

The Christmas Present

"How long has she been missing?"

Stout Lon Sellitto — his diet shot because of the holiday season — shrugged. "That's sort of the problem."

"Go on."

"It's sort of —"

"You said that already," Lincoln Rhyme felt obliged to point out to the NYPD detective.

"About four hours. Close to it."

Rhyme didn't even bother to comment. An adult was not even considered missing until at least twenty-four hours had passed.

"But there're circumstances, " Sellitto added. "You have to know who we're talking about."

They were in an impromptu crime scene laboratory — the living room of Rhyme's Central Park West town house in Manhattan — but it had been impromptu for years and had more equipment and supplies than most small-town police departments.

A tasteful evergreen garland had been draped around the windows, and tinsel hung from the scanning electron microscope. Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of Carols* played brightly on the stereo. It was Christmas Eve.

"It's just, she's a sweet kid. Carly is, I mean. And here her mother knows she's coming over but doesn't call her and tell her she's leaving or leave a note or anything. Which she always does.

Her mom — Susan Thompsons her name — is totally buttoned up. Very weird for her just to vanish."

"She's getting the girl a Christmas present," Rhyme said. "Didn't want to give away the surprise."

"But her car's still in the garage." Sellitto nodded out the window at the fat confetti of snow that had been falling for several hours.

"She's not going to be walking anywhere in this weather, Linc. And she's not at any of the neighbors'. Carly checked."

Had Rhyme had the use of his body — other than his left ring finger, shoulders and head — he would have given Detective Sellitto an impatient gesture, perhaps a circling of the hand, or two palms skyward. As it was, he relied solely on words. "And how did this not-so-missing-person case all come about, Lon? I detect you've been playing Samaritan. You know what they say about good deeds, don't you? They never go unpunished... Not to mention, it seems to *sort of* be falling on my shoulders, now, doesn't it?"

Sellitto helped himself to another homemade Christmas cookie. It was in the shape of Santa, but the icing face was grotesque.

"These're pretty good. You want one?"

"No," Rhyme grumbled. Then his eye strayed to a shelf. "But I'd be more inclined to listen agreeably to your sales pitch with a bit of Christmas cheer."

"Of... ? Oh. Sure." He walked across the lab, found the bottle of Macallan and poured a healthy dose into a tumbler. The detective inserted a straw and mounted the cup in the holder on Rhyme's chair.

Rhyme sipped the liquor. Ah, heaven... His aide, Thom, and the criminalist's partner, Amelia Sachs, were out shopping; if they'd been here Rhyme's beverage might have been tasty but, given the hour, would undoubtedly have been nonalcoholic.

"All right. Here's the story. Rachel's a friend of Susan and her daughter."

So it was a friend-of-the-family good deed. Rachel was Sellitto's girlfriend. Rhyme said, "The daughter being Carly. See, I *was* listening, Lon. Go on."

"Carly —"

"Who's how old?"

"Nineteen. Student at NYU. Business major. She's going with this guy from Garden City —"

"Is any of this relevant, other than her age? Which I'm not even sure is relevant."

"Tell me, Linc: You always in this good a mood during the holidays?"

Another sip of the liquor. "Keep going."

"Susan's divorced, works for a PR firm downtown. Lives in the burbs, Nassau County —"

"Nassau? Nassau? Hmm, would they *sort of be* the right constabulary to handle the matter? You understand how that works, right? That course on jurisdiction at the Academy?"

Sellitto had worked with Lincoln Rhyme for years and was quite talented at deflecting the criminalist's feistiness. He ignored the comment and continued. "She takes a couple days off to get the house ready for the holidays. Rachel tells me she and her daughter

have a teenage thing — you know, going through a rough time, the two of them. But Susan's *trying*. She wants to make everything nice for the girl, throw a big party on Christmas Day. Anyway, Carry's living in an apartment in the Village near her school. Last night she tells her mom she'll come by this morning, drop off some things and then's going to her boyfriend's. Susan says good, they'll have coffee, yadda yadda... Only when Carly gets there, Susan's gone. And her —"

"Car's still in the garage."

"Exactly. So Carly waits for a while. Susan doesn't come back. She calls the local boys but they're not going to do anything for twenty-four hours, at least. So, Carly thinks of me — I'm the only cop she knows — and calls Rachel."

"We can't do good deeds for everybody. Just because 'tis the season."

"Let's give the kid a Christmas present, Linc. Ask a few questions, look around the house."

