

ENCHANTRESS

by Steve Hockensmith

Urias Smythe

Smythe & Associates Publishing, Ltd.

175 Fifth Avenue

New York, New York

Dear Mr. Smythe:

I know it's only been a couple weeks since I sent you a story, and that one came quick on the heels of the story previous. Your magazine is *Smythe's Frontier Detective*, not *Otto Amlingmeyer Illustrated*. I suppose I should show some restraint and leave room for the other frontier detectives. But what can I do? My life just won't stop being interesting.

Not that you would've thought so two days ago. I had nothing to do but pick up groceries for our landlady, help my brother fight his way through another page of his *McGuffey's* reading primer (he's up to the part where "Sue hears the cow moo" — exciting!) and await word of paying work from our partner Col. Crowe. As you will recall, said landlady is as deaf as a post, on top of which she's an old-fashioned sort given to pinching pennies till they scream. (Why not, since she can't hear them?) So she refuses to splurge on that unhelpful (to her

anyway) flash-in-the-pan contraption the telephone. News from the colonel we have to get either via messenger boys or preferably — much, *much* preferably — his daughter Diana. Which is why every knock sends me sprinting to the door with a smile on my face and hope in my heart.

Such was the case this particular day, though my smile didn't even last till I reached the foyer.

“Don't get your hopes up, Big Red!” a voice called from the front porch. “It's just me!”

“Oh,” I groaned.

The “me” was not a lovely lady. It was Clay, one of the boys who carries messages and runs errands for the tenants of the Ogden Chamber of Commerce Building. He's gotten to know me well enough to both use my old cowhand nickname and anticipate my disappointment when I find him rather than Diana on our doorstep.

“From the colonel,” he said when I opened the door.

He handed over a sealed envelope. I handed over a nickel.

Clay bit the coin — our neighborhood had picked up a reputation for counterfeits — then gave me a grin when it didn't dent.

“I think it's a new case for you,” he said, nodding at the envelope. “Col. Crowe almost seemed in a good mood.”

“There could be other explanations for that. Maybe he's firing me.”

“Oh, he couldn't do that,” Clay said. “Where would the A.A. Western Detective Agency be without Otto ‘Big Red’ Amlingmeyer?”

It worked. I gave him another nickel.

A minute later I was at Old Red's door upstairs. I knew what I'd see when I opened it, for I could hear him painstakingly sounding out a word.

"Pies...nies. Pies-nies? What the hell's a pies-nies?"

I knocked.

"Yeah, what?" Old Red said.

That's his version of "Why, yes, of course — do come in."

I went in and there he was as I expected: stretched out on his bed with his *McGuffey's* on his chest. For years I think he was too embarrassed by his lack of letters to do anything about it, not to mention scared that he might fail were he to try. But now that he's got his primer — a Christmas gift from Diana Crowe — he's been stuck to it like a tick to a hound's back.

"I have no idea what a pies-nies is either, if that's any comfort," I said.

"It ain't."

Old Red turned the book around and held it out so I could read it.

"Ah," I said. "Sue and Henry are on a *picnic*."

"Oh," my brother grumbled. "Tricky son-of-a-bitch c's."

"Sue is enjoying the cheese," I continued. "Henry is hoping to get lucky."

Old Red shot me a glare and slammed the book shut.

"News?" he said, pointing at the slip of paper I'd taken from the envelope Clay delivered.

“The kind we’ve been waiting for.” I held out the paper. “You wanna take a crack at it?”

“Naw — you read it. Probably take me half the day to get through, and if it really is what we’ve been waitin’ for I’m anxious to get to it.”

“Right.”

This is what I read out.

The Western Union Telegraph Company Incorporated

Received at Union Station, Ogden, Utah

10:14 a.m., February 26, 1894

From Sheridan, Colorado

To A.A. Western Detective Agency, Ogden Chamber of Commerce Building, Room 303

Request services Gustav and Otto Amlingmeyer. Matter sensitive and urgent. Needed at my office Pine Grove Cemetery immediately. Will wire retainer. Please inform of amount required and anticipated time arrival Sheridan.

Dolores Fry

“The colonel wrote us a note on the back,” I said when I was done.

“So I’ve observed,” said Old Red. “Couldn’t make any of it out with your big paws in the way, but I’ll break The Man’s rule against guesses and take a stab at it. Tickets for Sheridan are waitin’ for us at Union Station.”

“You oughta guess more often, Brother. We leave in an hour.”

“Good thing I’m already packed.”

As indeed was I. The whole reason the Double-A’s based in Ogden is the number of rail lines that crisscross there. In theory we can get to any civilized point in the West within a day or two. We’ve just needed more reasons to go. In the three months our agency’s existed, my brother and I have handled a grand total of two paying cases...and one of them “paid” in a year’s worth of free advertising. So we’ve been anxious for more cash-on-the-barrel-head work, and we certainly weren’t going to quibble about it coming from a cemetery.

We were going to speculate, though. Or at least I was.

“What kind of urgent matter could a graveyard have?” I asked Old Red somewhere between Ogden and Sheridan.

He didn’t even look up from his tattered *Harper’s Weekly*. (He was trying to silently sound out one of Doc Watson’s old stories about “The Man” — Sherlock Holmes — though I doubt he got through more than a page the whole journey. He probably just wanted something to look at other than the snow-covered plains and distant mountains streaking past outside. Rail travel doesn’t make him as pukey as it used to, but Old Red can still turn into Old Green-Around-the-Gills if he’s not careful.)

“We’ll see when we get there,” he said.

“Yeah, but what if it’s...you know.”

I leaned in closer and dropped my voice. (Obviously we haven’t graduated to the private sleeper car stage of our career yet, so there were other passengers all around and in fact practically in our laps.)

“Body-snatching?”

“What if it is?” my brother said. “Could be pretty interestin’.”

“‘Could be pretty interestin’”? That’s all you got to say about chasing after moldy old corpses?”

Old Red shrugged, still without looking up. “We don’t know they’d be old and moldy. Might be pretty fresh...though I suppose by the time we get to Sheridan they’d have ripened up some.”

I let the conversation end there. I was the one going green about the gills now. If I went any greener people would start thinking Old Red was sitting next to a cactus.

The next day we walked through the front gates of Pine Grove Cemetery. And darned nice gates they were — black wrought iron rather than the weathered wood of so many rustic Western graveyards (when they have gates at all). They were attached to an actual fence — also a novelty — beyond which were not just the gray headstones one might expect but also a smattering of statuary and sarcophagi spread out over a snowy, pine-dotted acre. The place seemed to be new-ish, for not only were there only fifty or so residents their polished marble monuments gleamed in the mid-morning sun.

Off to the left was a chapel that presumably also housed the cemetery’s offices. As we approached, we could see a peculiar structure stretched out beyond it — a long, low one with glass walls that reminded me of similar buildings we’d seen at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago four months before.

“A greenhouse?” I said. “In a cemetery?”

Old Red shrugged. “Graves need flowers.”

“I suppose. Seems odd to grow ’em right here on the spot, though.”

“Why not? Plenty of well-fertilized dirt around.”

I gazed at my brother in wonderment.

“Well, look at you. Developing a sense of humor at your age.” I shook my head. “I wish I liked it.”

We wiped the slush and mud from our feet and headed into the chapel building. Inside was a lobby with double doors straight ahead, no doubt leading to the chapel itself. There were single doors to the left and right. The one to the left was closed. The one to the right open.

We went right. Beyond the doorway was a desk at which sat what could have been an angel awaiting installation above a nearby grave. She had no wings and was clad in a ruffled white shirtwaist and red skirt rather than flowing robes. But the perfection of her features would have done a master sculptor proud, and when she looked up at us and smiled it could only be described as “heavenly.”

Well, and “petrifying,” for that was the effect it had on my brother. You know how he gets around women of our age. If there’s not detecting to be done — if he can’t treat them like pieces of a puzzle to be solved — the impulse to turn around and run is hard to resist.

I, on the other hand, am inclined to rush in the opposite direction. Which is to say straight toward any lovely young lady.

I swept off my cap and returned the angel’s smile.

“Miss Dolores Fry?” I said hopefully.

“No. Miss Fry’s office is across the hall,” said the young lady, still smiling sweetly. “This is Mr. Swantz’s office.”

