

Fiddle Game

by Richard A. Thompson

Chapter One Waiting for the Dough

On the day of the first killing, it rained. Not an easy rain, but the kind of endless, pounding deluge that makes people wonder if they really did throw out that old boat catalog, and if not, whether it listed any arks. Personally, I gave up looking for arks a long time ago, the wooden ones or any other kind. I like the rain. Agnes, my secretary, says that's just perversity, liking anything that puts other people in a bad mood, but she isn't always right. Not always. On that particular wet day in 1996, nobody was right.

I looked out the streaked glass of my single storefront window, past the neon sign that says "24-Hour Service" backwards, and assessed the prospects of a flash flood.

You can tell a lot about a city by what's in its old, core downtown. Across the street from me is an old time resident hotel, long ago gone to seed. There used to be a nightclub on the ground floor under it, but that's been boarded up and closed for longer than anybody remembers. Farther down is a place called Pawn USA, a hole-in-the wall deli, and a pornographic book store. They've all been around long enough to be landmarks. The pawn shop, run by a sometime friend of mine named Nickel Pete Carchetti, just expanded and got its trendy new name, which I suspect came from the title of a textbook on modern economics. Farther down the street lie a Dunn Brothers coffee shop, an upscale tattoo parlor, and a manicure emporium called Big City Nails. Kitty-corner across from me stands the newly renovated Court House, taking up a whole square block, and behind it, connected to it by tunnel, is the County Jail. The long fingernails, tribal markings, and chi-chi coffee are current hot-ticket items, but I don't expect them to last. The trendy shops come and go. Here in St. Paul, Minnesota, the capitol of Midwest niceness, the only really solid growth industries we have are government and crime.

Strangely enough, the cops don't have a building in downtown proper, merely one on the fringe of it, though they definitely have a street presence. Maybe that's the way it should be, since they are really just the gatekeepers to the criminal justice system. And if they are the gatekeepers, then I'm the man in the tollbooth. My name is Herman Jackson, and I'm a bail bondsman.

Behind me, Agnes sat at her PC and made keys clatter sporadically. I could tell by the rhythm that it wasn't regular work, but since she is my chief office organizer, accountant, PR expert, and generally indispensable confidant, as well as my secretary, she's entitled to spend her time as she sees fit. The

computer was making funny noises, like tinny fanfare or electronic oohs and aahs, and occasionally she would make an "ooh" of her own.

"Video games, pornography, or the stock market?" I asked, without turning around.

"Stocks. I don't do games." She said nothing about porn, I noticed. "You should look at this, Herman. Amtech-dot-com is down to sixteen and a half today. It's a fluke, has to be."

"The market is reacting to news of an outbreak of moldy sowbellies in Katmandu." Which made exactly as much sense as most of what I hear out of market analysts.

"Seriously, at that price, you could make a killing. Double your money in a couple months, tops. You could afford to take a little flier like that now and then, you know. On your latest profit-and-loss sheet, you showed..."

"I don't gamble, Aggie."

"You gamble on pool."

"That's not gambling, that's social intercourse. I never bet more than a hundred on a game, and I never try a double-back off the side rail if I've had more than two drinks." And if that isn't prudence and self-discipline, I don't know the stuff. And I do. I paid full price for it, and now it's my biggest asset.

"The market's not really gambling, either," she said. "It's more like reversible bidding at a garage sale. After all the hype blows away, there's always a real piece of merchandise of some kind there."

"Except when there isn't. How much did you lose on Enron? Isn't that why you're still driving to work in your beat-up Toyota instead of your new Lexus?"

"That's not fair, Herman. People a lot smarter than me got burned in that scam."

"And people smarter yet didn't play."

"Like you? Like that time you got arrested for somebody else's homicide and had to liquidate your business in Detroit and run off to the boonies?"