Rhyme's expression was scowly but in fact he was intrigued. How he hated boredom... And, yes, he was often in a bad mood during the holidays — because there was invariably a lull in the stimulating cases that the NYPD or the FBI would hire him to consult on as a forensic scientist, or "criminalist" as the jargon termed it.

"So... Carly's upset. You understand."

Rhyme shrugged, one of the few gestures allowed to him after the accident at a crime scene some years ago had left him a quadriplegic. Rhyme moved his one working finger on the touch pad and maneuvered the chair to face Sellitto. "Her mother's probably home by now. But, if you really want, let's call the girl. I'll get a few facts, see what I think. What can it hurt?"

"That's great, Linc. Hold on." The large detective walked to the door and opened it.

What was this?

In walked a teenage girl, looking around shyly.

"Oh, Mr. Rhyme, hi. I'm Carly Thompson. Thanks so much for seeing me."

"Ah, you've been waiting outside," Rhyme said and offered the detective an acerbic glance. "If my friend Lon here had shared that fact with me, I'd've invited you in for a cup of tea."

"Oh, that's okay. Nothing for me."

Sellitto lifted a cheerful eyebrow and found a chair for the girl.

She had long, blonde hair and an athletic figure and her round face bore little makeup. She was dressed in MTV chic — flared jeans and a black jacket, chunky boots. To Rhyme the most remarkable thing about her, though, was her expression: Carly gave no reaction whatsoever to his disability. Some people grew tongue-tied, some chatted mindlessly, some locked their eyes on to his and grew frantic — as if a glance at his body would be the faux pas of the century. Each of those reactions pissed him off in its own way.

She smiled. "I like the decoration."

"I'm sorry?" Rhyme asked.

"The garland on the back of your chair."

The criminalist swiveled but couldn't see anything.

"There's a garland there?" he asked Sellitto.

"Yeah, you didn't know? And a red ribbon."

"That must have been courtesy of my aide," Rhyme grumbled. "Soon to be ex, he tries that again."

Carly said, "I wouldn't've bothered Mr. Sellitto or you... I wouldn't have bothered *anyone* but it's just so weird, Mom disappearing like this. She's never done that before."

Rhyme said, "Ninety-nine percent of the time there's just been a mix-up of some kind. No crime at all... And only four hours?" Another glance at Sellitto. "That's nothing."

"Except, with Mom, whatever else, she's dependable."

"When did you talk to her last?"

"It was about eight last night, I guess. She's having this party tomorrow and we were making plans for it. I was going to come over this morning and she was going to give me a shopping list and some money and Jake — that's my boyfriend — and I were going to go shopping and hang out."

"Maybe she couldn't get through on your cell," Rhyme suggested. "Where was your friend? Could she have left a message at his place?"

"Jake's? No, I just talked to him on my way here." Carly gave a rueful smile. "She likes Jake okay, you know." She played nervously with her long hair, twining it around her fingers. "But they're not the best of friends. He's..." The girl decided not to go into the details of the disapproval. "Anyway, she wouldn't call his house. His dad's... difficult."

"And she took today off from work?"

"That's right."

The door opened and Rhyme heard Amelia Sachs and Thom enter, the crinkle of paper from the shopping bags.

The tall woman, dressed in jeans and a bomber jacket, stepped into the doorway. Her red hair and shoulders were dusted with snow. She smiled at Rhyme and Sellitto. "Merry Christmas and all that."

Thom headed down the hall with the bags.

"Ah, Sachs, come on in here. It seems Detective Sellitto has volunteered our services. Amelia Sachs, Carly Thompson."

The women shook hands.

Sellitto asked, "You want a cookie?"

Carly demurred. Sachs too shook her head. "I decorated 'em, Lon — yeah, Santa looks like Boris Karloff, I know. If I never see another cookie again it'll be too soon."

Thom appeared in the door, introduced himself to Carly and then walked toward the kitchen, from which Rhyme knew refreshments were about to appear. Unlike Rhyme, his aide loved the holidays, largely because they gave him the chance to play host nearly every day.

As Sachs pulled off her jacket and hung it up, Rhyme explained the situation and what the girl had told them so far.

The policewoman nodded, taking it in. She reiterated that a person's missing for such a short time was no cause for alarm. But they'd be happy to help a friend of Lon's and Rachel's.

"Indeed we will," Rhyme said with an irony that everyone except Sachs missed.

No good deed goes unpunished...

Carly continued. "I got there about eight-thirty this morning. She wasn't home. The car was in the garage. I checked all the neighbors'. She wasn't there and nobody's seen her."

"Could she have left the night before?" Sellitto asked.

"No. She'd made coffee this morning. The pot was still warm."