“You’ll have to pardon my saying so,” I said, “but you don’t look like a ‘Mr. Swantz.’”

The young lady laughed.

Old Red — only a step into the room when the sight of her froze him — began easing himself out.

“I’m Mr. Swantz’s secretary. Miss Pferdefleisch,” the angel said. “Mr. Swantz works back there.”

She nodded at another door beyond her that I hadn’t noticed. If a grizzly had been sprawled in an armchair there reading the *Denver Post* I wouldn’t have noticed that either. When you were in view of Miss Pferdefleisch, Miss Pferdefleisch *was* your view.

“I see,” I said. “And Mr. Swantz is...?”

“The cemetery superintendent.”

“Ah. And how long have you worked for him?”

Old Red cleared his throat.

“Two months,” Miss Pferdefleisch said.

“Interesting,” I said. “You like it?”

Old Red cleared his throat again, this time so insistently it echoed through the lobby like a rumble of thunder.

“I’m sorry, Miss. I should go,” I said. “It was nice meeting you.”

“Likewise, Mr. ...?”

“Amlingmeyer. *Otto* Amlingmeyer. At your service.”

I gave Miss Pferdefleisch a little bow.

Her smile widened.

“Have a nice day,” she said. “Otto.”

I floated out of the room on a cloud.

“Did you hear that?” I said to Old Red as we headed toward the door to the other office.

“She called me ‘Otto.’”

“You don’t wanna hear what *I’d* call you,” my brother grumbled. ““At your service.’
Feh.”

“Pferdefleisch,” I sighed dreamily. “What a beautiful name.”

That got me another “Feh.”

In the other office we found a nearly identical set-up to the first: a desk, someone seated at it, another doorway at the back of the room. The major difference — aside from the splashes of color supplied here and there by arrangements of fresh flowers — was the someone. Rather than a golden-haired angel sitting primly at her post we found a man with his heavy, worn work shoes propped on the desk and a magazine spread before his face. He peeped over top of the magazine as we came in, creating a curious contrast as he did so.

His face was unshaved, his expression unfriendly.

The magazine was *The American Florist*, and the cover story seemed to be about petunias.

“You the guys Miss Fry’s been waiting for?” he said.

“Indeed we are,” I replied. “Otto and Gustav Amlingmeyer of — ”

“Ogden, Utah,” my brother cut in.

He followed that with a “Shut up” glower pointed over at me.

I’d been about to say “the A.A. Western Detective Agency,” of course. But we had no idea yet what Miss Fry’s “sensitive and urgent” graveyard problem was — or who knew about it.

What can I say? We’d been professional detectives since round about Christmas. You can’t expect me to be perfect at it till at least Easter.

I gave the man a smile. The silent, tight-lipped kind.

“The lady in?” Old Red said.

The man jerked his head at the doorway behind him.

We gave him a moment to add “Please go in, gentlemen” or “Go ahead — she’s back there” or some such.

He just lifted his magazine and went back to reading. Or maybe just admiring the pretty pictures of petunias.

On we went anyway, giving the door a soft knock before opening it.

The inner office wasn’t much different from the outer — desk, flowers, occupant. There was more clutter, though, with boxes stacked up against one wall and an overloaded bookcase against another.

“Excellent. Thank you so much for coming,” said the occupant — our client, Miss Dolores Fry.

She was a little older than us, in her early thirties maybe, with dark, pinned-back hair and even darker, serious, piercing eyes. Her white shirt waist was crisp and simple — no lace or leg of mutton of sleeves for her — with a black necktie around the high collar. While I wouldn’t call her “angelic,” she was certainly attractive in an austere, grave way. Enough so that my skirt-shy brother stumbled as he entered her office, and his first words to her came out low and croaky.

“Our pleasure. How can we help?”

Miss Fry looked at me and gestured at the door. I nodded and pulled it closed.

“There has been a theft, Mr. Amlingmeyer,” Miss Fry said to Old Red. “One that could have dire consequences.”

I gave my brother a look of the *Uh oh...here we go* variety. “The Case of the Missing Stiff” it was.

Old Red was trying to maintain eye contact with the lady and not entirely succeeding.

“I assume it’s got something to do with one of your cemetery’s occupants...?” he mumbled to his boots — and to Miss Fry in those fleeting moments he managed to look up.

“I’m surprised, Mr. Amlingmeyer,” she said coolly. “I thought you don’t make assumptions. And no — it has nothing to do with any of the ‘occupants’ here.”

That jerked Old Red’s head up.

“Oh?” he said.

I was tempted to add “Whew” but restrained myself.

“I do not run Pine Grove Cemetery,” Miss Fry said. “I am its florist.”

“Ah!” I said. “So that’s your greenhouse behind the chapel.”

“Correct. It was built last summer. That’s when I came to Sheridan to work for Mr. Swantz — the person who *does* run Pine Grove. The cemetery is only a few years old and, unlike most of its competitors, isn’t run by a municipality or church or fraternal order. It is a for-profit enterprise...and Mr. Swantz is most enterprising. Visionary, even.”

“And his vision is flowers?” Old Red said. The words came out with no waver to them, and his gaze remained steady.

He was intrigued.

“Flowers are part of his vision, yes,” Miss Fry said. “Colorado winters can be long. For nearly half the year, flowers have to be shipped in from the big commercial operations in the East. Yet the demand for them doesn’t abate during the cold months. If anything, it increases.”

“Cuz folks keep dyin’,” Old Red said.

“Precisely. And getting married and celebrating anniversaries and pitching woo,” said Miss Fry. She had such a businesslike, deadpan way of speaking even “pitching woo” came out like she was citing figures from a sales report.

“Having a variety of fresh, economical, customizable arrangements available year-round will give Pine Grove an advantage over other cemeteries,” she went on. “And we’re only twenty miles from Denver. The appetite for flowers there is ravenous. Not just for bouquets and boutonnieres but for the sort of extravagant sprays and arrangements favored by the more exclusive working women of Market Street. So there’s an opportunity to create a completely separate revenue stream — one that could ultimately prove more lucrative than Pine Grove itself.”

My brother’s eyes widened slightly. Mine widened more than slightly.

Market Street is Denver’s busiest red-light district. The “separate revenue stream” Miss Fry was speaking of so dryly would be flowing from prostitutes. Not just for gussying up their boudoirs themselves, I imagined, but as gifts from their favored customers — the gentlemen who brought a pretense of romance to their calls with flowers and chocolates and jewelry.

Old Red nodded thoughtfully. “That is a vision. So where’s the thievin’ come in?”

Miss Fry sat up a little straighter in her chair. Which isn’t to say she’d been slumping before. I’d have thought she couldn’t go any straighter. She already seemed all straight lines and right angles. But we were getting to the nub of the matter, and she focused her gaze on Old Red with such unblinking intensity she could’ve been a barn owl watching for mice.

“How much do you know about carnations, Mr. Amlingmeyer?” she said.

My brother didn’t hesitate.

“Not a thing, except they’re flowers and folks seem to like ’em.”

“That is an understatement,” said Miss Fry, unfazed. “The general public has gone carnation mad. Just a few years ago there was hardly any market for them at all, and now they’re

surpassing roses in popularity across the country. And the reason for that, Mr. Amlingmeyer, is hybridization. I'm sure you know all about *that*."

"Indeed we do," I said. I needed an opportunity to remind the lady I was still in the room, so I took it. "We were cowboys before we were detectives. And we were farmboys long before that."

Miss Fry acknowledged me with an impatient glance, then focused on Old Red again.

"The American carnation is a fairly recent hybrid — only a few decades old. It is hardier and blooms more often than its European counterpart and has been specially bred to encourage vibrant colors and serrated petals that bring a fullness and complexity to its character. And new varieties are being created all the time. They can prove immensely valuable. Just last year the great horticulturist Benjamin Boulden sold his creation Yankee Adonis to the New Jersey Carnation Company for ten thousand dollars."

I whistled. "That's a lot of cash for a pretty flower."

"For the exclusive right to distribute the seed it will most likely prove a bargain," Miss Fry replied. I didn't even get a glance this time. Her eyes remained locked on Old Red.