It was her ultimate weapon in any argument, and I had no defense for it. The incident she referred to was back in my high-roller days, when my ship really had come in, but I was dumb enough to torpedo it at the dock. Sometimes I let myself think those days might come back, but I don't really believe it. There aren't any big scores in the bonding business. Not usually, anyway. What you see up front is what you get, and sometimes you don't even get that. And in any case, the great god Odz doesn't forgive that kind of stupidity. St. Paul is my Elba, and if a delegation of leaderless Frenchmen came one day to rescue me from it, I would run from them in terror.

"Low blow, Aggie. I wasn't as smart then, in a lot of ways, and I admit it."

"You want a cookie for 'fessing up like a good boy?"

"You want to answer that ringing thing? It might be the phone."

She picked up the phone, and the pulse of the day's real business began.

Most of my business comes to me by phone, or at least the first contact does. I get a call from a defense lawyer or a PD, with the daily list of souls in bondage who want to buy a ticket to freedom. The logistics of paper and money flow are worked out, and the wheels begin to turn. I'm not allowed to start the process by approaching them, in the courtroom or the jail. It's sort of like ambulance chasing for a lawyer: not actually illegal, but sudden death to a professional reputation. Instead, I imitate Mohammed and wait for the accused mountians to come to me. For most customers, it's a standard proposition: ten percent non-refundable fee and some kind of negotiable security for the rest. If you think about it, it's a crummy deal for the client. He's paying a hell of a wad of cash for a short burst of liberty that he's probably going to lose anyhow, and if he jumps bail, or even appears to, he loses the security, to boot. But of course, they're all going to be acquitted, so they don't worry about that. Meanwhile, they wait for the authorities or the gods or the odds to come around, and the prospect of a short time in jail is horrifying. The prospect of a much longer time in prison doesn't seem to bother them so much. People have no grasp of time. All they can deal with is never and forever. They don't handle cause and effect real well, either.

If the first call is from a lawyer I know, sometimes we work out some other terms. It's a quid-pro-quo thing. I give up a little quid, in the form of reduced or eliminated security for a trustworthy customer, and the lawyer gives me some quo in the form of telling me what his clients are really like, including which ones are going to run like rabbits the minute the cuffs are off. I could do away with this little part of the whole game, treat everybody the same, but I like the action. And that's not gambling, either.

Most of the time, I never see the actual client. But I do see a regular parade of siblings, parents, friends, lovers, business partners, and significant-whatevers, come to do the dirty job of bargaining for somebody else's freedom. They range from sensible to pathetic, and they bring me enough stories to make an endless soap opera script and put scar tissue on my soul.

While Agnes talked on the phone, doing what I always think of as making book, I watched the little wisp of a blonde cross the street in the rain and head for my door. She had a dark raincoat that hung like a crumpled trash bag, shoes that were too low for the wet streets, and one of those clear plastic rain-bonnet things on her head. She carried a violin case as if it were her first born child, pressed against her bosom, and she walked with a limp. *Nice touch*, I thought. In a business that's full of Oscar-quality performances, the limp was a perfect bit of understatement. I made a mental note not to ask her how she got it. Under the bonnet, she had high cheekbones, big doe eyes, and a prominent, sharpish nose and chin, bracketing a thin-lipped mouth. It was very dramatic and oddly attractive. Sondra Locke clutching her bundle of secret hurt and rage.

Even hunched up against the rain, she didn't have much in the way of shoulders, but she damn sure had a chip on at least

one of them. I made a move to push the door open for her, but she snatched it angrily away from me, stomped in as well as one can stomp with a game leg, and shook off her bonnet at me. I was surprised. Usually, people get to know me a bit better before they're that hostile.

"Can we help you, miss...?"

Aggie rolled her eyes. The orphan of the storm glared with hers.

"Ms. Amy Cox," she said, drenching the title in acid. I don't know how I could have been so politically incorrect. I must have still been thinking about Ms. Locke.

"What can we do for you, Ms. Cox?"

"I'm here to let you suck my blood. Probably all of it."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I think you have him confused with your lawyer, sweetheart," said Agnes. I've never figured out how she can get away with "sweetheart," when I can't even drop an occasional "miss," but she can.