Rhyme said, "Maybe something came up at work and she didn't want to drive to the station, so she took a cab."

Carly shrugged. "Could be. I didn't think about that. She's in public relations and's been working real hard lately. For one of those big Internet companies that went bankrupt. It's been totally tense... But I don't know. We didn't talk very much about her job."

Sellitto had a young detective downtown call all the cab companies in and around Glen Hollow; no taxis had been dispatched to the house that morning. They also called Susan's company to see if she'd come in, but no one had seen her and her office was locked.

Just then, as Rhyme had predicted, his slim aide, wearing a white shirt and a Jerry Garcia Christmas tie, carted in a large tray of coffee and tea and a huge plate of pastries and cookies. He poured drinks for everyone.

"No figgy pudding?" Rhyme asked acerbically.

Sachs asked Carly, "Has your mom been sad or moody?"

Thinking for a minute, she said, "Well, my grandfather — her dad — died last February. Grandpa was a great guy and she was totally bummed for a while. But by the summer, she'd come out of it. She bought this really cool house and had a lot of fun fixing it up."

"How about other people in her life, friends, boyfriends?"

"She's got some good friends, sure."

"Names, phone numbers?"

Again the girl fell quiet. "I know some of their names. Not exactly where they live. I don't have any numbers."

"Anybody she was seeing romantically?"

"She broke up with somebody about a month ago."

Sellitto asked, "Was this guy a problem, you think? A stalker? Upset about the breakup?"

The girl replied, "No, I think it was his idea. Anyway, he lived in L.A. or Seattle or some place out west. So it wasn't, you know, real serious. She just started seeing this new guy. About two weeks ago." Carly looked from Sachs to the floor. "The thing is, I love Mom and everything. But we're not real close. My folks were divorced seven, eight years ago, and that kind of changed a lot of things... Sorry I don't know more about her."

Ah, the wonderful family unit, thought Rhyme cynically. It was what made Park Avenue shrink millionaires and kept police departments around the world busy answering calls at all hours of the day and night.

"You're doing fine," Sachs encouraged. "Where's your father?"

"He lives in the city. Downtown."

"Do he and your mother see each other much?"

"Not anymore. He wanted to get back together but Mom was lukewarm and I think he gave up."

"Do *you* see him much?"

"I do, yeah. But he travels a lot. His company imports stuff, and he goes overseas to meet his suppliers."

"Is he in town now?"

"Yep. I'm going to see him on Christmas, after Mom's party."

"We should call him. See if he's heard from her," Sachs said.

Rhyme nodded and Carly gave them the man's number. Rhyme said, "I'll get in touch with him... Okay, get going, Sachs. Over to Susan's house. Carly, you go with her. Move fast."

"Sure, Rhyme. But what's the hurry?"

He glanced out the window, as if the answer were hovering there in plain view.

Sachs shook her head, perplexed. Rhyme was often piqued that people didn't tumble to things as quickly as he did. "Because the snow might tell us something about what happened there this morning." And, as he often liked to do, he added a dramatic coda: "But if it keeps coming down like this, there won't be any story left to read."

A half hour later Amelia Sachs pulled up on a quiet, tree-lined street in Glen Hollow, Long Island, parking the bright red Camaro three doors from Susan Thompson's house.

"No, it's up there," Carly pointed out.

"Here's better," Sachs said. Rhyme had drummed into her that access routes to and from the site of the crime could be crime scenes in their own right and could yield valuable information. She was ever-mindful about contaminating scenes.

Carly grimaced when she noticed that the car was still in the garage.

"I'd hoped..."

Sachs looked at the girl's face and saw raw concern. The policewoman understood: Mother and daughter had a tough relationship, that was obvious. But you never cut parental ties altogether — can't be done — and there's nothing like a missing mother to set off primal alarms.

"We'll find her," Sachs whispered.

Carly gave a faint smile and pulled her jacket tighter around her. It was stylish and obviously expensive but useless against the cold. Sachs had been a fashion model for a time but when not on the runway or at a shoot she'd dressed like a real person, to hell with what was in vogue.

Sachs looked over the house, a new, rambling two-story Colonial on a small but well-groomed lot, and called Rhyme. On a real case she'd be patched through to him on her Motorola. Since this wasn't official business, though, she simply used her hands-free cord and cell phone, which was clipped to her belt a few inches away from her Glock automatic pistol.

"I'm at the house," she told him. "What's that music?"

After a moment "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" went silent.

"Sorry. Thom insists on being in the *spirit*. What do you see, Sachs?"