"Quite a 'revenue stream' for this Boulden fella," he said. "Or anyone who hybrids up a carnation enough folks might want."

He cocked an eyebrow at the lady.

For the first time since we'd met her, she smiled. It was a small, tight thing — a pucker of the lips rather than a grin.

It was fleeting, too. By the time Miss Fry was speaking again, it was gone.

"I haven't begun working on any varieties of my own yet. My arrangement here with Mr. Swantz is still too new. But I do have a new variety in my greenhouse. Enchantress. It was

created by a mentor of mine. He hopes it will adapt well to growing conditions in the West, so I've been cultivating and observing it here. Just a dozen plants...until recently."

"And now?" my brother said.

"Ten," said Miss Fry.

"Ahh," I said, suppressing a smile of my own. One of relief.

We'd reached the nub of the nub. Stolen flowers rather than stolen bodies.

Old Red raised a finger — a signal for the lady not to go on.

"Show me," he said.

Miss Fry rose from behind her desk, collected a coat from a rack in the corner, and held a hand out toward the door. When we passed through the outer office, the surly fellow there still had his feet on his desk and an *American Florist* in his hands. He didn't bother trying to look busy for the lady.

"Still comparing flower pot prices, Mr. Goggins?" she said.

"Yeah." He lazily flipped a page. "Hard at work."

"Mr. Goggins is my assistant," Miss Fry explained a moment later, as we stepped from the chapel building into the cold. "He's displeased because I collected his key yesterday and have not allowed him into the greenhouse since." She looked over at Old Red. "I wanted to preserve the scene undisturbed for you."

"Good. Wish all our clients was so thoughtful."

The lady's tight smile returned — then left again as quick as before.

"Mr. Goggins is also displeased because Mr. Swantz will be returning from a business trip tomorrow," she said.

"Oh?" said Old Red. "He and Swantz don't get along?"

“They get along all right, on the rare occasions they interact. Mr. Goggins and Mr. Swantz’s secretary, on the other hand...they seem to get along very, very well indeed.”

“Miss Pferdefleisch?” I said.

There must have been a little too much of the pining sigh about it, for Miss Fry shot me a disdainful look.

“Yes. Miss Pferdefleisch. You’ve met?”

“Went to the wrong office when we got here,” Old Red explained. “So Swantz — he’s been outta town, supposedly?”

“Yes. He took his wife to St. Louis. For a conference of the Association of American Cemetery Superintendents.”

“My, what a lucky lady,” I said. “So the folks who run graveyards got themselves a club?”

My brother shrugged. “Why not? Don’t most everybody these days? Shriners, Oddfellows, parties, unions.”

“There’s nothing for detectives yet.” I stroked my chin. “Unless there is and we don’t know it cuz we’ve been blackballed...”

Old Red didn’t laugh, so I did it for him.

“That was just a joke, miss,” I said. “I’m along to provide color, you see.”

“He’s also handy for heavy lifting,” my brother added.

“And to punch anyone needs punching, though I prefer to avoid it.” I rubbed my right hand. “Hard on the knuckles.”

Miss Fry acknowledged the repartee with a poker-faced “Hm.” I’ve met a few women who seem immune to my charms, of course, but rarely one so thoroughly inoculated.

“And here we are,” she said.

We’d arrived at the greenhouse door. It was glass with white latticework, like the rest of the structure.

Miss Fry pulled a key from her coat pocket and brought it toward the knob.

Old Red held up a hand, and she froze.

“When did them flowers disappear?” my brother said.

“Sometime between nine o’clock Monday night, when I locked the greenhouse for the night, and six o’clock the next morning, when I returned.”

My reaction to that must’ve shown on my face.

“Yes. I work long hours,” Miss Fry said. “This enterprise means a lot to me. Plus Sheridan, Colorado, isn’t exactly New York City. I had no date to see the opera.”

“That the only way in and out?” my brother asked, nodding at the door.

“Yes.”

“You didn’t notice no broken glass anywheres?”

“No. And I *would* notice. Immediately. The greenhouse has its own boiler and is strictly temperature controlled. Sixty-four degrees during the day, fifty-three degrees at night. A single broken pane would throw off the whole system and destroy dozens of plants.”

“So who had a key other than you and Goggins?”

A look of prissy satisfaction appeared on Miss Fry’s face, like you’d see on a schoolmarm when a student manages to recite the Gettysburg Address without missing a word. I got the feeling she’d been waiting for one of us to ask that question.

“Only two people,” she said. “Mr. Swantz and William Novy-Lindsay.”

“William Novy-Lindsay?” said Old Red.

“William Novy-Lindsay?” I said, too. Not for any good reason. It just had a bouncy rhythm to it that made it sound fun to say. Try it yourself!

“William Novy-Lindsay,” said Miss Fry. (Even she seemed to like saying it.) “He’s what’s called our ‘commission man’ in floristry. Our salesman. He arranges the deals and deliveries.”

“And he’s still got his key?” my brother asked.

Miss Fry shook her head. “I asked him for it yesterday. As I said before — to keep the greenhouse pristine for you. I collected Mr. Swantz’s key, as well.”

“You said he was out of town till tomorrow.”

“He is.” Miss Fry cocked her head just the teeniest bit to the side. “But Miss Pferdefleisch knows where he keeps it.”

“Ahh,” said Old Red.

The look of schoolmarm approval returned to Miss Fry’s face.

“All right then,” my brother said. “I know you said no one could break in through the glass without you noticin’, but...well...hold on.”

He hunched over and started moving along the side of the greenhouse, swiveling his gaze up and down, up and down.

“It isn’t that he doesn’t believe you, miss,” I said. “He just doesn’t trust anyone’s eyes but his own.”

“I understand. He is thorough. I would have been surprised if he *hadn’t* taken a look for himself.”

“You know, miss, I gotta ask — ,” I began.

“Don’t make me miss nothin’!” Old Red cut in.

He crooked a finger at us without looking our way, motioning for us to follow as he methodically scanned the glass and the ground around it.

Miss Fry and I started walking.

“How’d you hear of us?” I asked the lady. “Your message to the Double-A asked for us specifically, and you don’t seem altogether unfamiliar with our...unique ways.”

“We are only nine miles from Littleton — where you and your brother recently resolved a case on behalf of the *Republican* newspaper. I read an account of that, then did a little further research on you.”

“A little further research”? Meaning maybe you tracked down one of my stories in ‘Smythe’s Frontier Detective’...?”

Miss Fry gave me a small, unenthused nod. “Crimson Claws of the Phantom Puma.”

“Oh,” I said. “They never use *my* titles.”

“Stupid name or not, that story must’ve made *some* kinda impression,” said Old Red, still moving his gaze up and down, up and down as he walked sideways along the greenhouse. “Here we are.”

Miss Fry didn’t shrug — I got the feeling such a gesture would be a little too uncouth for her — but something about the way she lifted her dark but painstakingly plucked eyebrows had the same effect.

“Not only does Sheridan have no opera, it has no detective agency. So when I found myself in need of a detective’s services, I thought of you.”

“Surely Sheridan has ’em some police,” my brother said. “You call them in?”

“No. The town constables are clods. And I would greatly prefer for this matter to be handled privately.”

“Cuz this flower from back east is a secret?”

“Yes.”

“Hm. We’ll come back to that.”

Old Red stopped and dropped to his knees to look at something up close.

“Tracks?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

He gently brushed away a little snow, scowled at something that had been buried underneath, then got up and moved on.

“Jackrabbit,” he said. “Left you some fertilizer if you need it, miss.”

“I find myself amply supplied at the moment, thank you.”

Miss Fry favored me with one of her rare glances in my direction.

I got the feeling I should be offended.

“So...who knew you had you those special flowers out here?” Old Red said as he rounded the corner of the building.

We rounded it with him.

“Mr. Goggins was certainly aware of them. He couldn’t not be. He and I usually work together in the greenhouse all day. I never gave him much detail about their providence, however. Just that they were a new, still-developing variety from the East. It’s the same with William Novy-Lindsay. He saw them, admired them, but hadn’t been told of their history or significance...so far as I’m aware.”

“Who else coulda told him?”

“I can’t say for certain. But you might find it of interest that all mail to the cemetery — including all mail to me — goes through Mr. Swantz’s office.”