"I don't have anybody or anything confused." She tried out another glare. When nobody took the bait, she relaxed a little and did a half-hearted shrug. "But I suppose you didn't invent the system, did you? I take it nobody called? About my brother?"

I gave her my best David Carradine look. The grasshopper, waiting to be enlightened.

"I have to get a bail bond for my brother, Jimmy."

Agnes turned back to her PC and began scrolling through the list of the day's happy candidates. "Got him," she said, after a few seconds. "James W. Cox, right? Double GTA, five counts of MPD, handful of moving traffic violations. Bail is eighteen K."

GTA is grand theft, auto, and MPD is malicious property damage, better known as vandalism. Two counts of GTA told me he had gotten away at least once, since it's unusual that a suspect has time to steal a second car while he's in the middle of a high speed chase with the first one. Even so, and even with the vandalism rolled in, the bail seemed high. Had he pissed off the judge? I pictured some dopey kid, hauled in for a crash-and-burn spree, maybe still lit up a bit, and stupid enough to mouth off to hizzoner. Not that I cared about any of that, except as a way of guessing how big a flight risk this guy was. So far, he sounded high-to-certain.

"Is your brother a young person?" I said. "A little on the wild side, maybe? Sometimes does little booze, a little drugs, a joyride with some bad..."

"He's not like that."

Of course he's not. Your own brother never is. "What is he like, exactly?"

"He's a neo-Luddite."

That even stopped Agnes. I shifted to something easier.

"Is your brother underage?"

"I wish." She plopped down into my best 1955 neo-motel chair, not bothering to take her coat off. "If he were still a

kid, I could hope he might grow out of it. But he's pushing thirty-two now, and he's, well..."

"Crazy," said Agnes, ever eager to help out.

"Fanatical is more like it, I think. He's not really violent, at least not towards people. He thinks modern society is insane, and he imagines he's making some kind of big, heroic statement. It's his own term, neo-Luddite. The first Luddites were a bunch of people in the early eighteen hundreds who thought the Industrial Revolution was ruining the world, so they went around smashing power looms, burning mills, that sort of thing. Jimmy goes out and steals fifty-thousand-dollar SUV's and crashes them through the windows of Starbucks."

I looked out the window to see if perhaps little Jimmy had been to visit my neighborhood while my attention was turned elsewhere. Nope. The brown and green storefront seemed to have all its glass intact.

"What he imagines he's accomplishing is beyond me. Other than bankrupting the entire family. Mom and Dad disowned him years ago. I'm all he's got now. And the judge wasn't just being mean with the bond amount, Mr. Jackson."

Wow, a "Mister." Did that mean I was no longer the vile bloodsucker or the chauvinist pig? Was I about to get the inside dope? "I take it he's done this before?"

"Five times, in three other states."

Bingo.

"What you will need, Ms. Cox, is..."

"I know what I need. I can give you a check for the eighteen hundred. It wipes out the last of my savings, but if my stupid little brother doesn't care, why should you? Our lawyer explained that in a flight-risk case, I'll have to post something for security for the full eighteen thousand, as well."

If she was hoping I would disagree with her, she was about to be disappointed.

"All I have is my violin," she said.

I wanted to say, "Must be one hell of a fiddle," but it didn't seem to fit. My expression must have said it for me.

"It's an Amati," she said. "It's over four hundred years old."

Silly me, I thought the Amati was a car that Studebaker quit making in 1965. I didn't want one of them, and I didn't want a fancy antique fiddle, either.

"It's probably priceless," she said, "but it's been appraised at sixty thousand dollars. And that was almost twenty years ago."

On the other hand, old violins spill very little oil on the floor and never, ever rust out. Maybe I'd been a bit hasty.

She produced a much-folded paper from her purse and handed it to me. It appeared to be a professional appraisal, and as I scanned it, I began to assess the situation. And all the possible combinations and permutations. There was still the question of possession. "Is there a title document of some kind?"

