

Hearts and Flowers

a Short Story



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By Margo Hoornstra

Homicide detectives Jake Martin and Sean Crawford pulled up to the posh Galleria Restaurant. The officer who took the original call had followed protocol. The crime scene was cordoned off with the bright yellow tape the public had come to recognize, and usually respect. Only a few curious bystanders stood outside its boundary.

“Suspicious death of a Mr. Charles Bentley. That’s all we have?” Martin shut off the engine and put the gear shift in park.

“That’s it.” Crawford scanned a document on the onboard computer. “The EMTs who responded to the scene called it suspicious. Said it was a choking. The uniforms got a driver’s license off the victim. Dispatch is running the name and prints.”

“What’s was so suspicious about someone choking at a restaurant?”

“One of the EMTs happened to be a flower buff. She recognized Hemlock petals—lethal amount—on the table. Remnants are at the lab now. She said the stuff grows wild if you know what to look for.”

“Apparently somebody made an effort to do just that.”

“I actually came here once.” Crawford made the remark as they got out and crossed the sidewalk. “My wife dragged me. Not being married, you wouldn’t know about that.”

“Probably not.”

“Very fancy.”

Martin ducked under the crime tape. “How so?”

Crawford was right behind him. “Menu in French, lemon slices in the water, little flowers in the salad.”

“Sounds yummy.”

“Apparently the clientele likes it.”

“Not all of them.” Martin deadpanned the comment before he pushed through the big double doors to the restaurant.

“You must do something!” A tuxedo clad man with a Charlie Chaplin mustache rushed up and grabbed Martin’s sleeve. “My reputation! I will be ruined!”

Martin pulled his arm free to reach for the notebook he always carried in his breast pocket.

“What happened?”

“Monsieur Bentley was one of my better customers.” He continued in an accent that wasn’t quite authentic. “Not a week went by that he didn’t join us for dinner at least once, maybe twice.”

Martin had his pen poised. The man still hadn’t answered his question. He shuffled a couple of pages. *Victim a regular.*

“Your name, Sir?” He flipped back to page one.

“I am Henri DuBois.” His accent in full swing, he gave a short bow. “I own La Galleria.”

Crawford coughed slightly. Martin ignored him. “Again, what happened?”

“Our guest had ordered the specialty of the house—Steak Merlot Du Bois, an excellent choice!”

“And?”

“A few moments into his meal, he grabbed at his throat and . . . gone!” He indicated the demise with an elaborate flick of his hand, then lowered his voice. “My enemies did this!”

“You have enemies, Mr. DuBois?”

Warming to his own theatrics, he spread his arms with a flourish. “Every great artist has enemies!”

“Artist?” Martin didn’t look up.

“A culinary artist.” His tone suggested he didn’t appreciate having to explain himself. “My competitors are jealous. They will do anything to ruin me!”

Crawford stepped forward. “Can you provide the names of these . . . uh, competitors of yours?”

“One needs to look no further than the phonebook. Pick any one.” Again the arms flourished in a huge circle.

“I see.” Martin nodded.

Though he doubted that kind of ‘competition’ could lead to murder, he had enough years in the business to know people had been done in for less. That didn’t mean he was going to check out every restaurant in the city. Not yet, anyway.

Besides a few employees, only two people who had been identified as the victim’s dining companions remained in the restaurant. They were huddled together at a far table. Martin

recognized local socialite Rita Barnes. The man, he couldn't identify. Probably her boyfriend judging by the way his arms were wrapped around her as she sobbed into his shoulder.

"Let's see what they have to say." Leaving his partner to the over the top restaurant owner, Martin walked toward them.

"Your name, sir?" He posed the question after introducing himself.

"Harvey Nelson. I'm Ms. Barnes's financial advisor."

Martin was careful to keep the surprised look from his face. *Awfully cozy for business associates.*

"You knew the victim?"

"I did." The reply was terse.

Rita Barnes raised her head. "Charles and I were going to be married."

Martin noticed the other man's jaw tighten.

She pushed upright. Her chin quivered uncontrollably and she took a breath. "Next month."

"Ms. Barnes is too distraught to talk with you right now." Nelson lowered his head to bring his face even with hers. "Rita, I'm going to speak with the Detective for a moment." He handed her a handkerchief he'd pulled from his pants pocket then patted her hand. "Please." He stood to lead Martin across the room, out of earshot. "I recently made a complaint to your Department." He spoke in a hushed voice. "I suspected Bentley was up to no good. He was just a little too smooth, if you know what I mean."

Martin nodded. "What did they tell you?"

The man stiffened. "That nothing could be done without more evidence. That my just thinking he was after her money wasn't breaking any laws. The whole thing was a total waste of my time."

"Have you told Ms. Barnes about your suspicions?"

"Of course not! Her personal affairs are none of my business." He seemed to choke before he went on. "I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't say anything either. If she found out . . ."

"You'd stand to lose a very lucrative client."

Her business associate's lips pursed in obvious distaste. "I was going to say it would hurt her deeply. I only have her best interests at heart." He cast a quick look the woman's way. "She wanted Bentley put on her bank accounts. I had managed to talk her out of doing that—until today. The necessary papers are in my brief case. That was why I met them here tonight."