“Oh ho,” said Old Red.

He did indeed find that of interest.

I, too, was interested in Mr. Swantz’s office. In the person sitting outside the office door, in particular.

“Miss Pferdefleisch,” I said.

It didn’t have quite the same musicality as “William Novy-Lindsay,” but I still enjoyed saying it — even when the gist of the conversation wasn’t exactly flattering.

Old Red rounded another corner.

“You said Miss Pferdefleisch and Goggins are friendly,” he said. “How about her and William Novy-Lindsay?”

“They are not ‘friendly’ in the same intimate way, so far as I can tell, but they are on good terms. In fact, William Novy-Lindsay helped her secure her current position.”

“A ha,” my brother said.

It’s not something he says often — maybe it feels a bit trite for a detective — but I guess he didn’t want to say “Oh ho” again.

“And how about Miss Pferdefleisch and Mr. Swantz?” he said. “They ‘friendly-intimate,’ ‘on good terms’ or something else?”

“Something else. Something in between the other two.”

“That’s a little hard to get a rope on,” Old Red said. “It’s just us here, and this is all business. You should speak plain.”

“Fine,” said Miss Fry. “Miss Pferdefleisch and Mr. Swantz are not lovers, but he probably wishes they were. There is much ogling. He seems unaware that Miss Pferdefleisch and Mr. Goggins *are* lovers. I only know for certain because I heard them going at it in the vestry

when I came in from the greenhouse the other day. Goggins in particular seemed to be enjoying himself quite a bit.”

My brother’s face was already flushed from the cold, but the lady’s plain speaking took it from splotchy pink to solid crimson.

As old Aesop said, *Be careful what you wish for...*

Old Red tried to say something, but only a gurgle came out. He coughed, then tried again.

“I see. Thank you.”

He carried on to the end of the greenhouse — back to where we’d started — in silence.

“Satisfied?” Miss Fry asked him.

He just grunted.

He went to his knees before the door and leaned in so close to the keyhole you’d have thought his nose was the key. He tilted his head this way and that, even twisting it around to look up at the knob upside down.

He grunted again, then stood up.

“Any sign the lock was tampered with?” Miss Fry asked.

“Nope. A few little scratches on the brass, but that’s what you’d expect around any keyhole.”

Old Red narrowed his eyes and ran a hand over his bushy mustache. Something wasn’t sitting right with him, but I knew better than to ask what. He’s got half a dozen Holmes quotes to choose from when he wants to justify keeping me in the dark. His favorite’s “It is a capital mistake to theorize etc. etc.,” but maybe he’d be in the mood for “You know my methods — apply them.” Which is just a fancy way of saying “Shut up, I’m thinkin’.”

He stepped back and held out a hand toward the door.

The lady pulled out the key and let us in.

“Quickly, please,” she said as we stepped past her. “There is no vestibule.”

By the time she was closing the door firmly behind us, I was already sweating. Sixty-four degrees isn’t exactly balmy, but it can feel that way when you’re dressed for a Colorado winter. It was muggy in the greenhouse, too, with the smell of moist, rich soil hanging heavy on the humid air. The glass walls were too steamed up to allow for a good look in from outside. But now that I was in the greenhouse, I found myself surrounded by what you’d expect.

Flowers. Lots and lots and *lots* of flowers. They stretched on ahead of us in three straight rows on raised beds: one against each wall and the third and thickest in the center. The flowers were all abloom, with great blocks of color as if someone had pulled down a rainbow and broken it into chunks. Crimson here then pink there then purple there, then yellow then blue then white.

“Absolutely beautiful,” I said as I took it all in.

Old Red had turned to get a close look at the plants nearest the door.

“These all healthy here?” he asked. “None of ’em hurt by the cold?”

“I keep some of the sturdiest varieties at this end of the greenhouse,” Miss Fry said. “As long as no one dawdles or leaves the door open, they’re fine.”

My brother gave that a “Hmm” and rubbed at his mustache again. He swiveled his head to look to the side, peering through the steamy glass of the door at a looming, hazy-gray shape sixty yards off.

“Them cemetery gates...they locked at night?”

“Certainly. What is the use of having gates if they’re not?”

“I try not to assume nothin’,” Old Red grumbled.

“Of course,” Miss Fry said. “Would you like to meet the Enchantress?”

My brother looked taken aback for a second — I think he was still rattled from the lady's blunt talk outside — but he quickly got the gist and nodded.

Miss Fry began leading us toward the far end of the greenhouse.

“Duke of Orange. Golden Gate. Bohemian Girl,” she said, nodding at the carnations to her left. She nodded to the right. “Buttercup. Fairy Princess. Fascination.” She nodded to the left again. “General Custer. Tidal Wave. Ben Hur.”

There were no markers for the different varieties. She knew them all by sight.

She stopped and turned to face us.

“And Enchantress,” she said.

She held a hand out toward a cluster of carnations in the center bed. I didn't want to admit it, but I couldn't see any difference between them and the flowers all around them other than the color, and even that didn't strike me as remarkable. The blossoms were a dark-ish pink of the sort you see when you cut into a perfectly ripe watermelon.

“Very pretty,” I said.

Old Red squinted at the plants the lady was showing us.

“What makes *them* so special?” he said.

“They are strong, flower easily and often, and have exquisitely ruffled petals,” Miss Fry explained, unoffended.

My brother's squint turned into a scowl. “And that makes 'em worth ten thousand dollars?”

“Perhaps. Perhaps far more.”

There was a blank spot in among the Enchantresses — a foot-long, foot-wide square where there were no plants and the soil dipped down.

I pointed at it.

“That where the stolen flowers were?” I said.

I’m no Sherlock Holmes or Old Red, so I have to grab my deductions where I can.

“Yes,” Miss Fry said.

Old Red’s scowl got scowlier. He stalked back toward the door, eyes on the floor, then spun around and stomped back.

“You say you left the place just how you found it?” he said, looking up at Miss Fry.

“Didn’t sweep up or nothin’?”

“This is exactly as it was yesterday morning.”

“You missin’ any pots?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Hmm.”

Old Red looked down again. I saw nothing but a wooden floor. It was dirty, of course. How could it not be with big bins of soil all around and us tramping in muck from outside? But there was no particular mess or trail or tracks that I could pick out.

“Who are the other big flower folks around here?” my brother asked.

““Big flower folks’?”

“Your competitors.”

“Oh. There are a dozen florists in the area. In Denver alone you’ve got Pollock & Sons, Navarro Floral, the Montview Boulevard Flower Shop — ”

“I said the *big* flower folks,” Old Red cut in. “The ones with their own greenhouses.”

“Ah. That *is* different. There are only three floral greenhouses that I am aware of in all of Colorado. Mine, Pollock & Sons’, and one belonging to the Frasier Meadows Floral Company in Boulder.”

“Boulder? That’s what? Thirty, forty miles from here?”

“Something like that.”

“And this Pollock & Sons — where’s their greenhouse?”

“On the South Platte River, near Commerce City.”

“And where the heck is that?” my brother snapped.

“A bit northeast of Denver,” Miss Fry replied placidly.

Old Red gave that a grunt.

“And here we are to the southwest...,” he mused.

He fell silent after that, staring off through the blurry glass walls at nothing in particular.

“Your operation here — it’s quite a marvel,” I said to Miss Fry. “Do you think those Frasier Meadows or Pollock & Sons people are aware of it?”

It was a lame question, I knew. Three flower greenhouses in the whole state, and the first two wouldn’t have heard of the third? But I felt the need to lob the lady something easy to at least demonstrate that one of the Amlingmeyer brothers could ask things politely.

“Of course, they’re aware of it,” she said. Her cold tone made it plain she thought it was a lame question, too. “They probably knew what we were building before it was half-way finished.”

“Have they ever tried to interfere in any way? Weed out the competition before it can take root, so to speak?”

That question was more to the lady's liking. For the first time, she looked my way with something like approval on her face.

“Yes, actually. They have already tried to weed me out. Mostly by dropping their prices to such ridiculous lows it's been hard to build a customer base, even with our superior product. But there have been bullying tactics, too. Attempts to scare off our coal and chemical and fertilizer suppliers, for instance. And I'm expecting worse the longer we survive. Business can be brutal back east. But here, I'm finding, it's positively cut-throat.”