"None. Never was. My grandfather brought it home after the Second World War. We never knew how he got it and probably wouldn't want to. When I took up playing the violin seriously in high school, he put me in his will to receive it. After he died, it was something of a family joke at first, then the source of a lot of bad feelings. It turned out the whole rest of his estate wasn't worth that much. But I kept it. It was the first really fine instrument I ever got to play, and I swore I'd never give it up."

"Until now," I said.

"For your stupid little brother," said Agnes.

"Yes." It was a word, but it sounded more like a sob. She stood up, put the case on my desk, and opened it for my inspection.

I leaned over and took a look, not touching the instrument, in case it was ready to crumble into dust. It looked a lot like a violin. Not very shiny, I thought, but after four hundred years, what is? I tried to remember something about a secret varnish formula. Maybe that was Stradivarius.

"You understand that for something like this, with no title, I can't just attach a lien against it? I'll have to actually take possession, or have some mutually acceptable third person do it."

She nodded. "The problem is, I have to have something to play. It's what I do. I play for the Opera, and sometimes for the Chamber Orchestra, and I teach a little. I have to have an instrument."

I glanced over at Agnes, and she shot me a look that said "Don't you dare even think about it." But I was thinking about a different angle than waiving possession.

"What's a run-of-the-mill, professional-quality instrument cost?"

"Two, maybe three thousand. I already told you, the eighteen hundred is all..."

I held up my hand. "I'll have to get somebody else to take a look at the Amati anyway, to tell me if your certificate is really talking about this exact instrument. That's as good a place as any to do it." I gestured at the window and the street beyond, towards Nickel Pete's. "Maybe we can work out something with a loaner, while we're there."

She looked, and her face fell. "A pawn shop? My God, have I come to this?"

Trust me, sweetie, there's lots worse places to come to. I put on my trenchcoat, grabbed an umbrella, and we headed out into the rain.

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The streets were empty except for a dark Ford LTD parked at the curb a half block down, so we crossed against the light and hurried down to the emporium of discarded dreams. Pete's shop was a mixture of traditional and new, with a modern, open sales floor up front, to display all the bulky stuff like exercise machines and huge TVs, and the old-style teller's cage in the back, guarding the cases of the smaller and more precious goods,

as well as the firearms. Pete greeted us the way he greets everybody, sitting owl-faced at his cage with both hands under the counter. I knew that he had one hand poised to push an alarm button, while the other gripped a sawed-off shotgun. When he saw it was me, he folded his hands on top of the counter.

"Herman, old friend." His ancient troll's face morphed into what passed for a smile. "How's business? Mine's great. You ever get ready to expand, take on a new partner, I got the capital and the disposition for it. All's I need is the referrals."

"You've got the disposition of an undertaker."

"Then we'll get along fine, won't we?" He laughed, went into a coughing spasm, and finally treated himself to a pink antacid tablet from a bottle that he kept next to the cash register. It was a regular ritual of his. The ball was back in my court.

"This lady," I said, "needs a professional violin. You got anything of any quality?"

"One or two, I think. The good ones are in the back."

"Let's see them. And while she's checking them out, I want you to take a look at the one she's carrying, give me your opinion."

"Is this a professional consultation? Do I get a fee?"

"Yes, it is, and no, you don't."

"You always were a cheap sonofabitch, Herman." It wasn't true, but I let him get away with it, and he went into the back room and emerged with one violin whose case said it was a Yamaha and another, older-looking one that had no label. He passed them over to Amy Cox, and then proceeded to have a look at the maybe-Amati and the appraisal document. Then he took out his jeweler's loupe and had a real look, and an attitude of reverence spread across his face.

"I don't usually deal in goods of this quality, you know. I have no market, no contacts. The best I could do on it..."

"I'm not asking you to do anything on it, Pete. Just tell me if it's the Amati the paper talks about."

"Oh, it's the violin in the appraisal, all right. As to whether it's a real Amati, that's not such a simple question."

"Is it worth twenty-one grand?"

"The paper says sixty, plus inflation."

"It doesn't have to be worth sixty. The bond she needs is for eighteen, plus she needs enough to get one of those fiddles you just showed her. Is it worth that much or not?"

"Absolutely. You want I should advance it?"

"No. We'll do it a little different."

Amy Cox picked out the Yamaha. Pete said it was worth twenty-seven hundred, Amy said twelve, tops, and we all knew we were eventually going to settle on eighteen, if only for the beautiful irony of the number. Pete put the Amati away somewhere in the back and wrote a pawn ticket for eighteen hundred, made out to me. The deal was that I would issue the bail bond for the wayward, neo-Luddite Jimmy. If he showed up at his trial like a good little boy, and the bond got released, then his sister could come and get the ticket from me and redeem her own violin by

bringing back the Yamaha and paying the interest. If little Jimmy reverted to type and took a hike, then I was out eighteen grand to the Sheriff's office, but the Amati was mine for the eighteen hundred, plus interest. In that case, Amy could keep her substitute, so she wouldn't have to go to her job at the Chamber Orchestra with a kazoo, but she lost first rights to her heirloom. It was the deal of the century. For somebody, anyway. She took it. We went back to my office to have Agnes draw up the formal papers.

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The length of time it takes to mortgage all your past dreams to pay for tomorrow's reduced hopes is heartbreakingly short. Before Amy Cox had time to feel the cold lump in the pit of her stomach spread to the rest of her soul, or to look at her new violin and cry a bit, she was signed, notarized, wished the best of luck, and sent back out into the rain. I stood in the same spot where I had been when I first saw her, looking through the neon letters, watching her go. Once again, she had her shoulders hunched against the rain, but now she held her violin case under one arm, at her side.

"Cute, wasn't she? In a prickly sort of way."

I turned around to see Agnes looking disgustingly smug. "Was she?" I said.

"Oh, listen to him. The ice man. This is me you're talking to, okay? If she'd put her hooks into you any deeper, you'd need sutures."

Had she? "You are obviously mistaking my professional manner of..."

I was interrupted by the sound of a loud thump, out in the street, and I looked back that way in time to see Amy Cox flying through the air like a rag doll thrown by some mean little kid. She hit the wet pavement with a sickening second thump and lay motionless. Behind her, the dark LTD I had noticed earlier was braking to a stop.

"Call nine-one-one!" I screamed over my shoulder. I ran out the door and into the street, where the rain hit me in the face like a slap with a wet towel. The LTD was at the scene ahead of me, and the driver's door opened to disgorge a large man in a dark overcoat. He bent over the victim briefly, then ran back to the car and got in. He immediately floored it, spinning the tires on the wet pavement, running over the crumpled body, and fleeing into the mist. I couldn't believe I had seen him do that. I think I screamed again, something obscene, but I'm not sure.

I tried my damndest, but with the rain spitting in my eyes, I couldn't read the departing license plate. I kept running until I got to where Amy Cox lay like a pile of broken sticks, one leg bent the wrong way, an arm thrown over her head, blood trailing from her mouth and ears, wide eyes staring at nothing. I bent down and felt for a pulse in her throat, but I was already pretty sure I wasn't going to find one. She looked as dead as anybody I've ever seen. I hunkered down beside her, not sure what to do.

Down the street, Sheriff's deputies and cops were running out of the Courthouse, and I could already hear an ambulance siren. I was surprised to also hear myself moaning. I rocked back on my heels and let somebody pull me up and guide me off to one side. I looked around, dazed. Twenty yards down the road were the shoes that were too low for the wet streets. The speeding car had knocked her right out of them. Closer to me was her small purse, from which she had produced the certificate of appraisal. Here and there were a few scattered papers and what may have been some gouts of blood. I looked all around, scanning the area in progressively widening sweeps, zoning it off, making sure I missed nothing. That seemed important, for some reason.

There was nothing, anywhere, remotely resembling a violin case.