice thin as ice, “of falling for a certain type of man. A crude man. I would simply like to see her with someone who has charm and class for a change. Someone who can give her the things she deserves.”

“She thinks I got no charm,” Henry concluded.

“Come on everybody. We’re ready!” Carla shouted.

Everyone took seats at the dining table. Mama Thorn, Carla’s mother, was positioned so she could hear what was going on. Mama Thorn was a cranky old woman in her seventies, partially deaf and confined to a wheelchair. She never left the first floor of the house, but compensated for it by complaining about what was going on everywhere else.

“Somebody get up and help me with this,” she shouted, just as everyone got comfortable.

She was pointing to a floral pillow that cushioned the lower part of her back. It needed constant adjusting, and Henry, for the tenth time that day, got up to help her.

“Not you,” Mama Thorn barked, “you’ve got the touch of a moose. Carla, darling, help me.”

The celebration lasted only an hour. That was all they could take of each other. They ate the cake, which tasted just like defrosted one-year-old cake. They drank a toast to future years of happiness, which no one really believed would occur. They congratulated Carla for putting up with Henry, and Henry himself for not dropping dead at the table. And they passed around the instant camera and took pictures. Then, with great relief, they broke up and went about their business.

Bill Meekam got tools from his truck and climbed out through the second floor bathroom window onto the roof. Jenny went into her room behind the kitchen on the first floor and lost herself in some brain-rattling music on the headphones. Carla, with a headache, went upstairs and took an aspirin, then turned on the television and fell asleep. Mama Thorn wheeled herself into the living room
and went back to knitting a yellow sweater. Mrs. Crone went to the basement to do the laundry. And Simon went home.

For a gift, Carla had given Henry a bottle of bubble bath that she insisted he try out. It was part of her effort to introduce him to the finer things in life. Although not at all the bubbly type, he went along with it. After the party, he went upstairs, ran the bath, turned on the radio, slipped into the tub and pulled the curtain closed.

A short time later, Simon got a frantic call from Carla. The news was inevitable. Like his predecessors, and despite all precautions, Henry had not made it through the day. He had tried to play it safe. In fact, the most daring thing he had done was to take a bubble bath. Naturally, it was his last.

When Simon arrived, he found Henry dead in the tub under a mound of bubbles. The radio that had been sitting on the window sill had apparently fallen in the water and electrocuted him. Henry's hair still had a stringy, electrified look. And his face retained the shock of the voltage. The floor was covered with water and suds from his final thrashing.

But as Simon took a closer look at the scene, he began to think that chance was not the villain. There had to be another hand behind the hand of fate. Henry's death was no accident. The radio that was lying in the bath water wasn't plugged in. In fact, Simon realized, the cord wasn't even long enough to reach from the wall socket to the water. Someone had pushed the radio into the tub AFTER Henry died—to make it look like an accident.

"Didn't any of you hear anything?" Simon asked the others.

"I was on the roof hammering," Bill Meekam said. "I didn't hear a thing."

"Me, either," Jenny said. "I was downstairs listening to music on my headphones. I can't believe this. There really IS a curse!"

She turned to Carla who could hardly speak from the shock of yet another anniversary accident. Still, at Simon's urging, Carla tried to recall what happened.

"I fell asleep," she said slowly. "In the bedroom. Down the hall. The TV was on. I woke up. Then I came in to check on..."

But the sight of Henry buried in bubbles was too much for her. Meekam and Jenny took her to her room to lie down.

"What about you?" Simon asked, turning to Mrs. Crone. Her face was a mask of indifference. "I was in the basement. The washing machine was on. It drowned out all other noise."

"What's going on up there?" Mama Thorn shouted. She had wheeled her chair to the foot of the stairs below
and was shouting to anyone who would listen. "Did this one croak too? Answer me!"

Those words echoed in Simon's mind as he finished going over the events of the day. It took a few seconds to focus his attention back on the dining room. The others were still arguing about who killed Henry and why. Mama Thorn was still pointing to the photos and Simon walked over to her to study them.

"And what exactly do these pictures have to do with it?" he asked her, adjusting his glasses for a better look.

"This is the first picture taken," Mama Thorn explained. "The radio can be seen in it. There on the shelf. But it's not in the other two pictures. See what I mean?"

Simon could see that the radio was missing from the other photos. But he didn't at all see what that meant. And he shook his head from side to side to show it.

"Do I have to draw you a picture?" Mama Thorn snapped. "Look. Someone took the radio off the shelf here and carried it upstairs. They were setting up the murder, see? And whoever took it didn't get back in time for the next picture. All YOU have to do, sonnyboy, is figure out which picture was taken next and who's missing from it. That's the murderer."

"That's crazy," Jenny said. "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard."

Simon agreed. But only because it seemed too easy.

There were so many suspects. Like Mrs. Crone, who disliked all the men in Carla's life. Did her tidy manner hide a more sinister streak? Or Bill Meekam, friend and repairman. Was he really there to kill two birds with one stone, or was there a third dead bird? And Jenny, who despised her stepfather. Was she mad enough for murder? Or Carla herself. Had she found a better way to end domestic strife? And then there was Mama Thorn. Clearly she couldn't have raced up the stairs. But was she protecting a guilty daughter?

Simon kept all that in mind as he examined the photos in Mama Thorn's lap. After a few moments, he had his answer. The old lady was correct. The photos DID point directly to the murderer.

Assemble the puzzle to see if you can figure out who killed Henry in the bathtub and how the murderer did it.
THE SOLUTION:

"If only you had’t pointed out those photos. Simon said to Mama Tom. You might have gotten away with
it."

You’re NOT REALY the one’s attention.

"You’re right. I’m continued. The answer is in these photos. But it’s not obvious to do with who’s missing from
the photos. Henry and I are missing from one. And Henry and Jennifer are missing from the other. But that means
nothng. I looked the second photo, my guess is that
Jennifer took the third.

"That’s right. Jennifer said. I DID take one of the
pictures."

In order words. Simon continued. Henry pointed to the
Mama Tom’s wheelchair. No one. Tom’s wheelchair.

"You must have gotten up out of the wheelchair. You sometimes after the pictures were taken. Otherwise, how
the couch the pillow was flipped to."

Mama Tom didn’t say a word, and that encouraged
Simon.

\[14\]
And the others. But I had to. To protect Carla. She didn't know what she was going. None of them was good enough for my daughter. None of them. They couldn't give her what she wanted. She didn't know. She's just a baby. I had to take care of it myself. I mean, after all, isn't that what mothers are for?