Miss Fry looked over at my brother and raised a hand to her own long, slender neck.

“And unfortunately,” she said, “it's been my experience that men are only emboldened when the throat in question is feminine.”

Old Red had come back to the here and now as the lady spoke, and he returned her gaze with a sudden sadness in his eyes — one that said he was thinking of other women and other vulnerable throats.

“That's been my experience, too,” he said.

He blinked away the bad memories and jabbed a pointed finger at the remaining Enchantresses.

“How deep the roots for these things go?”

Before Miss Fry could answer, the greenhouse door swung open, and a short, stout man burst inside. He was clad in a silk top hat and a black overcoat with thick fur trim at the collar and cuffs.

“Are we back in business today, Dolores?” he said with a grin.

He started to close the door behind him.

“Out!” Miss Fry barked.

He froze in the doorway, startled.

“Out, William! Out!”

The man hustled back out as quickly as he’d hustled in. Once he was in the cold again he peered through the glass of the door and raised his gloved hands in a puzzled “What the heck, lady?” sort of way.

I couldn’t blame him. I was wondering the same thing.

“That William Novy-Lindsay?” Old Red said.

“Yes. I kept him out of here yesterday, of course. In order to preserve the scene for you. I knew he’d be coming again today but didn’t expect him till later. I assume you’d like to interview him somewhere in private...? Perhaps my office...?”

My brother mulled that over.

“Supposedly, he don’t know about the Enchantresses, right?” he said. “What they are or that any are missin’?”

Miss Fry nodded. “That’s right. He’s probably noticed them, but he’s unaware of their true value...so far as I know.”

“Let’s play it easy, then. Casual-like.” Old Red gave the lady a look. “Maybe no more shoutin’...?”

Miss Fry nodded again, this time with a small, chagrined smile.

“Best if we don’t have a fancy story to explain me and Otto,” my brother went on. “Simple and true-ish — that’s the way to do it. We’re two fellas from the A.A. Western Detective Agency here to...to...”

He turned to me.

“Provide a security assessment and consult on potential services,” I said. “Given Miss Fry’s concerns about her competitors’ unscrupulous practices.”

“That’ll do.”

“See?” I said to the lady. “I am good for more than lifting heavy objects and occasionally hitting people.”

“Yeah,” Old Red said. “You’re also handy when I need bullsh-...um, flimflam.”

I held a hand out toward the door — and the man who was still peering through it looking perturbed. “Perhaps we shouldn’t keep the gentleman waiting any longer?”

“Right. Miss Fry, I’ll take you up on that offer to use your office. Only I think you oughta stay here and go about your usual flower-tendin’ while we talk to William Novy-Lindsay. In my experience, the presence of a lady — or an employer — gives folks lockjaw when it comes to certain subjects.”

Miss Fry peered at my brother a quizzically. “What ‘certain subjects’ would you need to broach other than his whereabouts two nights ago?”

“Miss,” Old Red said, “one never knows.”

A moment later, introductions were made, and my brother and I escorted a surprised William Novy-Lindsay into the chapel building. We found Goggins still reclining with his feet on the desk in Miss Fry’s outer office, and he lowered his *American Florist* enough to give Novy-Lindsay a smirk.

“William,” he said.

“Goggins,” Novy-Lindsay replied curtly.

The greetings were frostier than the February air outside.

Nothing more was said until we were in Miss Fry's office with the door shut. It was a cramped room, with the only chair being the one at the lady's desk. My brother quickly maneuvered himself into it.

"Well, gentlemen?" Novy-Lindsay said. "I wonder what help I can be to two representatives from a detective agency."

The room was warm, the air in it stale, and Novy-Lindsay began unbuttoning his long, heavy overcoat.

"We're just lookin' for a little information, that's all. Mostly about..."

Old Red's words trailed off, his gaze fixed on something just below and to the left of Novy-Lindsay's round, fleshy face. I was bemused when I saw what it was, for my brother's usually not the type to be struck dumb by fashion.

He was looking at the flower affixed to the lapel of Novy-Lindsay's black frock coat — a carnation with wide, frilly petals as green as spring grass.

Novy-Lindsay noticed the effect it had on Old Red. He bent his head down to give the flower a sniff, then looked up at my brother and smiled.

"Do you like my boutonnière?"

"Unique," my brother said.

"Indeed. You don't see them this shade often."

"I didn't see 'em that shade in the greenhouse at all."

Novy-Lindsay laughed and shook a pudgy finger at Old Red. "Very observant! You're wondering if Miss Fry's own commission man would be so disloyal as to buy his boutonnières from a rival florist! Well, let me assure you I would do no such thing...though Miss Fry certainly isn't fond of dyed carnations."

“Dyed?” I said. “Hold on. Seems to me I’ve read something about dyed green carnations. Something they supposedly mean...”

Novy-Lindsay looked impressed. “You must read widely. Because green-petaled carnations don’t appear in nature, they’re thought of as a symbol of the ascendancy of aesthetics over established organic order.”

I nodded though I had no idea what the heck that meant.

Old Red didn’t bother with the nod. He just looked confounded.

“They were introduced in London not long ago by a popular writer,” Novy-Lindsay continued. “Aesthetes wear them. To show their esteem for his ideas.”

“Oh, now I remember,” I said. “Oscar Wilde, right?”

“That’s right. Are you admirer?”

“Never read him. But if a fella’s gotten himself mentioned in *Harper’s Weekly* or *McClure’s Magazine* the last few years, I’ll have heard of him.”

Novy-Lindsay’s smile went a bit stiff.

“Ah. Of course.” He slapped his hands together and gave them a little rub. “So...what *can* I do for you?”

“Tell us about your competitors, first off,” Old Red said. “Particularly Pollock & Sons and the Somethin’ Meadows Flower Company. Miss Fry tells us they been playin’ a bit rough.”

“That they have. They’ve both been taking losses in the Denver market for months just to undercut us. That’s about as far as it goes for the *Frasier Meadows Floral Company*. They’re all the way up in Boulder, so they don’t have a lot of clients here. Or influence. Not like Pollock & Sons.”

“The lady said someone’s been pushin’ your suppliers around,” my brother said. “That sound like them?”

“Yes. They’re not above threats. Or making good on them. They’d be unwelcoming enough to Miss Fry and her greenhouse under normal circumstances, but I think my employment here is salt in the wound.”

“Why’s that?”

“Miss Fry didn’t tell you?”

Old Red shook his head.

“She hired me away from Pollock & Sons,” Novy-Lindsay explained. “I was their commission man before I became hers. I’m surprised she didn’t mention it. You know — issues of security being the reason for your visit.”

“So you’ve seen their bullyin’ ways up close,” my brother said. “Maybe even been a part of ’em.”

Novy-Lindsay nodded ruefully.

“For five years,” he said. “I do hope you won’t judge me too harshly. It’s my philosophy that one shouldn’t hold a person’s former employers against them. Perhaps you yourselves have had jobs that were, in hindsight, not entirely savory...? I can’t imagine every assignment you take as detectives involves helping old ladies cross the street.”

“You’re right,” I said. “Sometimes they’re old men.”

Old Red told me what he thought of that with a frown.

I shrugged in a not-exactly-apologetic way. Better to make a lousy joke, I’d figured, than admit that Novy-Lindsay was right.

My brother rolled his eyes, then turned back to Novy-Lindsay.

“That why you came to work for the lady? Pollock & Sons’ less-than-savory ways?”

“Partially. But also because Miss Fry offered me a larger percentage to sell superior flowers.” Novy-Lindsay smiled again. “Plus I was won over by her sparkling personality.”

Old Red gave that a neutral “Hmm” and began idly sifting through the journals and papers on Miss Fry’s desk. When he spread out a pile of crinkly onionskin invoices he froze. Beneath the papers were two familiar figures.

Us. Or “us” as imagined by some starving artist in New York, more like.

It was an issue of *Smythe’s Frontier Detective*. To be specific, the one mostly devoted to my story “Buckaroo Sleuths Against the Ripper of the Range!” (My original, apparently uninspiring title: “The Crack in the Lens.”)