"How long had they . . . uh, dated?"

"About six months. Their goings on made all the society columns." He stopped speaking and considered Martin for a moment. "You don't read those, do you?"

Martin shook his head. "Must've missed it."

"Well, she certainly wined and dined him in style. It bordered on disgraceful." Unmistakable bitterness tinged his voice.

"I take it you didn't care for Mr. Bentley?"

"I couldn't stand the man!"

"You have any interest in flowers?"

Brows raised, Nelson's head reared back. "Why would you ask that?"

"Just wondered."

Telling Nelson not to leave the premises just yet, he moved on to talk to the staff and noticed with more than a little irritation that they all sat together at a back table. *That should make for some valuable recollections.* Interrogation 101—keep any possible witnesses separate. He shrugged again. Nothing he could do about it now. Flipping to a clean page in his notebook, he approached their table. Those who had been in the dining room at the time of the incident gave much the same account of events as the restaurant owner, though not as dramatic. Then Martin got to the next witness.

"I was taking out the trash." Eddie, the dishwasher lounged in a chair by the wall. "They were arguing in the back hall. One guy—not the dead guy, the other one—he said 'I'll see you dead first!' Guess he meant it." Eyes wide, the kid smiled.

Martin didn't smile back. "What exactly do you mean by 'the other one'?"

"The guy that was at the table with them." He spoke slowly as if the cop should have figured that one out for himself. "I had just brought a load of glasses out front when he croaked. He was struggling pretty hard, trying to breathe and all. The lady started to scream, but, the other guy; he just kinda stood there, watching him."

Martin just nodded. *To think this was their only real witness.* “Is anyone else here?”

“Just Sally.” He pointed toward the back of the kitchen. “She works set up.”

Sally Wells turned out to be a small blond in a chef’s hat that didn’t seem to fit right.

“I just started working here today.” She looked like she’d been crying.

Understandable. Must be tough to lose a customer—literally—your first night on the job.

“Did you know the victim?” Martin’s cop gut prompted that one.

She lowered her gaze. “No...of course not.” She managed to answer between sniffles then brought a tissue to her nose with the long, painted nails of a professional manicure. “I just heard the commotion.” She dabbed at her eyes. “Do they know what . . . how it happened? Eddie said he choked on a piece of meat. Is that right?”

“Something like that.”

Her attention was focused on the floor. “What will they do with the body?”

“Depends if next of kin can be found.” Martin decided to play a hunch. “Sometimes families don’t want anything to do with it. In cases like that, the body ends up being disposed of by the state.”

Head still lowered, she seemed to cringe at that bleak scenario.

“That’s sad.” Face lifted, she croaked out the whisper as new tears welled.

“It happens.”

“It’s just so sad.” That was all she got out before tears got the better of her and she launched into a pitiful crying jag. Her shoulders heaved as she buried her face in her hands.

Well, crap. He so hated the crying. Arms at his sides, he stood there like an idiot. *A helpless idiot.* In need of a diversion, he glanced through his notes so far. Two hysterical women, a jealous—wanna be—lover and some imaginary enemies. *Quite a suspect list. It sure was going to be a long night.*

Not only that, the woman still hadn’t stopped crying.

“Take it easy.” He made his voice sound gentle and wished now he’d stayed with ‘Henri’. Let Crawford deal with the rest of it. Notebook in one hand, he took an awkward grip on her arm

and led Sally out to the dining room where Crawford questioned a now more composed Rita Barnes. Nelson was a tolerable distance away taking it all in.

Martin had Sally Wells almost to a nearby table, when he sensed a sudden shift in her body language. Just like that she went from pliant to tense. *Women. He'd never understand them.*

Oddly grateful when a newly arrived female officer took over for him, temporarily, he returned to talk with Harvey Nelson. "You and Mr. Bentley had a disagreement tonight?"

"We did." Back straight, his chin lifted in defiance. "I'm not proud my temper got the better of me. He was so arrogant."

Just then a uniform called Martin over to the entrance. "The ID the victim had on him was phony. Turns out there is a real Charles Bentley. This one's alive and owns a real estate company. But, we lucked out. The picture of our Mr. Bentley did produce a match and some aka information." He glanced at the paper in his hand. "His real name was Carl Bendix. He had quite a record. Bank account cons. Credit card scams. The grab and go kind of stuff."

Martin had to admit, Harvey Nelson was a pretty good judge of character. Too late, he realized, the man was also right behind him.

"I told you!" Chin still elevated, he sniffed. "The man was bad news! You people never listen!"

"That still doesn't tell us who killed him. All we have now is a possible motive." Martin stared at Harvey Nelson as the color drained from his face. For the first time, the man seemed to grasp the severity of the situation and his possible role in it.

"Who's going to tell Rita. . .Ms. Barnes?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I think it's best if she hears it from me."

Martin nodded. "Go ahead." *At least they could give him that.*

The patrol officer continued with his report after Nelson stalked away. "He worked with an accomplice until about six months ago. Then he seemed to strike out on his own. Seems odd to change an MO after so long. Anyway, they're sending over a picture of the accomplice."

Martin stuffed the notebook back in his pocket as he headed over toward Sally Wells. "I bet I know just what she looks like."

Turned out it wasn't going to be such a long night after all.