She explained where she was and the layout of the place. "The snow's not too bad here but you're right: in another hour it'll cover up any prints."

"Stay off the walks and check out if there's been any surveillance."

"Got it."

Sachs asked Carly what prints were hers. The girl explained that she had parked in front of the garage — Sachs could see the tread marks in the snow — and then had gone through the kitchen door.

Carly behind her, Sachs made a circuit of the property.

"Nothing in the back or side yard, except for Carly's footprints," she told Rhyme.

"There are no visible prints, you mean," he corrected. "That's not necessarily 'nothing.'"

"Okay, Rhyme. That's what I meant. Damn, it's cold."

They circled to the front of the house. Sachs found footsteps in the snow on the path between the street and the house. A car had stopped at the curb. There was one set of prints walking toward the house and two walking back, suggesting the driver had picked Susan up. She told Rhyme this. He asked, "Can you tell anything from the shoes? Size, sole prints, weight distribution?"

"Nothing's clear." She winced as she bent down; her arthritic joints ached in the cold and damp. "But one thing's odd — they're real close together."

"As if one of them had an arm around the other person."

"Right."

"Could be affection. Could be coercion. We'll assume — hope — the second set is Susan's, and that, whatever happened, at least she's alive. Or was a few hours ago."

Then Sachs noticed a curious indentation in the snow, next to one of the front windows. It was as if somebody had stepped off the sidewalk and knelt on the ground. In this spot you could see clearly into the living room and kitchen beyond. She sent Carly to open the

front door and then whispered into the microphone, "May have a problem, Rhyme... It looks like somebody was kneeling down, looking through the window."

"Any other evidence there, Sachs? Discernible prints, cigarette butts, other impressions, trace?"

"Nothing."

"Check the house, Sachs. And, just for the fun of it, pretend it's hot."

"But how could a perp be inside?"

"Humor me."

The policewoman stepped to the front door, unzipping her leather jacket to give her fast access to her weapon. She found the girl in the entryway, looking around the house. It was still, except for the tapping and whirs of household machinery. The lights were on — though Sachs found this more troubling than if it'd been dark; it suggested that Susan had left in a hurry. You don't shut out the lights when you're being abducted.

Sachs told the girl to stay close and she started through the place, praying she wouldn't find a body. But, no; they looked everywhere the woman might be. Nothing. And no signs of a struggle.

"The scene's clear, Rhyme."

"Well, that's something."

"I'm going to do a fast grid here, see if we can find any clue where she went. I'll call you back if I find anything."

On the main floor Sachs paused at the mantel and looked over a number of framed photographs. Susan Thompson was a tall, solidly built woman with short blonde hair, feathered back. She had an

agreeable smile. Most of the pictures were of her with Carly or with an older couple, probably her parents. Many had been taken out-of-doors, apparently on hiking or camping trips.

They looked for any clue that might indicate where the woman was. Sachs studied the calendar next to the phone in the kitchen. The only note in today's square said *C here*.

The girl gave a sad laugh. Were the single letter and terse notation an emblem of how Carly believed the woman saw her? Sachs wondered what exactly the problems were between daughter and mother. She herself had always had a complex relationship with her own mother. "Challenging" was how she'd described it to Rhyme.

"Day-Timer? Palm Pilot?"

Carly looked around. "Her purse is gone. She keeps them in there... I'll try her cell again." The girl did and the frustrated, troubled look told Sachs that there was no answer. "Goes right to voice mail."

Sachs tried all three phones in the house, hitting "redial." Two got her directory assistance. The other was the number for a local branch of North Shore Bank. Sachs asked to speak to the manager and told her they were trying to locate Susan Thompson. The woman said she'd been in about two hours ago.

Sachs told this to Carly, who closed her eyes in relief. "Where did she go after that?"

The policewoman asked the manager the question and the woman responded that she had no idea. Then she asked hesitantly, "Are you calling because she wasn't feeling well?"

"What do you mean?" Sachs asked.

"It's just that she didn't look very good when she was in. That man she was with... well, he had his arm around her the whole time. I

was thinking maybe she was sick."

Sachs asked if they could come in and speak with her.

"Of course. If I can help."

Sachs told Carly what the woman had said.

"Not feeling well? And some man?" The girl frowned. "Who?"

"Let's go find out."

As they approached the door, though, Sachs stopped. "Do me a favor," she said to the girl.

"Sure. What?"

"Borrow one of your mothers jackets. You're making me cold just looking at you."



The branch manager of the bank explained to Sachs and Carly, "She went into her safety deposit box downstairs and then cashed a check."