Somehow managing not to gag — he cannot stand the musclebound giant he’s typically depicted as in *Smythe’s* — Old Red moved the magazine aside to reveal another underneath. There he and I were again, this time pointing our six-guns at an approaching army of hatchet-wielding Chinese. The title blaring from the cover was “Cowboy Crime-Busters Confront the Chinatown Menace!” (My title: “The Black Dove.” Sigh.)

My brother nonchalantly reburied the magazines under invoices.

“Look,” Novy-Lindsay said, “I know there’s more going on here than you’re saying. The way Miss Fry confiscated my greenhouse key yesterday, then you two here today...? Something happened. I wish you wouldn’t be coy about it.”

“You’ll have to talk to the lady about that,” Old Red said. “All I can do is ask questions. Like what was you doin’ two nights ago?”

The slightest lingering trace of a smile on Novy-Lindsay's face disappeared. My brother wasn't going to say anything about the Enchantress, but he had just confirmed to Novy-Lindsay that he was suspected of something. And the man didn't like it.

"I spent the evening paying calls on customers," he said.

"All night?"

"Until late in the evening, yes. Then I went home."

"Which customers are these that receive gentlemen callers 'late in the evening'?"

The way Old Red asked the question made it clear he already knew the answer.

"The ones the more priggish commission men prefer not to deal with," Novy-Lindsay said. "Which is why they're my bread and butter."

"You're talkin' about the bawdy houses."

"You'd be surprised how un-bawdy some of these houses are." Novy-Lindsay looked me up and down. "Or perhaps you wouldn't be. The ones that are my best customers put up excellent appearances. Quite elegant, quite tasteful. Fresh flowers are very much in demand, and the operators have a discerning eye for them. They're always in search of new beauty and variety to offer their clientele."

"Oh, I bet they are," my brother said. "You given access to the merchandise? As a...gratuity?"

Novy-Lindsay's lip curled with contempt. He'd seemed a pleasant enough fellow up to now, but Old Red's insinuations were pushing him too far.

"There are fine things to eat and drink and amusing people to talk to," he said stiffly. "I enjoy the company...in a purely friendly way."

I held in a snort. What kind of man could hang around bordellos all night and keep things “purely friendly”?

But then I remembered that I knew what kind. At least one.

I looked over at my brother.

He’d cocked his head to give Novy-Lindsay a long, appraising look. Old Red has a protective feeling for prostitutes — had loved one, years before — and the men who exploit and abuse them are, to him, worse than vermin. Whether Novy-Lindsay was such a man he hadn’t yet decided.

“Miss Fry tells me you got Miss Pferdefleisch her job here,” he said.

Novy-Lindsay looked surprised by the sudden change of subject.

“I recommended her for it, yes. Swantz was expanding his operation and needed administrative help, and I knew an intelligent young lady in need of a respectable position. It seemed a perfect solution for them both.”

“How’d you know her?”

“Her family and mine have been close for years.”

“Oh? Where your families from?”

“Wichita,” Novy-Lindsay said flatly. He’d gotten past his surprise and was back to scowling.

“You don’t say. Otto and I are Kansas boys ourselves. Wichita’s quite a town. Which part would I find the Novy-Lindsays and Pferdefleischs in?”

“Riverside,” Novy-Lindsay growled.

“Oh ho.” My brother looked over at me. “Ain’t that one of them high-falutin’ neighborhoods?”

I nodded. “The faluting there is notably elevated.”

Novy-Lindsay jammed a hand under his coat and produced a pocket watch on a silver chain.

“Oh, goodness — is that the time?” he said, giving it a perfunctory glance. “I’m due for lunch with a customer. I really must go.”

“Fine. You go on about your business,” Old Red said with a smirk. “Otto and I have something important to discuss anyway. Ain’t that right, brother?”

I smirked back. “It is indeed.”

Novy-Lindsay stuffed the watch away, gave us a clipped “Good day,” and hustled out.

My smirk disappeared the second the door was closed behind him.

“What’s this ‘something important’ we’re supposed to be discussing?” I said.

My brother held up his left hand, index finger pointed up.

“Just givin’ the gent a head start,” he said, distracted.

He let a moment go by in silence, finger still in the air. Then he lowered his hand and hopped to his feet.

“Come on.”

He rushed past me out the door. I followed him through the outer office — empty now, no Goggins in sight — and across the lobby.

The door to the other office suite was still open, and before we could reach it Novy-Lindsay popped out. He looked even more agitated than when he’d fled from Miss Fry’s office. His pudgy face was flushed, the expression on it a mix of anger and panic.

“Gentlemen,” he muttered, attempting (unsuccessfully) a carefree smile.

He swept past without slowing and left the building.

Old Red carried on into Swantz's outer office. What we found there stopped him dead in his tracks.

At first glance, there was nothing particularly interesting to see. Just Goggins perched insolently on a corner of Miss Pferdefleisch's desk, the young lady gazing at him from her seat. Of course, a man's eye would be quickly drawn to the young lady's lovely features, and that's where the surprise was. For the features weren't so lovely anymore. How could they be when so twisted by rage and revulsion?

When she noticed me and my brother in the doorway, she composed herself, smoothing away the hate, plastering over it with a thin layer of pleasant blankness.

"Can I help you?" she said.

Old Red just stared at her a moment, and I didn't know what to say.

"Well?" said Goggins.

He seemed anxious to be alone with Miss Pferdefleisch again, hate be hanged.

My brother ignored him. He took off his white Stetson — the mannerly thing to do when addressing a proper lady — and held it pressed to his chest.

"No, miss," he said. "We don't need anything from you. You just carry on with your work." He plopped his hat back on and looked at Goggins. "You come with us."

Goggins didn't move. "What do you want?"

"I need you to take a look at something for me."

Goggins sighed, obviously debating whether to accommodate Old Red or tell him what he could do with himself.

"It's for Miss Fry," my brother said. "Won't take a minute, then you'll be on your way."

"All right. Fine."

Goggins pushed himself off the desk and started toward us. He threw a leer at Miss Pferdefleisch over his shoulder.

“Be right back.”

The young lady responded with a smile so dead it belonged in one of the plots outside.

“Go on and grab your hat and coat,” Old Red told Goggins. “We’re headed out to the greenhouse.”

“This have something to do with Miss Fry taking my key?”

“Yeah...something. It’s about wrapped up now.”

Goggins didn’t appreciate the caginess — he gave my brother an irritated glare — but he peeled off to Miss Fry’s rooms and reemerged a moment later in a pea jacket and Brighton cap.

“Who the hell are you two anyway?” he asked.

Old Red looked over at me.

Time for bullshit.

“Security consultants,” I said. “Your boss wants to make sure no one messes with her greenhouse.”

Goggins snorted. “Sounds like a waste of money. The cemetery’s already got a gate and a night watchman. What more do you need for a bunch of flowers?”

There was no hint of nervousness or guilt in the man’s voice. If Goggins was the thief, he was as good at bullshitting as me.

When the three of us stepped outside, Old Red pointed at a figure in the distance: Novy-Lindsay making a hasty escape.

“What’d he want when he come into Swantz’s office a minute ago?”

Goggins rolled his eyes. “That busybody? To gossip.”

“What exactly did he say?”

“Well, I don’t remember *exactly*. Something about news from home. So-and-so in Riverside is in trouble again.”

My brother nodded thoughtfully, then shocked me by leaning over to give Goggins a playful elbow to the ribs.

“Can’t blame a man for wantin’ to gossip with Miss Pferdefleisch,” he said. “Or better yet spark a little gossip, like you.”

Goggins shot Old Red a sidelong look that was half wary, half lascivious. “Oh. So Miss Priss *did* notice something the other day. I was afraid of that. That’s not why she took my key, is it?”

“Naw. Got nothin’ to do with that. She ain’t mad at ya...not like *I’ll* be if you don’t tell me how a fella can get in good with that blonde.”

My brother gave Goggins a wink.

Goggins puffed on his dirty fingernails and buffed them on his lapel. “You just need to be as naturally charming as me.”

“Oh, come on. This ain’t the first time I been to Denver on business, if you know what I mean.” Old Red waggled his eyebrows and clicked his tongue. “Seems to me the young lady looks a mite familiar. I just can’t pin down the particulars. But maybe you did.”

Goggins shook his head and shrugged.

