

The Deadly Hobby of Murder
(A Dexter Talbot Mystery)

CHAPTER 19

At the appointed time, the characters all arrived at Dexter Talbot's Upper West Side apartment. Talbot's faithful servant Chalmers showed them in. There was Lady Dalrymple-Fitzhugh, nervously fingering the pearls that edged her mantilla, followed quickly by Brandy Weaver, Lady Dalrymple's paid companion. Brandy, poor thin thing, was pulling a wheeled steamer trunk behind her, since one never knew when Lady Dalrymple would want to voyage to Paris on the moment. Biff Brock, the vulgar American swell, soon followed, bursting in with wide lapels and a well-chewed cigar, crying G___ this and d___ that. This vigorous language was a great trial on young Yvonne Gammon, the presumptive telegraph heiress who entered in his stormy wake. She'd come in a flapper costume that was little more than negligee, and without her enormous sable overcoat, it seemed likely she might have frozen halfway up the drive and remained forever like Lot's wife. The old colonel, Chandler Frost, arrived next, his white-haired mustaches curled into a permanent smile. Seeing Yvonne's pale and troubled condition, he was immediately concerned with her comfort, throwing additional logs on the fire and asking Chalmers whether Talbot had gas heat. Last of all came the sullen count-in-exile, Dmitri Davidovitch, who sipped vodka from a silver flask and stayed huddled in the corner, refusing to remove his coat.

"It's supposed to go down to -27 degrees tonight," said Colonel Frost, making conversation in the short silence. "With wind chill, I mean."

"My God!" expulsed Dmitri. "That's too cold for even snow to powder!"

"You ain't far wrong," said Biff Brock. "Remind me to make you king of Prussia."

Lady Dalrymple sniffed. "Where is this amateur playboy sleuth, anyway? Some of us have balls to attend."

At that moment, Dexter came in, neatly attired with his usual cufflinks and ascot, and apologized to all the present company. "You're probably wondering why I've asked you all here on this bitter evening..."

"You think one of us **murdered** Jess Mulligan, I'll wager," said Colonel Frost. "And this is your idea of a trap. One of us will lie too much, and you'll pin the thing on them."

"I thought the same thing," said Yvonne. "I saw something similar at the flickers, with Clara Bow in *The Case of The Hobbled Fishwife*. Is this the big moment of revelation? Oh, I do hope the **MURDERER** isn't me!"

"**MURDERESS**," corrected Lady Dalrymple, adjusting her lorgnette. "Have a sense of decorum, you base jezebel. Some of us still care about preserving gender distinctions."

"I had nothing quite so sinister in mind," said Talbot, disingenuously. "I simply thought we might be able to discuss where we all were on the night of Jess Mulligan's **murder**. For example—Miss Weaver. As Lady Dalrymple-Fitzhugh's assistant, wouldn't you have been at Club 13 on the night in question?"

Miss Weaver blanched. "I was...I was there, but I didn't see anything." A weary look came over her face and she sighed. "Oh, what's the use? You may as well know. I...I'm in love with Biff Brock! I knew that Jess Mulligan was extorting from my Lady, but I couldn't help myself. While Lady Dalrymple was dealing with Jess inside, I made my excuses and met Biff under the ash tree across the street."

"Serpent's tooth!" gasped Lady Dalrymple, clutching her intaglio ormolu cameo. "Have you no shame, deigning to strike up an amour with this hoodlum?"

"He's not a hood! He's the man I love!" cried Brandy.

"Enough! Mulligan was found outside on Main Street, clubbed thirteen times within sight of the aforementioned sign," said Talbot. "This can hardly have been a fluke."

“Are you accusing me?” said Biff. “I don’t even own a d___d club! You all know I carry a rod. If I’d have caught that louse alone, I’d have sooner put a bullet in his brain pan.”

“Such a colorful tongue you possess,” said Lady Dalrymple. “Kin to Keats and Shelley.”

“Aw, jump in a river, you old bat,” said Mr. Brock by way of rejoinder. “Everyone knows you were dying to off that guy because he had dirt on you about your fling with Gammon’s husband. Word was he was bleeding you dry for over a year before he bought it. I bet that ring you’re wearing is just so much paste.” He looked around the room, slightly ashamed. “I won’t deny I was worried about Brandy. If that b___ had gotten his hands on Dalrymple’s diamonds, Brandy would’ve soon been out of a job.”