"You don't know what she did down there, I assume?" the policewoman asked.

"No, no, employees are never around when customers go into their boxes."

"And that man? Any idea who he was?"

"No."

"What did he look like?" Sachs asked.

"He was big. Six-two, six-three. Balding. Didn't smile much."

The police detective glanced at Carly, who shook her head. "I've never seen her with anybody like that."

They found the teller who'd cashed the check but Susan hadn't said anything to her either, except how she'd like the money.

"How much was the check for?" Sachs asked.

The manager hesitated — probably some confidentiality issue — but Carly said, "Please. We're worried about her." The woman nodded to the teller, who said, "A thousand."

Sachs stepped aside and called Rhyme on her cell. She explained what had happened at the bank.

"Getting troubling now, Sachs. A thousand doesn't seem like much for a robbery or kidnapping, but wealth's relative. Maybe that's a lot of money to this guy."

"I'm more curious about the safe deposit box."

Rhyme said, "Good point. Maybe she had something he wanted. But what? She's just a businesswoman and mother. It's not like she's an investigative reporter or cop. And the bad news is, if that's the case, he's got what he was after. He might not need her anymore. I think it's time to get Nassau County involved. Maybe... Wait, you're at the bank?"

"Right."

"The video! Get the video."

"Oh, at the teller cage, sure. But —"

"No, no, no," Rhyme snapped. "Of the *parking* lot. All banks have video surveillance of the lots. If they parked there it'll have his car

on tape. Maybe the tag number too."

Sachs returned to the manager and she called the security chief, who disappeared into a back office. A moment later he gestured them inside and ran the tape.

"There!" Carly cried. "That's her. And that guy? Look, he's still holding on to her. He's not letting her go."

"Looks pretty fishy, Rhyme."

"Can you see the car?" the criminalist asked. Sachs had the guard freeze the tape. "What kind of —"

"Chevy Malibu," the guard said.

"This year's model." Sachs told this to Rhyme and, examining the screen, added, "It's burgundy. And the last two numbers on the tag are seventy-eight. The one before it could be three or eight, maybe six. Hard to tell. It's a New York plate."

"Good, Sachs. Okay. It's up to the uniforms now. Lon'll have them put out a locator. Nassau, Suffolk, Westchester and the five boroughs. Jersey too. We'll prioritize it. Oh, hold on a minute..." Sachs heard him speaking to someone. Rhyme came back on the line. "Susan's ex is on his way over here. He's worried about his daughter. He'd like to see her."

Sachs told Carly this. Her face brightened. The detective added, "There's nothing more we can do here. Let's go back to the city."



Amelia Sachs and Carly Thompson had just returned to the lab in Rhyme's town house when Anthony Dalton arrived. Thorn led him inside and he stopped abruptly, looking at his daughter. "Hello, honey."

"Dad! I'm so glad you came!"

With both affection and concern in his eyes, he stepped toward the girl and hugged her hard.

Dalton was a fit man in his late forties with a boyish flop of salt-and-pepper hair. He wore a complicated ski jacket, straps and flaps going every which way. He reminded Rhyme of the college professors he sometimes shared the podium with when he was lecturing on forensics at criminal justice colleges.

"Do they know anything?" he asked, apparently only now realizing that Rhyme was in a wheelchair — and finding the fact unremarkable. Like his daughter, Anthony Dalton earned serious points with Rhyme for this.

The criminalist explained exactly what had happened and what they knew.

Dalton shook his head. "But it doesn't necessarily mean she's been kidnapped," he said quickly.

"No, no, not at all," Sellitto said. "We're just not taking any chances."

Rhyme asked, "Do you know anyone who'd want to hurt her?"

He shook his head. "I have no idea. I haven't seen Susan in a year. But when we were together? No, everybody liked her. Even when some of her PR clients had done some pretty shady things, nobody had a problem with her personally. And she always seemed to have the particularly nasty clients."

Rhyme was troubled — for reasons beyond the danger to Susan Thompson. The problem was that this wasn't a real case. They'd backed into it, doing a favor for someone; it was a Christmas present, as Sellitto had said. He needed more facts; he needed

serious forensics. He'd always felt you run a case 110 percent or you don't run it at all.

Thom brought more coffee in and replenished the plate of ugly cookies. Dalton nodded at the aide and thanked him. Then the businessman poured coffee from the pot for himself. "You want some?" he asked Carly.

"Sure, I guess."

He poured it and asked, "Anyone else?"

No one else wanted anything. But Rhyme's eyes flipped to the Macallan on the shelf and, lo and behold, without a syllable of protest, Thom took the bottle and walked to Rhyme's Storm Arrow. He opened the tumbler, then frowned. He sniffed it. "Odd, I thought I washed this out last night. I guess I forgot," he added wryly.

"We can't all be perfect, now," Rhyme said.

Thorn poured a few fingers into the tumbler and replaced it in the holder.

"Thank you, Balthazar. You can keep your job for now — despite the weeds on the back of my chair."

"You don't like them? I told you I was going to decorate for the holidays."

"The house. Not me."

"What do we do now?" Dalton asked.

"We wait," Sellitto said. "DMV's running all the Malibus with that fragment of a tag number. Or, if we're real lucky, some officer on the street'll notice it." He pulled his coat off a chair. "I gotta go down to the Big Building for a while. Call me if anything happens."

Dalton thanked him, then he looked at his watch, took out his mobile phone and called his office to say he'd have to miss his office Christmas party. He explained that the police were looking into his ex-wife's disappearance and he was with his daughter at the moment. He wasn't going to leave the girl alone.

Carly hugged him. "Thanks, Dad." Her eyes lifted to the window, staring at the swirling snow. A long moment passed. Carly glanced at the others in the room and turned toward her father. In a soft voice she said, "I always wondered what would have happened if you and Mom hadn't broken up."

Dalton laughed, ran his hand through his hair, mussing it further. "I've thought about that too."

Sachs glanced at Rhyme and they turned away, letting the father and daughter continue talking in relative privacy.

"The guys Mom's dated? They were okay. But nobody special. None of them lasted very long."

"It's tough to meet the right person," Dalton said.

"I guess..."

"What?"

"I guess I've always wished you'd get back together."

Dalton seemed at a loss for words. "I tried. You know that. But your mom was in a different place."

"But you stopped trying a couple of years ago."

"I could read the writing on the wall. People have to move on."

"But she misses you. I know she does."

Dalton laughed, "Oh, I don't know about that."

"No, no, really. When I ask her about you, she tells me what a cool guy you were. You were funny. She said you made her laugh."

"We had some good times."

Carly said, "When I asked Mom what happened between you, she said it wasn't anything totally terrible."

"True," Dalton said, sipping his coffee. "We just didn't know how to be husband and wife back then. We got married too young."

"Well, you're not young anymore..." Carly blushed. "Oh, I didn't mean it like that."

But Dalton said, "No, you're right. I've grown up a lot since then."

"And Mom's really changed. She used to be so quiet, you know. Just no fun. But she's into all kinds of things now. Camping and hiking, rafting, all that out-of-doors stuff."

"Really?" Dalton asked. "I never pictured her going in for that kind of thing."

Carly looked off for a moment. "Remember those business trips you'd take when I was a kid? You'd go to Hong Kong or Japan?"

"Setting up our overseas offices, sure."

"I wanted all of us to go. You, Mom and me..." She played with her coffee cup. "But she was always like, 'Oh, there's too much to do at home.' Or, 'Oh, we'll get sick if we drink the water,' or whatever. We never did take a family vacation. Not a real one."

"I always wanted that too." Dalton shook his head sadly. "And I'd get mad when she didn't want to come along and bring you. But she's your mother; it's her job to look out for you. All she wanted

was for you to be safe." He smiled. "I remember once when I was in Tokyo and calling home. And —"

His words were interrupted when Rhyme's phone rang. He spoke into the microphone on his chair, "Command, answer phone."

"Detective Rhyme?" the voice clattered through the speaker.

The rank was out of date — a "Ret." belonged with it — but he said, "Go ahead."

"This's Trooper Bronson, New York State Police."

"Go ahead."

"We had an emergency vehicle locator request regarding a burgundy Malibu and understand you're involved in the case."

"That's right."

"We've found the vehicle, sir."

Rhyme heard Carly gasp. Dalton stepped beside the girl and put his arm around her shoulder. What would they hear? That Sue Thompson was dead?

"Go ahead."

"The car's moving west, looks like it's headed for the George Washington Bridge."

"Occupants?"

"Two. Man and a woman. Can't tell anything more."

"Thank God. She's alive." Dalton sighed.

Heading toward Jersey, Rhyme reflected. The flats were among the most popular places for dumping bodies in the metro area.

"Registered to a Richard Musgrave, Queens. No warrants."

Rhyme glanced at Carly, who shook her head, meaning she had no clue who he was.

Sachs leaned forward toward the speaker and identified herself. "Are you near the car?"

"About two hundred feet behind."