And smiled.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said in that way that actually means “I know *exactly* what you’re talking about.”

“Look, Goggins — Miss Fry don’t know for sure you done any canoodlin’ on the clock,” my brother said. “And that don’t have to change...if you share the wealth.”

He gave Goggins a leer and another eyebrow waggle.

Goggins eyed him a moment, then glanced over at me. There’d already been enough winking and waggling and tongue-clicking for my taste, so I just tried to look all-around smarmy.

“All right. But keep it to yourselves,” Goggins said, dropping his voice low. We’d almost reached the greenhouse, and through the foggy glass we could see Miss Fry fussing over flowers. “You want to get friendly with ‘Miss Pferdefleisch’? Just call her ‘Belle.’ She’ll oblige you.”

And he winked. I guess he figured one more couldn’t hurt.

My brother and I looked at each other. And I’m sure that’s all most folks would’ve seen: two men looking at each other. But there was a message in the way Old Red’s eyes locked onto and held mine — a message I didn’t have to nod or wink or anything to acknowledge. He knew it had been received.

Miss Fry whipped around in surprise as my brother led the three of us into the greenhouse.

“Mr. Amlingmeyer...what’s going on?”

She moved quickly up the aisle to join us near the entrance.

“You know what’s out here better than anyone,” Old Red said to her. “But I reckon Goggins must know it pretty good, too. I’d like him to take a look around, see if he spots anything odd.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?”

“We’re all here watchin’. Don’t see what the harm could be.”

Goggins looked back and forth between Old Red and Miss Fry, frowning. “Am I being accused of something?”

“It’s just part of our security consualizin’,” my brother said. “Please — have a look. Call out if you see something off.”

Miss Fry was blocking our way. Sulking, Goggins stepped around her and moved up the aisle she’d been in, gaze swiveling this way and that. I went with him (having to work a little harder to squeeze my bulk past the lady), nonchalantly admiring the flowers as we headed for the back of the greenhouse.

“How’d you come to hire Goggins anyway? Don’t particularly strike me as a flower lover,” Old Red said to Miss Fry.

Goggins answered for her.

“I’m not. But I know how to grow ’em. Sunflowers, anyway. Crops.” He flapped a hand at the nearest bed of carnations without stopping. “Not this frilly stuff.”

“Good help is hard to find,” I heard Miss Fry whisper to Old Red.

Goggins came to a sudden stop. He was lucky I did, too, for I had more than a foot in height and thirty pounds in weight on him, and if I’d kept going I’d have trampled the man to mulch.

For a second I thought he was going to whip around and tell Miss Fry she could take her “good help” and shove it where flowers don’t grow. Instead he kept staring at one of the beds to the left. After a moment, he moved in close to it, then spun around to inspect the flowers directly across from them in the center bed. Then he went back to the other flowers again.

The first carnations — the ones to my left — were pink.

The second carnations — the ones in the middle of the greenhouse — were, too. They were also the Enchantresses.

“You wanted me to look for something odd?” Goggins said. “Well, this sure is.”

“Yeah?” said Old Red.

Goggins straightened up and turned around, and I pressed back against the flower bed running along the glass so he could look past me to my brother.

“These varieties got mixed up.” Goggins jerked his head to the side, toward the Enchantresses. “Two of these plants were replanted with the Ben Hurs. They’re similar, but not quite the same. It’s not a mistake *I’d* make. Someone around here does need help.”

He shot Miss Fry a smug sneer.

“Thank you, Goggins,” said Old Red. “I’m inclined to agree with you about that, actually.”

He pivoted toward the lady.

“Miss,” he said, and he raised his right arm and pointed at Goggins. “Fire that son of a bitch right now.”

“*What?*” Goggins blurted out.

Miss Fry, on the other hand, seemed only mildly surprised — and mostly, I could somehow tell, by the “son of a bitch” part.

“You want me to dismiss Goggins?” she said.

“That’s what ‘Fire that son of a bitch right now’ means,” Old Red said. “I know you’ve read of what my brother and I can do. And if you believe what you read, you’ll do as I say: Fire that man and have him run out of here this instant and don’t let him back on these grounds unless he’s in a box.”

Goggins took a couple steps forward, moving past me and toward Old Red and the lady.

“Now you hold on just a damn minute...”

“Goggins,” Miss Fry said, “you are dismissed.”

“Otto,” said my brother.

Not that he had to. I’d been waiting for this moment since he’d given me the signal outside.

I grabbed the collar of Goggins’ jacket with one hand and the seat of his trousers with the other, lifted and started walking.

“Whoa!” Goggins cried.

It’s quite a surprise when your pants suddenly go that snug in sensitive places and you find yourself walking without moving your legs.

His toes were still on the ground but his heels were in the air, and he couldn’t get any purchase to stop us as I marched him up the aisle.

“Coming through,” I said.

Old Red and Miss Fry fled before us. The lady ducked to the side once she was out of the aisle. My brother carried on all the way to the door, which he helpfully opened for me.

I hustled Goggins through it, then gave him a shove that sent him staggering on several more steps. He pinwheeled his arms, fighting for balance in the snow. The second he was steady, he whirled around and charged back toward me.

“You can’t do this to me,” he snarled.

I would’ve just given him another shove, this time to the chest, but he clenched a fist as he got within swinging range.

I punched him in the face.

Goggins took a step in reverse, knees wobbling, then stiffened and pitched backward into the snow.

I shook my hand and flexed my fingers.

“Ouch,” I said, rubbing the knuckles. “Stings.”

After Goggins lay still a moment, not even bothering to let out an “Ouch” of his own, I stepped closer and looked down at him.

His nose was bloody, his eyes closed.

“Oh. Shoot,” I said. “I swear I didn’t punch him that hard. I wanted him to leave.”

I tapped the bottom of one of his shoes with the toe of one of mine.

“Goggins...you dead?”

His eyelids fluttered, and he let out a groan.

“Ah. Good,” I said. “Long as you’re down there you might wanna put some of that snow on your nose. It’ll keep the swelling down.”

He didn’t respond but he did keep groaning, so at least I knew he wasn’t unconscious again.

“So,” I heard Miss Fry say, “Goggins moved the Enchantresses so he could sneak them out later somehow.”

I turned around to find both the lady and my brother just outside the now-closed greenhouse door. Miss Fry was buttoning up her coat, which she must’ve grabbed as she rushed out to see the show.

“When you told him to look for anything out of place in the greenhouse, he assumed you’d figured it out,” she went on. “So he’d have to bluff his way out of trouble by feigning

ignorance and leading you straight to the missing flowers. But you and your brother saw right through him. Right?”

“Nope,” Old Red said.

Miss Fry raised her eyebrows. “Nope?”

My brother shook his head. “*Nope*. I told you to fire Goggins because he’s been takin’ advantage of Miss Pferdefleisch.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not entirely sure I should explain. ‘Good help is hard to find,’ you say. Well...how would you rate Miss Pferdefleisch? As a secretary, I mean?”

“She seems quite capable, actually. The two women Mr. Swantz tried before her hardly lasted a week each. And it’s not just that Mr. Swantz, like most men, finds her...appealing. The bills are getting paid faster and things running more smoothly all around. I’d have no complaints at all if I she and Goggins weren’t — ”

“Don’t hold that against her,” Old Red snapped.

“But what exactly are you suggesting?” Miss Fry pressed. “Blackmail? How could that be? William Novy-Lindsay vouched for her. Said she was a respectable young lady. An old family friend from Wichita.”

My brother scowled and shook his head.

“An ‘old family friend from Wichita’ who wouldn’t even know which part of town Novy-Lindsay’s from ’less he busts into her office and works it into conversation quick cuz I’m on his heels with questions. Naw. They got to know each other around here. At one of your customer’s places. One, unfortunately, that Goggins or someone he knows has been to. All the same, what Novy-Lindsay said about Miss Pferdefleisch when he recommended her — that she

was an intelligent young woman in desperate need of a good job — was true. And I hope you'll keep that in mind when weighin' what to do about it.”

Miss Fry remained utterly still as she listened. When Old Red was done, she nodded, then took a few steps from the greenhouse and knelt not far from the sprawled, moaning Goggins. She swept up handfuls of snow, pressed them together, methodically squeezed and smoothed them, then rose and threw a perfect snowball at Goggins' face.

She had good aim, too. It hit right on the nose. But I'm pretty sure she wasn't trying to help keep the swelling down.

Goggins sat up spluttering.

“Ow,” he said, wiping away bloody snow.

He looked around, blinking in confusion. When his eyes focused on the three of us glaring down at him, it all came back to him.

“You can't do this to me,” he said.

I moved toward him. “I don't know why you keep saying that when plainly it's been done. Unless you need me to do my part again...?”

Goggins scrambled to his feet and began a woozy retreat.

“I'll send your final wages to your apartment,” Miss Fry said. “There is no need for you to return. Ever.”

Goggins replied with the usual names resentful man cast at resolute women. But he kept going. Soon he'd be staggering through the gates bloodied, disheveled, and covered with slush and mud.

“I hope no one's passing by when he leaves,” I said. “Folks are gonna think the cemetery just lost a customer.”

Old Red ignored me, as Old Red will.

Miss Fry ignored me, too.

“I think it was awful kind of William Novy-Lindsay to help Miss Pferdefleisch land herself a decent job,” my brother said to her. “You see it the same way?”

“Don’t worry. I won’t say anything. I’m sympathetic to women at the mercy of merciless men.”

My brother nodded. “I do believe you are. There’s one thing I don’t understand about you, though.”

Miss Fry had been watching Goggins go, but now she turned toward Old Red with a half-reluctant, half-amused expression on her face. She seemed to know exactly what he was about to say.

“And what is that?”

“Why’d you do it?” my brother said.

The lady gave him a cool, wry smile — the kind that both conceded and challenged.

“Why did I do what?”

“You’re worried about a little chill gettin’ into your greenhouse every time the door opens,” Old Red said. “Yet you were tryin’ to tell me someone snuck in, dug out two flowers, put ’em in pots — which they would’ve had to bring along themselves, since you said none of yours was missin’ — carried ’em back out through the cemetery gates without bein’ seen by the night watchman — who Goggins told me about, not you — and took ’em to either the north side of Denver or all the way to Boulder. Those bein’ where the only other floral greenhouses in the state are, and neither of ’em close. So your precious, delicate flowers would’ve been out of the ground on a freezin’ night how many hours? Stolen by some fool who knew they were valuable,

could find them in the greenhouse — where you don't use any markers for your different varieties, I noticed — but *didn't* know cartin' 'em around all night in the cold would kill 'em? Naw. Once I put all that together, I couldn't believe it. And I couldn't believe *you'd* believe it. Same as I couldn't believe that Goggins — who you'd been so anxious to keep out of the greenhouse even though the damage was supposedly done — would spot where those moved Enchantresses was but you wouldn't. Which all adds up to one thing.”

Miss Fry's amused expression didn't change all through my brother's little speech. The challenge remained. So he set the deducifying aside and just said it.

“*You* moved those flowers. As an excuse to bring us here. Test us. Which brings me back around to the only question I got left.” Old Red threw up his hands. “Why?”

I raised a finger and cleared my throat. “Before you answer that, Miss Fry, I would like to point out that just because there was no crime doesn't mean we don't get paid.”

My brother gave me a glare for daring to interrupt the explanations.

I shrugged. “You know Col. Crowe would want one of us to say it.”

“Don't worry, Big Red,” Miss Fry said to me. “As Old Red said, this was a test. One you've passed. But even if you hadn't, I fully intended to pay for it.”

Hearing the lady use our nicknames took me aback a moment. Then I remembered the magazines my brother had uncovered on her desk. Magazines with my stories about our detecting.

Miss Fry knew more about the Amlingmeyer brothers than she'd let on.

“I am an excellent horticulturist,” she said. “One of the best in the country, I like to think. Yet I've always been dependent upon — one might even say at the mercy of — men. As with cooking, flowers are considered women's business until it is indeed a business. Then only men

are allowed to excel. It made advancement in the East nearly impossible. I would have to resign myself to being some less-talented individual's assistant or even secretary. And there was always pressure to be...other things to such men. Things I did not care to be. You understand?"

"Of course," I said.

Old Red just gave a hoarse grunt.

"So I came west and, thanks to introductions from one of my less-presumptuous patrons, partnered with Mr. Swantz," Miss Fry continued. "So far, he has been a true partner. A true gentleman. But I've learned not to assume such would be the case forever. And the competition here is fierce. No — no one has stolen any valuable varieties from me. No one has sabotaged my greenhouse or pressured me to...make unappetizing concessions. Yet. I consider it just a matter of time before one or all of these things happen. Unless I head it off."

"How does settin' me and my brother on a wild goose chase head off anything?" Old Red said.

"It confirmed that the stories I'd read about you were true. They'd seemed so fanciful. So silly even."

"Hey now," I said.

Miss Fry gave no indication she heard me.

"But what I saw in them, what intrigued me about them, appears to be very real: an unpolished and unprepossessing yet brilliant, tough and tenacious man. An unattached man, as well. One more or less my age."

My brother blinked. "Uhh...what?"

Usually he prides himself on deducing out what'll happen before it actually does. But he clearly hadn't calculated on anything like this.

“Do you know how you create a variety like Enchantress, Old Red?” the lady said.

She didn't wait for an answer. Which was wise. The way my brother's jaw was starting to drop even another “Uhh...what?” seemed beyond him.

“You carefully select two flowers of the same species but with unique traits. The colors, the heights, the blooms — all different. Perhaps quite so. And through cross-pollination you can blend those traits. Create something new and beautiful and strong. And...well...it doesn't just apply to flowers. You see?”

As Miss Fry spoke, Old Red had managed to get his mouth closed. He now appeared to have no intention of ever opening it again.

“I see,” I said. “You're gonna have to spell it out plain for my brother, though. Sherlock Holmes ain't much help when it comes to this kinda thing.”

Miss Fry nodded. “I understand. Old Red — would you care to join me in the greenhouse again? So that we may speak in private?”

My brother just widened his eyes.

“Ain't polite to keep a lady waiting,” I said, shooing him away.

Still he didn't move.

“Go on!” I said. “Just think of it as another mystery to solve.”

Slowly, reluctantly, Old Red walked back to the greenhouse with Miss Fry. Once they were inside, I gave them more privacy by turning my back and looking out at the cemetery gates and the snowy-peaked mountains far beyond.

The real mystery to me was why Miss Fry had picked Old Red for cross-pollination. I was just as unattached as him, and not nearly so unpolished and unprepossessing. It must have been the difference in our ages...

I'd only been ruminating on this a few seconds when I heard the greenhouse door fly open so fast it was a wonder the glass didn't shatter.

"Thanks all the same!" Old Red called out. "You know where to send the money!"

He scurried past me, headed for the gates.

"Come on come on come on come on," he muttered.

I jogged after him. "So? What did she say?"

"I...I...I think she was proposin'."

"Ah. So I assume we're rushing off to find a minister?"

"Oh, shut up."

My brother glanced back at the greenhouse. Miss Fry must have stepped outside, because he sped up from a scurry to a sprint.

The lady was as good as her word, though. Our fee beat us back to Ogden, wired to the offices of the A.A. Western Detective Agency. A telegram came with it, and I brought it up to Old Red after Clay the messenger boy ran it over to the boarding house courtesy of Col. Crowe. My brother had holed up in his room — the best place to avoid my merciless ribbing — and he opened the door with obvious reluctance.

"Yeah?"

"Message from Sheridan," I said, giving the telegram a little flutter.

Old Red's face flushed.

"Well? What's it say?"

I held out the slip of paper. "I think you should figure that out yourself. Good way to practice your reading. Plus I think it's about time you learned how to get the message when a

woman's trying to send you one. Miss Fry might've gone about it a strange way, but you ain't exactly run of the mill yourself, are you?"

My brother scowled at me a moment, then snatched away the telegram and shut the door. He hasn't said so yet, but I'm sure he was able to work out the words. There were only six.

TELL OLD RED OFFER STILL STANDS.

It wouldn't be like my brother, but who knows? Maybe one day he'll decide to go back to that greenhouse at the Pine Grove Cemetery. With flowers.

O.A. Amlingmeyer

Ogden, Utah

February 28, 1894