“You...you cad!” hissed Lady Dalrymple. “While it is true that I had a brief dalliance with Mr. Gammon, he had misrepresented his marital status all along, and the moment I discovered the existence of his young wife, I balked and ended our meetings immediately. But he had hired this—” here she pointed at Dmitri—“this venal, expatriated gutter-dwelling snipe, and he took pictures that would have meant my ruin!”

Dmitri snorted, so offended that he actually launched himself from his sulking place and stood on tottering alcoholic legs. “This is—how you say—the bollocks. Da, I was hired to bring my camera, with a stand and a scope, to a particular place and shoot some photos at such-and-such-a time. But this is legal, nyet? I had no hand in the blackmail. None at all! It offends my dignity to even hear such, how you say, baloney! This American, however, would stop at nothing for a few, how you say, bucks...”

“You seem incensed,” said Dexter. “One can almost imagine you committing—dare I say it?—**murder!**”

Dmitri Davidovitch sneered. “But I was nowhere near Club 13! Unless you think we Russians can be in two places at once, you are stalking the wrong prey!”

“Hah!” said Yvonne Gammon, suddenly. “There’s just one hitch. You’re not Russian! You were never even a count! You’re just a second-generation Hungarian from Queens.” She turned to address the company. “As you know, after Mulligan’s **MURDER**, we were all confined to separate rooms at the Shipworthy Arms. But I left a freshly-laundered sheet at the foot of the stairs—the stairs none of us were supposed to be traveling at night. And yet, I saw the sheet bend beneath some large boot-sized footprint when I checked the next morning. Only Dmitri wears such large boots! He had been cabling someone! His accomplice in murder, I’m bound!”

“I was wondering why the iron was warm,” said Colonel Chandler. “Unwrinkled sheets! Fancy that! Now it all makes perfect sense!”

“Colonel Chandler!” said Talbot. “I was wondering when you’d speak up. I was wondering why you haven’t been talking more.” Talbot strode over to Chandler’s overstuffed chair and, producing a tin from his shirtsleeve, said, “I wonder if your throat isn’t perhaps a little dry. Tell me—would you like a *lozenge*?” And with this, he shoved a tiny white pill towards the colonel’s monocle.

Chandler actually screamed and fell into a faint. The whole party was stunned.

“Why...that’s the very lozenge that was discovered at the scene of the murder!” gasped Yvonne. “Are they tied together somehow?”

“Alas, this is merely a very clever copy,” said Talbot, retinning the object with a snap. “But did you see how his gorge rose and his face went pale before he collapsed? The fact is, Colonel Chandler Frost is deathly afraid of mint! And this is no mere accident—it is, if you will, a family trait. Isn’t it, Lady Dalrymple? Or should I say, Meredith Mullet of Hamtramck, New Jersey?!”

This comment was greeted by the surrounding people with murmuring and rhubarb.

Talbot continued. “You married into the name Dalrymple, but in your time at Yale you also had an amour-fou with a young chevron-sporting military cadet by the name of Chandler. It was only when you received a letter from your estranged father that you discovered the shocking truth—that Chandler was, in fact, your own long-lost brother, separated from you at birth, living under an assumed name, but carrying the same mint-related phobia that has characterized the inbred Mullet line for countless generations!”

“For 2,467 generations, to be precise,” said Lady Dalrymple, with a new even deeper level of coldness. “How dare you try to catch me in this! I’ll murder you!” And herewith she sprang up and lunged at Talbot, brandishing a hatpin.

Biff Brock intervened. “There’s been enough murder this week already, joker! Have a sock in the kisser!” And with a single punch, the elderly matron crumpled to the floor.

“Brock!” Brandy gasped. “How could you do such a thing? You belong in a cage!”

“Aw, she was asking to get hit,” said Biff. “I wouldn’t have hurt her none. I know you need her money to survive.”

“Money!” Brandy called, with a note of disgust. “I don’t care about money! I’ll go back to hawking gloves on the street if I have to!” said Brandy, eyes fiery and defiant. “I’m 36 years old, and that means I’m a legal, full-fledged woman! Lady Dalrymple doesn’t own me—and neither do you!”

“I thought you said you were twenty-one,” said Biff, clearly at sea.

At this unsettled juncture, Colonel Frost’s eyes flickered open. “What’s going on?” he asked, looking around a trifle bewildered. “Our sleuth here showed me that lozenge and everything just went green. Has the **MURDERER** been revealed?”

“Oh, you and your **murderers!**” said Yvonne. “That’s all I hear from you all. *Murder*, *murder*, *murder!* I wish I’d never gone to the Club that fateful night! What about Lady Dalrymple?”