"You in a marked vehicle?"

"That's right."

"How far from the bridge?"

"A mile or two east."

Rhyme glanced at Sachs. "You want to join the party? You can stay right on their tail in the Camaro."

"You bet." She ran for the door.

"Sachs," Rhyme called.

She glanced back.

"You have chains on your Chevy?"

Sachs laughed. "Chains on a muscle car, Rhyme? No."

"Well, try not to skid into the Hudson, okay? It's probably pretty cold."

"I'll do my best."



True, a rear-wheel-drive sports car, with more than four hundred eager horses under the hood, was not the best vehicle to drive on snow. But Amelia Sachs had spent much of her youth skidding cars on hot asphalt in illegal races around Brooklyn (and sometimes just because, why not, it's always a blast to do one-eighties); this little bit of snow meant nothing to her.

She now slipped her Camaro SS onto the expressway and pushed the accelerator down. The wheels spun for only five seconds before they gripped and sped her up to eighty.

"I'm on the bridge, Rhyme," she called into her headset. "Where are they?"

"About a mile west. Are you —"

The car started to swerve. "Hold on, Rhyme, I'm going sideways."

She brought the skid under control. "A VW doing fifty in the fast lane. Man, doesn't that just frost you?"

In another mile she'd caught up to the trooper, keeping back, just out of sight of the Malibu. She looked past him and saw the car ease into the right lane and signal for an exit.

"Rhyme, can you get me a patch through to the trooper?" she asked.

"Hold on..." A long pause. Rhyme's frustrated voice. "I can never figure out —" He was cut off and she heard two clicks. Then the trooper said, "Detective Sachs?"

"I'm here. Go ahead."

"Is that you behind me, in that fine red set of wheels?"

"Yep."

"How do you want to handle this?"

"Who's driving? The man or the woman?"

"The man."

She thought for a moment. "Make it seem like a routine traffic stop. Taillight him or something. After he's on the shoulder I'll get in front and sandwich him in. You take the passenger side and I'll get the driver out. We don't know that he's armed and we don't know that he's not. But the odds are it's an abduction, so assume he's got a weapon."

"Roger that, Detective."

"Okay, let's do it."

The Malibu exited. Sachs tried to look through the rear window. She couldn't see anything through the snow. The burgundy car rolled down the ramp and braked slowly to a stop at a red light. When it turned green the car eased forward through the slush and snow.

The trooper's voice crackled into her ear. "Detective Sachs, are you ready?"

"Yep. Let's nail him."

The light bar on his Police Interceptor Crown Victoria started flashing and he hit the squeal once. The driver of the Malibu looked up into the rearview mirror and the car swerved momentarily. Then it pulled to a stop on the side of road, bleak town houses on the left and reedy marshes on the right.

Sachs punched the accelerator and skidded to a stop in front of the Malibu, blocking it. She was out the door in an instant, pulling her

Glock from her holster and jogging fast toward the car.



Forty minutes later a grim Amelia Sachs walked into Rhymes town house.

"How bad was it?" Rhyme asked.

"Pretty bad." She poured herself a double scotch and drank down half the liquor fast. Unusual for her; Amelia Sachs was a sipper.

"Pretty bad," she repeated.

Sachs was not, however, referring to any bloody shootout in Jersey, but to the embarrassment of what they'd done.

"Tell me."

Sachs had radioed in from the roadside to tell Rhyme, Carly and Anthony Dalton that Susan was fine. Sachs hadn't been able to go into the details then, though. Now she explained, "The guy in the car was that man she's been seeing for the past couple of weeks." A glance at Carly. "Rich Musgrave, the one you mentioned. It's his car. He called this morning and they'd made plans to go shopping at the Jersey outlet malls. Only what happened was, when she went out to get the newspaper this morning she slipped on the ice."

Dalton nodded. "The front path — it's like a ski slope."

Carly winced. "Mom always said that she was a born klutz."

Sachs continued, "She hurt her knee and didn't want to drive. So she called Rich back and asked him to pick her up. Oh, the spot in the snow where I thought somebody was looking in the window? It was where she fell."

"That's why he was so close to her," Rhyme mused. "He was helping her walk."

Sachs nodded. "And at the bank, there was no mystery — she really did need something out of the safe deposit box. And the thousand bucks was for Christmas shopping."

Carly frowned. "But she knew I was coming by. Why didn't she call me?"

"Oh, she wrote you a note."

"Note?"

"It said she'd be out for the day but she'd be back home by six."

"No!... But I never saw it."

"Because," Sachs explained, "after she fell she was pretty shaken up and forgot to leave it on the entryway table like she'd planned. She found it in her purse when I told her it wasn't there. And she didn't have her cell phone turned on."

Dalton laughed. "All a misunderstanding." He put his arm around his daughter's shoulders.

Carly, blushing again, said, "I'm really, really sorry I panicked. I should've known there was an explanation."

"That's what we're here for," Sachs said.

Which wasn't exactly true, Rhyme reflected sourly. No good deed...

As she pulled on her coat, Carly invited Rhyme, Sachs and Thom to the Christmas party tomorrow afternoon at her mother's. "It's the least we can do."

"I'm sure Thom and Amelia would be *delighted* to go," Rhyme said quickly. "Unfortunately, I think I have plans." Cocktail parties bored him.

"No," Thom said. "You don't have any plans."

Sachs added, "Nope, no plans."

A scowl from Rhyme. "I think I know my calendar better than anyone else."

Which wasn't exactly true either.

After the father and daughter had gone, Rhyme said to Thom, "Since you blew the whistle on my unencumbered social schedule tomorrow, you can do penance."

"What?" the aide asked cautiously.

"Take the goddamn decorations off my chair. I feel like Santa Claus."

"Humbug," Thom said and did as asked. He turned the radio on. A carol streamed into the room.

Rhyme nodded toward the speaker. "Aren't we lucky there are only *twelve* days of Christmas? Can you imagine how interminable that song would be if there were twenty?" He sang, "Twenty muggers mugging, nineteen burglars burgling..."

Thom sighed and said to Sachs, "All I want for Christmas is a nice, complicated jewelry heist right about now — something to pacify him."

"Eighteen aides complaining," Rhyme continued the song. He added, "See, Thom, I *am* in the holiday spirit. Despite what you think."



Susan Thompson climbed out of Rich Musgraves Malibu. The large, handsome man was holding the door for her. She took his hand and he eased her to her feet; her shoulder and knee still ached fiercely from the spill she'd taken on the ice that morning.

"What a day," she said, sighing.

"I don't mind getting pulled over by the cops," Rich said, laughing. "I could've done without the guns, though."

Carrying all her shopping bags in one hand, he helped her to the front door. They walked carefully over the three-inch blanket of fine snow.

"You want to come in? Carly's here — that's her car. You can watch me prostrate myself in front of her and apologize for being such a bozo. I could've sworn I left that note on the table."

"I think I'll let you run the gauntlet on your own." Rich was divorced too and was spending Christmas eve with his two sons at his place in Armonk. He needed to pick them up soon. She thanked him again for everything and apologized once more for the scare with the police. He'd been a nice guy about the whole thing. But, as she fished her keys out of her purse and watched him walk back to the car, she reflected that there was no doubt the relationship wasn't going anywhere. What was the problem? Susan wondered. Rough edges, she supposed. She wanted a gentleman. She wanted somebody who was kind, who had a sense of humor. Somebody who could make her laugh.

She waved good-bye and stepped into the house, pulled the door shut behind her.

Carly had already started on the decorations, bless her, and Susan smelled something cooking in the kitchen. Had the girl made dinner? This was a first. She looked into the den and blinked in surprise. Carly'd decked out the room beautifully, garlands, ribbons, candles.

And on the coffee table was a big plate of cheese and crackers, a bowl of nuts, fruit, two glasses sitting beside a bottle of California sparkling wine. The girl was nineteen, but Susan let her have some wine when they were home alone.

"Honey, how wonderful!"

"Mom," Carly called, walking to the doorway. "I didn't hear you come in."

The girl was carrying a baking dish. Inside were some hot canapes. She set it on the table and hugged her mother.

Susan threw her arms around the girl, ignoring the pain from the fall that morning. She apologized for the mistake about the note and for making her daughter worry so much. The girl, though, just laughed it off.

"Is it true that policeman's in a wheelchair?" Susan asked. "He can't move?"

"He's not a policeman anymore. He's kind of a consultant. But, yeah, he's paralyzed."

Carly went on to explain about Lincoln Rhyme and how they'd found her and Rich Musgrave. Then she wiped her hands on her apron and took it off. "Mom, I want to give you one of your presents tonight."

"Tonight? Are we starting a new tradition?"

"Maybe we are."

"Well, okay..." Then Susan took the girl's arm. "In that case, let me give you mine first." She got her purse from the table and dug inside. She found the small velvet box. "This is what I got out of the safe deposit box this morning."

She handed it to the girl, who opened it. Her eyes went wide. "Oh, