

# A BRUSH WITH DEATH

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Also by Richard King

*A Death at the University*

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# Chapter 1

‘Sam! Sam! You’ve got to help me.’ It was Jennifer, my business partner, and it was obvious from the panic in her voice that she was in trouble.

I don’t know how long the phone had been ringing before I woke up enough to hear it but Jennifer’s plea snapped me into full consciousness. According to the clock radio next to the telephone it was 1:18.

‘Where are you? Are you OK?’ I asked, trying to keep the panic from my own voice.

‘I’m at Ovid’s. You’ve got to come right away.’ I knew that she’d had a date with Ovid Holmes the night before and she must have gone with him to his place after dinner. ‘Are you hurt? Tell me where he lives and meet me in the lobby. Don’t stay there with him,’ I told her.

‘You don’t understand. I’m fine. It’s Ovid. He’s dead.’

It passed quickly, but for a second I had the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach that Jennifer had murdered Ovid.

‘Dead?’ I yelled back at her. ‘Are you certain? Don’t touch anything. Tell me where you are and give me at least ten minutes before you call the cops so I can try to get hold of Lemieux. Then



call 911 and report it. Give as little information as you can. I'll make certain that Gaston takes the call.' I knew quite a bit about police procedure from my association with Gaston Lemieux, a homicide detective on the Montreal police. I was already fully awake; now my brain went into overdrive.

She gave me the address of Holmes's condo on Sherbrooke East near St-Denis. I pulled on a pair of jeans and a shirt, called a cab, grabbed my cell phone from the charger and rushed downstairs to meet the taxi.

It must have been nearby, because it pulled up to the front of my house just as I emerged onto the street.

I gave the driver the address and fell back against the seat cushions as he pulled away from the curb. I realised that the shock of being awoken from a dead sleep combined with the fact that Jennifer was in trouble had caused my heart to beat faster than the bleep of the taxi's meter. I took a couple of slow breaths to calm myself and called Gaston Lemieux.

He and I had met at the store years before, during a shop-lifting incident. We became friendly and I even helped him on one of his murder investigations. I trusted him and wanted to be sure that he got to Holmes's so that he would be in charge of the case. He was obviously more used to middle-of-the-night calls than I was as he snapped quickly into full cop mode as I explained the situation to him. Before he could get a word in I said, 'I told Jennifer to call 911 and report it. I promised her that you would be able to take the call.'

'Got it. I'll call dispatch and I'll be there in twenty minutes,' he told me. 'Stay where you are and I'll call you when I know something.'





Yeah, right, I thought. The streets were deserted, and the taxi pulled up in front of Holmes's building minutes after I got off the phone with Gaston.

So Holmes was dead, I thought. The author of so many murders was now the victim of one.

## Chapter 2

I became a bookseller because I liked to read and I thought it would be a good way to earn a living. I also thought that it would be fun to meet writers. I was wrong on two out of the three counts. I love my chosen career, but it's a difficult way to earn a living; I still love to read but I spend more time carrying books than reading them, and meeting writers is not all it's cracked up to be. The ones I most want to meet are shy and ill at ease with people they don't know. For the most part they are not very good at small talk and I am so much in awe of them that I become uncharacteristically tongue-tied myself. The first time I met a famous writer it happened to be my favourite author, Mordecai Richler. I barely managed to mumble a greeting. Richler was very understanding about my incoherence and, in an effort to help me make a simple declarative sentence, asked me something about the book business. I don't remember what the question was, nor do I remember my answer, but I do know that he must have taken pity on me because every time I requested that he do a book signing session in our store he accepted.

After a couple of years in the business and with a bit of training by my partner, Jennifer Riccofia, who is fearless in the presence

of authors, I became more adept at meeting and chatting with them. I even became friendly with some of the not-so-famous scribes. Jennifer's ability to make writers feel comfortable made our bookshop, Dickens & Company, a preferred stop on author tours. Some writers out there, as with the population in general, are nothing but arrogant pains in the ass. One such author was the very famous and very popular British mystery writer, Ovid Holmes.

One day in February, a few months after Jen and I had celebrated our nineteenth anniversary of business together, I received a call from Ovid Holmes's Canadian publisher asking me if I knew that Holmes had been in Montreal for the last several months doing research for his new mystery novel, and did I want to have him in the store for a reading and signing.

The degree of difficulty involved in arranging an author event depends to a large extent on the publisher. Holmes's Canadian publisher, The Sullivan Company, is one of the easiest to work with. The Sullivan Company is a small publishing house owned by Andrea Sullivan and her not-so-silent partner, James McWilliam.

Andrea Sullivan came to Toronto as the Canadian sales and marketing representative for a large American publisher of romance, science fiction and horror novels. After five years of successfully filling the book racks of drugstore chains, supermarkets and big-box discount stores, she decided to strike out on her own and publish the kinds of books she wanted to promote rather than the schlock she had to sell. Also, she claimed, she wanted to work with booksellers and not the merchandising managers for whom books were an annoying sideline.

Andrea may have had a better sense of how to market books than most small Canadian publishers but her skills couldn't do much to alter the economic realities of the Canadian book business. After two years of hard work she found she had a moderately successful catalogue of books and was quickly burning through her capital. Her very American approach to business made it impossible to follow the well-worn path of her Canadian-born colleagues to the government for financial assistance.

She was on the verge of adding horror and romance novels, 'hormance' as she termed them, to her list – a step she dreaded only slightly less than turning to the government for help – when she was saved from literary and fiscal penury by James McWilliam, a British antiquarian book dealer who made a fortune in the booming Toronto market of the last part of the twentieth century and pre-recession years of the twenty-first, when investors were hungry for anything they thought would go up in value. If the thing that was supposed to go up in value had a bit of class, such as antiquarian books or works of art, so much the better.

McWilliam had ambitions to become a gentleman publisher. This was impossible in London, seemingly overflowing with publishing houses run by the pseudo-gentry. The possibilities were much better in Canada where a distinguished-looking middle-aged man with a good accent and a good supply of capital could buy his way into the industry and enjoy a stress-free life so long as he didn't run out of money.

Andrea Sullivan had enough energy for two people so when James McWilliam proposed a partnership she grabbed the opportunity before it went elsewhere. She knew that McWilliam wanted

an office so he could arrive at about ten o'clock in the morning, authors or other publishers to have lunch with, and just enough real work so he wouldn't be bored for the two or three hours he would remain in the office after lunch. For Andrea, James was the ideal partner: someone who was pleasant, who had money and who would not interfere in the editorial and marketing decisions of The Sullivan Company.

James McWilliam also brought another benefit to the partnership with him: contacts in the British literary establishment. It was through these contacts that The Sullivan Company was able to acquire the Canadian rights to many British books, not least of which were the novels of Ovid Holmes.

I enjoyed Holmes's mystery novels and Jennifer loved them, so of course I agreed to an in-store event. How could one say no to the creator of Chief Inspector Harry Wolfe and his assistant Sergeant Mary Carpenter? I couldn't imagine how he could set a mystery involving those two typically British policemen – well, police people – in Montreal, but both Jennifer and I were curious to know what he was working on.

In retrospect, shoving bamboo shoots under my fingernails would probably have been a less painful experience. I've dealt with writers who have a lot more talent than the great Ovid Holmes but I've never met one who I disliked quite as much. He showed up about thirty minutes late to his event, which angered the customers who were waiting patiently to hear him, and he proceeded to act as if his tardiness was our fault. 'Are taxis unknown in this backwater?' he asked, implying that it was somehow our responsibility to ensure that there was always a

cab available when he needed one. 'I mean, how do you people expect me to get anywhere if I can't find transportation? One certainly can't be expected to walk anywhere in the frozen muck that covers the pavement, can one?' He went on in this vein for a while as I tried gently, and then not so gently, to lead him to the corner where we had set up a table and a chair for the purposes of the reading and book signing session. The first ten minutes of the reading was a Euro-centric diatribe about the difficulties of living in non-European cities – like anyone gave a damn. Jennifer, as usual, saved the day. She had taken the precaution of finding out what Holmes liked to drink – clear Earl Grey tea with a generous shot of twelve-year-old single malt Scotch. Jennifer presented him with a cup of tea and Scotch and after a long sip he settled into reading from his most recently published novel, *Death Takes the Circle Line*. I have to admit that he was an excellent reader and the audience was enthralled.

It became clear to me that one of the reasons for his popularity was that he talked to each of the people who purchased his novel and requested an autograph as if they were the most important person in the world to him. He was able to do this without spending more than five minutes with each reader. An amazing skill. Amongst the last people to request an autograph was a writer I knew, Robbie Kayn. Kayn was more a casual acquaintance than a close friend. He had only published one book, which consisted of a novella and half a dozen short stories. The novella was, in the words of his publisher, 'a post-modern mystery', whatever that was.

I was not close enough to where Holmes and Kayn were speaking so I couldn't hear their conversation but Kayn must have tested Holmes's patience because I could see that his smile was replaced first by a grimace and then by a look of stone-cold disdain. He signed Robbie's book with a scrawl and handed it back to him without making eye contact, turning instead to the next person in line.

After he signed the last customer's book he sought out Jennifer to thank her for the cup of 'tea'. Jennifer blushed slightly and told him that she was glad to have been able to help and yes, wasn't it awful trying to find a cab in Montreal – like there are not ten desperate cab drivers looking for a fare on every city block. He took Jennifer's sympathy for interest and he asked her if she would like to go out for a coffee. I prepared myself to be delighted to watch Jen blow him off and I was crushed when I heard her say, 'Yes, I'd love to. Just let me get my bag.' I was surprised that Jen agreed so readily to go out with Holmes. Jennifer's social life was really none of my business and I wasn't jealous of course, not really, but I had a fraternal interest in her well-being and I thought that she could do a lot better than Holmes. On the other hand, a coffee with a famous author was bound to be interesting, so I wished them a good afternoon as they departed the bookstore. Holmes, the arrogant son of a bitch, didn't think to thank me for all the work I did to make his reading and signing a success.

Coffee must have turned into drinks and dinner as Jen didn't return that afternoon, and she looked just the slightest bit

bleary-eyed with red veins showing in the whites of her eyes the next morning.

‘How did it go?’ I asked her, expecting to be told what a bore Holmes was and how she could barely stay awake during his monologue about Canadian weather and public transportation problems and how she was unable to make her escape until about nine o’clock and how the result of the miserable evening was a migraine that had kept her up all night.

I was amazed when she told me that she’d had a wonderful evening, during which time had flown and that Ovid Holmes was a brilliant conversationalist. She told me that she was looking forward to seeing him again. Holmes obviously had charms to which I was immune.

I’m not the jealous type and in any event Jennifer and I don’t date. We agreed that it would be very bad for our working relationship if we tried to be anything other than business partners and friends. And we more or less stick to this rule. Still, the thought of her and Ovid Holmes really upset me for some reason.

‘Seriously?’ I asked, trying to appear cool and uninterested.

‘Not seriously – casually,’ she teased me. This was her way of telling me, in a friendly way, to back off a bit, which I did because, as I said, I’m not the jealous type.

So Jennifer spent the rest of February and March seeing Ovid Holmes on a semi-romantic basis. I knew it was only a matter of time until their relationship became something more serious. Frankly, I couldn’t understand what was taking so long. Holmes was attracted to Jennifer for obvious reasons; she was a beautiful





and vivacious woman. I supposed it was Jen's naturally cautious nature when it came to men that was slowing things down. I knew it was only a matter of time and then Jen's heart would be broken. When the research was done, Holmes would return to England to write his book, leaving Jen behind with nothing but memories and a lover's broken promises. Promises that weren't worth the breath it took to make them.

Spring came early to Montreal in the April of that year. The end of March saw the city covered with a gelatinous, semi-frozen, grey slush that disappeared after a sunny week. It's not that the weather was all that warm but it was above freezing and dry. Montrealers love to rush the seasons. As soon as the temperature stays above freezing for four or five consecutive days the tables start to appear on the sidewalks in front of cafés and restaurants. It's amusing to see Montrealers sitting on these terraces in their winter coats, faces pointed to the sun, their hands wrapped around cups of coffee for warmth. It was during this early spring that I noticed a change in Jennifer. I could tell from the look in her eyes that she had made the decision to allow her romance with Ovid Holmes to be cranked up a notch or two.

Holmes must have sensed that the time had come as he planned a romantic evening, starting with dinner at L'Express and ending up God knows where, although I had a pretty good idea. Jennifer left work early that Tuesday to prepare for the date. I wished her a good evening and decided to work late on the store's accounts. I wanted something to occupy my mind and there is nothing like the puzzle of which supplier to pay and how much to pay them to keep the brain focused. Too focused; when



I looked up from the stack of invoices it was just shy of 9.30. I decided to pack it in and head home. I walked across the mountain and through Jeanne-Mance Park to my flat on the corner of Esplanade and Rachel, and was in bed with a book by 10.45.

As Jen's friend, I was concerned for her happiness, but I was a close enough friend to know that she didn't like me to interfere in her personal life. I knew Jen well enough to keep my opinion of her relationship with Holmes to myself. She knew that if a romance ever went sour I would be there for her, just as she would be there for me. In fact, over the years that we had known one another, we each had had too many opportunities to provide comfort for each other at the end of relationships.

Our business partnership grew out of this strong personal relationship. We met when Jennifer was a sales representative for Murray & Kerr and I worked for a large chain of bookstores at a time when bookselling was less of a threatened business. We only had to compete with other booksellers, not with e-commerce and e-books. We both became frustrated working for others at the same time and after many discussions we decided that we wanted to stay in the book industry *and* in Montreal. We decided to open the Dickens & Company Bookstore downtown at a time when the so-called smart money was leaving Quebec and before the smarter money started coming back into the province. Still, it was better than the alternatives: move to Toronto, give up the book business, or open a small local publishing house. Over the years we divided the chores so that Jennifer looked after buying, merchandising and the staff, and I took care of marketing, accounting and finance.

Maybe if Jennifer and I weren't business partners our relationship would have taken a different direction. Or maybe we wouldn't have had a relationship at all. Who knows? We chose to go into business together and it was a choice I have never regretted, and I am certain she hasn't either.

## Chapter 3

The building that Holmes lived in was a lovely art nouveau construction on Sherbrooke Street East a few paces east of St-Denis, the *Quartier Latin* of Montreal. The façade of the building had recently been sandblasted clean and the art nouveau touches were visible even at night. The vestibule had a tile floor in a large black and white block pattern and was surrounded by dark mahogany wood panelling on the walls. Leaded windows in the double doors leading to the street and to the main lobby were thick glass, each panel curving towards the centre where it met its mate. Dark wood carved into a braided pattern framed the glass panels. All the wood was polished to a high oily shine.

Instead of a panel of names and apartment numbers with a buzzer next to each one, there was a number pad and a speaker on the wall. A notice invited visitors to key in the code on the number pad for the resident they wished to visit. I had no clue what Holmes's number code was; probably his London phone number or something equally unguessable.

I mounted the three steps to the vestibule's inner doors in the desperate hope that they would be unlocked. They were locked *and* there was a plastic sign hanging from the handles by a chain.

The sign informed me that any non-resident seeking entrance to the building between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. had to see the security guard at the desk in the inner lobby. There was a brass doorbell to the left of the doors. I peered through the glass to check for the guard. The desk was a massive affair. The three sides that I could see were surrounded by a counter that appeared to be at least four feet high. I assumed that the counter contained TV monitors and other security-guard equipment to keep the building safe from intruders. I could not see the guard himself. I scanned the lobby as carefully as I could from my vantage point at the doors. I even checked the floor and that's when I noticed the heavy black work boots and the cuffs of the security guard's blue-grey trousers under the desk.

His feet were very still and I realised that he must be asleep on the job. I did not want to wake him up and have to explain why I wanted to get into the building and up to Holmes's condo. I'd let the cops take care of that. I backed quietly down the three steps and considered my options. I knew I wanted to get up to Holmes's place before the cops arrived so I took a second to figure out how to do this.

I would soon have realised that the smart thing to do would be to use my cell phone to call Jennifer and get her to let me in, but at that moment it started to vibrate.

'Hello,' I answered softly.

'Sam, where are you?' It was Jennifer.

'I'm in the lobby. Buzz me in.' I whispered.

I got to the doors in a single stride so as to get them open without disturbing the guard. I removed the sign and pulled

at the doors so that they would open noiselessly when Jennifer buzzed from Holmes's apartment to unlock them. I made certain to return the sign to the door handle as I slipped inside the inner lobby and then closed the doors without making a sound. Jennifer had told me that Holmes lived in apartment 9-B but I didn't know where the elevators were. I looked around the lobby and noticed that there was an alcove opposite the security desk. This would give the guard a clear view of all those who got in and out of the elevators. If he were awake, that is. The security desk was to my right and I could hear the hum of the television. I peered over the counter and saw that the guard was indeed asleep, his head resting on his folded arms. I couldn't see the monitors and I didn't want to spend any more time in the lobby than I had to for fear the guard would wake up and notice me. So I tiptoed to the elevators like a teenager coming home after curfew.

Luckily there was an elevator waiting and I got in, hit the ninth-floor button and was taken up to Holmes's floor.

The elevator let out onto an alcove similar to the one on the ground floor and 9-B was the second door to the left of the archway.

I ignored the brass bell on the doorjamb and tapped lightly on the door. Jennifer opened it almost immediately.

I walked into Holmes's entryway and found a bloody mess. He was lying on his back to the right of the door with a pool of blood covering his chest and the floor, and a long bloody butcher's knife lying beside him. Jennifer's hands were covered in blood and she looked awful.



This was not the first time I had seen a dead body but the sight of a bloody corpse, especially when it was the body of someone I knew, horrified me. I felt the blood drain from my face and I felt both queasy and light-headed. I put my hand on the doorjamb to steady myself, knowing that I had to pull myself together for Jennifer's sake. I looked away from the body and took some deep breaths.

Jennifer's eyes were wide with fear, her complexion was white and her hair was a mess, all sweaty and stuck to her head. It looked like she was about to throw up. She threw her arms around me and I held her close.

'Oh, Sam,' she sobbed. 'He's dead. Someone killed him.'

'It will be all right,' I told her. 'You have nothing to worry about. I called Lemieux and he'll be here any minute. Whatever happened, it's not your fault.'

'Of course it's not my fault,' she said, gaining control. 'Someone came to the door and killed him.'

I didn't see how that explained the blood on Jennifer's hands but I wanted to hear her story before the cops arrived. 'Tell me what happened,' I told her.

We moved down the hall to the living room to get away from the body.

'We went out for a late dinner at L'Express. Our reservation was for nine.' She was nervous and her words came out in a rush. As she told me what happened she began to regain her composure and her rate of speech slowed. 'After dinner we walked here for an after-dinner drink. Ovid had just poured the drinks and we were talking about something or other when the doorbell





rang. Ovid went to answer it. I heard him talking, practically screaming at someone and then another voice said, “No way! I’m not going to let you ruin everything I worked for!” I heard what sounded like a scuffle and a thud, and then I heard the door close and then nothing. I was worried so I called out to Ovid to see if he was all right and when he didn’t answer I went to investigate. I found him lying on the floor with that knife in his chest. There was blood everywhere. I tried to help him but he was dead. Then I called you.’

‘How did you get blood all over yourself?’ I asked.

‘I told you. I tried to help him,’ she said, sounding exasperated.

I walked back to the entryway to take another look at the crime scene. Jennifer followed. It looked like a typical entrance hall. I noticed a shelf and a mirror on the wall next to the door with a few envelopes and a set of keys on the shelf. Under the shelf at the corner of the wall was a brass umbrella stand with a couple of canes and umbrellas in it. The adjacent wall was mostly closet, a coat closet I assumed. It looked like Jennifer and Holmes entered his condo, he tossed keys onto the shelf, probably hung up their coats in the closet and continued into the living room for drinks.

‘Show me where you were,’ I said to Jennifer just as the doorbell rang. I hoped it was Lemieux and not the patrol cops.

I opened the door and thanked God it was.

‘I might have known you wouldn’t listen to me,’ he said to me by way of greeting. He gave Jennifer a look that caused her to pull closer to me for protection. Lemieux made a careful visual inspection of the entrance area. Finally, he turned to Jennifer







and asked, 'Is there somewhere we can sit? I want you to tell me what happened. Sam, you stay here and let the other police in. Leave the door open so that it's not touched any more than it already has been.'

The two beat cops arrived a couple of minutes later, and they were followed by a team of three forensics people and a couple of guys from the morgue. I went looking for Lemieux as the group was assembling in the foyer. I found him with Jennifer in the dark over-furnished living room. The place had two sofas, one a dark blood-red and the other in burgundy. There were Windsor chairs and ladies chairs here and there and of course a lamp table next to each chair, end tables at the sides of the sofas and coffee tables in front of them. I absolutely wanted to meet the people from whom Holmes was sub-leasing the apartment. They had managed to re-create a Victorian living room full of furniture and bric-a-brac. Gaston and Jennifer were sitting on the burgundy sofa, the one she must have been sitting on with Holmes when the doorbell rang, as two glasses remained on the coffee table in front of them. One of the glasses had a splash of brandy in it; the other was empty and covered with Jennifer's bloody fingerprints. Obviously the brandy had helped to calm her nerves. In her position I probably would have been drinking straight from the bottle. I told Lemieux that the various teams of cops had arrived and were awaiting his instructions. The previous time I had found myself on an investigation with Lemieux I made sure to follow him around in order to be sure to be included in all aspects of the case. This time I was happy to see him leave the room so that I could talk to Jennifer alone.





‘What did you tell him?’ I asked her.

‘What do you mean? I told him exactly what I told you. What happened.’

I sat down beside Jennifer. I twisted so that I could face her, our knees almost touching, and with her hand in mine I tried to find the right words to comfort her.

‘It must be terrible,’ I said, ‘to come in from a date and have things end so badly. I can’t imagine how awful you must feel. But I’m here and I’ll do everything I can to help you cope with this. And Gaston will do his best to find the murderer.’

Some of what I said was little more than cliché but I was desperate to say something to comfort her. I looked down at her hands and realised that they were still covered with blood, almost dry by now, but still moist and sticky enough to have transferred onto my own hands.

‘I think we’ll both want to wash up,’ I said absently. And then the realisation hit me that from the police’s point of view, the fact that Jennifer had blood all over her hands would be incriminating. I also understood that we couldn’t wash it off until Lemieux took samples. ‘I better find Gaston and see if it’s OK,’ I added.

Lemieux came back into the room just as I was standing up to go find him.

‘We’d like to wash up,’ I told him.

‘First we have to take some blood samples from your hands, Miss Riccofia.’

He looked at me and noticed that there was blood on my hands as well. ‘My God, Sam, how on earth did you get blood on yourself?’





‘We were holding hands,’ I told him.

‘Damn.’ He walked back to the foyer, leaving us standing in the living room among all the fine furnishings. He was back in an instant with a young female police officer who I had met the first time I found myself involved in a murder investigation.

He turned to us and said, ‘I’m sure you remember Constable Bouchard. She’ll take samples of the blood and your fingerprints, then you can wash and then we’ll talk.’

‘Fingerprints,’ I repeated. Like it or not, I understood that for the moment the cops had to consider Jennifer a suspect.

‘It’s necessary if only to eliminate your prints from those that we find,’ Gaston explained.

Constable Bouchard took blood samples from my hands and carefully labelled which sample came from which hand on the evidence bags. She then wiped my fingers with an alcohol-drenched cloth and took my fingerprints using a portable fingerprint kit. Once she was finished with me, Bouchard started work on Jennifer. I followed Lemieux’s instructions to wash up and used the opportunity to explore the apartment while searching for the bathroom. I made a point of not asking Jennifer where it was so that I would have an excuse to wander freely about the place.

The living room was off the hallway that led from the entranceway. I left the room and instead of turning right to head back to the front door I turned left and continued down the hall. I opened the first door I came to, on my right, and discovered a closet that contained bed linen and towels. The next door was on my left and it opened into the dining room. I walked in. It was





a large formal room with a dark, oak table with ten heavy oak chairs around it, four on each side and one each at the head and foot. The backs of the chairs looked like matching treble clefs that met in the middle. The seats were covered in a wine-red upholsterer's velvet; a good choice if the dinner guests spilt their wine. Behind the narrow end of the table was a glass-doored breakfront, of the same polished dark oak as the table, filled with fancy china, white with maroon trim. A long table loaded with wine and liquor bottles served as a bar and serving table and opposite, a mirror created the effect of squaring the long room. A swinging door to the left of the breakfront led to the kitchen.

Finally, a room that looked used by a real person. The kitchen was a good size with all the modern conveniences. It was well designed with plenty of counter and cabinet space and a double sink, full of dishes, and a dishwasher. A dining area behind the kitchen, with a table and four chairs, is where I would have eaten if I had lived there and I guess that was true of Holmes as well. A coffee cup and newspaper were on the table, left over from breakfast, I supposed. I wandered over to take a look at how great mystery writers got their news these days. I expected to find an airmail edition of *The UK Times*, or perhaps *Le Monde Diplomatique*; at the very least *Le Devoir*, if it was a local paper he preferred. I was surprised and secretly pleased to discover that Holmes took his news from Montreal's sports and crime daily, *Le Journal de Montréal*. Sure enough the paper was open to pictures of a crime scene. The black and white photos were a lot sharper than I'd have expected from a tabloid. I could make out what looked like an office in which a bunch of guys in off-the-





rack raincoats were looking at a dead body. That is, I assumed they were looking at a dead body; the guys in coats – cops, I guessed – were standing between the body and the camera, so all I saw was a back and side view of the cops and the legs of the victim. There were other photographs showing a passport-size snapshot of a nice-looking middle-aged man and another one of an attractive woman with stunning eyes (lovers, the story intimated), and some photos of what looked like a party at an art gallery. What trash, I thought. How could the late, not-so-great, Ovid Holmes try to make out that he was just the smartest, most sophisticated person on Earth when he was just like the rest of us – fascinated by the gory details of crime. I bet he tried to pass his concupiscent interests off as research when he was alive.

I used the kitchen sink to wash my hands thoroughly and I dried them with a paper towel. I didn't want to use any of the expensive-looking dishtowels hanging neatly on a rack near the sink.

I glanced at the newspaper again on my way out of the kitchen. There was something about the eyes of the woman in the photograph that held my attention. Something about the direct, self-confident way that she looked into the camera intrigued me. Her eyes made me want to know more about her and about the murder she was involved in. They gave no hint of either guilt or innocence, just a strong sense of self-assurance.

Using the tip of my index finger I pulled the newspaper closer to me to more easily read the story. As I did so, I uncovered a copy of *Le Devoir* that had been concealed beneath. *Le Devoir* and *Le Journal de Montréal*, I thought; Holmes sure had Catholic tastes in reading material.



The story in *Le Journal* had to do with a murder in a private art gallery. Charles Walters was found dead in his office at the Walters/Cohen Gallery on Sherbrooke Street. The death had been discovered during a *vernissage* at the gallery where about 100 people were attending the opening of an exhibition of art forgeries. The seventy guests who were in the gallery at the time the body was discovered were questioned, but none of them appeared to have anything resembling a motive. On the contrary, all those in attendance who knew the deceased seemed to revere him. He had a reputation as an honest art dealer with excellent taste. The implication of the article was that *honest* art dealers were hard to find. There didn't appear to be any clues; certainly no empty vial that could have contained the poison. The only thing that seemed like it might point to a motive was a painting on an easel in the office. It was a Monet painting, *Les Peupliers au bord de l'Epte*. Marie Daumier, the marketing manager of the gallery and the attractive woman whose picture illustrated the story, told investigators that the painting was a forgery and that Walters knew it. The report suggested that art forgery was somehow related to the crime.

In addition to the photograph of Marie Daumier and the pictures of the cops standing over the body, there was a passport-size picture of the victim, Charles Walters, a distinguished and kindly-looking gentleman of about fifty years old. The crime reported in *Le Journal* had occurred a couple of years before Jen and I opened our store a short distance away from the gallery so we had missed all the excitement – it was then that I noticed the date on *Le Journal* was more than twenty years earlier. On closer examination



I realised that the pages I was looking at were not the originals, but copies. The paper was better than newsprint quality and that explained why the photographs were so clearly reproduced. I checked the date on *Le Devoir*. It was yesterday's paper.

*Le Journal* held my interest. I noticed that there were coloured Post-it notes stuck to the pages. I knew better than to touch them but there was no reason not to read them. There were three of them, in two colours – green and yellow. One of the green notes said 'Wolfe & Saatchi?' The other one said 'Wolfe & Brick Lane Art Gallery?' The yellow note said 'Carpenter – art courses at U!'

It wasn't hard to figure out that the Wolfe and Carpenter referred to in the notes were the characters in Holmes's novels: Chief Inspector Harry Wolfe and Sergeant Mary Carpenter. The Saatchi must have been a reference to the Saatchi Gallery in London, and Brick Lane was apparently also an art gallery. I'd been to the Saatchi but I had no idea whether the Brick Lane was real or fictional.

There were other notes that mentioned London locations and the names of people mentioned in the article followed by an equal sign and other names with the same initials. So Marie Daumier became Marnie Daniels and Charles Walters became Clifford Watters. There were two or three other notes stuck to the article.

From these notes and the copy of the back issue of *Le Journal*, I surmised that Holmes was using the Walters murder as the plot for one of his mysteries and that he was moving the action to London. It seemed more than likely that this was the reason Holmes had come to Montreal to work on his novel.