“I think I can finish that story,” offered Dmitri, speaking now in an entirely American accent. “Meredith Mullet’s father threatened to kill them both if she pursued the romance with her brother—which she obviously could no longer do, now that she knew who he was—but she was also forbidden to tell Colonel Frost the truth: that he was her biological brother!”—here, with a gasp, Colonel Frost fainted again—“I was hired by her father’s firm to keep an eye on them once the **MURDER** of Mulligan had accidentally forced them to reestablish contact. And that is why I was walking around the hotel at night! I was protecting the unthinkable from happening. Fortunately, Colonel Frost no longer even recognized his college crush from forty years earlier, and Lady Dalrymple was disinclined to offer more information than she had to.” He straightened his scarf, adding, “And now that the secret is out, I think my work here is done. May I go now? Obviously, since I was here for a completely different reason, I could have had no motive for murder.”

“Wait a minute,” said Yvonne. “That scar on your neck is very distinctive, and you always keep it covered with a loop of scarf...” she thought for a moment, then gasped. “Julie? Is that you?”

Dmitri sighed. “Okay, you’ve cornered me. What tipped you off? The scent of Castilian Nights perfume? I may be a man now but I’m still a sucker for it.”

“We also went to college together,” said Yvonne to everyone else. “In fact, we were roommates. We were practically twined together. Even then, I knew that Julie was different, though I didn’t know the technical term for it. Then one semester she simply didn’t return to school and there was no explanation. It was so sudden, I’d feared she’d been murdered. But instead you...changed, I guess. We simply *must* catch up!”

“There are only a few options with people of...inverted tendencies in this era,” said Talbot. “Your choice was to switch genders and live as a man?”

As this last tidbit was being revealed, the Colonel and Lady Dalrymple both regained consciousness.

“That’s correct,” said Dmitri/Julie. “I left school and underwent some experimental surgery, attempting to start a new life in Nebraska. For years it has worked, and I’ve even met a wonderful woman. The only thing that could have harmed my upcoming marriage was my secret past coming out. And then...Jess Mulligan had contacted me with blackmail threats of his own. So when Mr. Mullet’s firm brought this case to my employer, I volunteered because of Mulligan’s involvement. To be honest, I’d used the Dalrymple-Frost job as an excuse to come to New York to **MURDER** Jess, but I couldn’t work up the nerve. I was still trying to figure out what to do when he was killed at Club 13.”

“Outside,” said Lady Dalrymple. “To be precise.”

“I no longer even care about **murder**,” said Biff Brock. “This whole evening’s been a flop. Come on, Brandy. I’m sorry about earlier. Let’s blow this joint!”

“You’ll force your mitts on any floozy who bats her lashes in your general direction,” Lady Dalrymple seethed. “And as for you...” she wheeled on her erstwhile companion.

“Save it,” said Brandy, walking to Brock’s side. “After years of feeling my soul deaden in your presence, I’ve hardened so much that your talons can’t even scratch my breastplate.”

“Of course,” Chandler muttered, “it would be rough if you both got so teed off you simply left before we discovered the **murderer**. Seems suspicious to me, in fact. Where could you be going, now that it’s late, 20 below, and everything’s closed? Were you going to order your driver to take you to the woods, perhaps? I think you’re *both* the murderer!

“Enough!” cried Talbot, raising a triumphant finger. “Stay where you are, Brock! Lady Dalrymple, keep your sable on the pile! The **murderer** has been revealed!”

“How?” cried Lady Dalrymple-Fitzhugh, speaking for herself as well as for the poorer people in the room. “Are you loaded?”

“Because we know from the crime scene that the **murderer** had a particular hobby or pastime whose name is eight letters long,” he said. “And the **MURDERER’S** restless conscience has run rampant, and so throughout this entire record, the **murderer** has used at least one or two words related to that hobby or pastime every time they have spoken—with a single paragraph’s exception—for a total of at least a dozen words-slash-references. There is also at least one instance where the guilty one spoke three such words in a single paragraph.”

There was a moment of silence, as everyone realized that sentences like this contained no clues at all, since they were like words outside of quotation marks. *With any luck*, they thought, *someone will have written all this down*.

“I know who the **MURDERER** is!” Talbot continued, index finger still poised but getting a little cramped now. “I’m Dexter Talbot, and this party is over!”

HELP INSPECTOR TALBOT: What was the **murderer’s** hobby or pastime?

Answer: _____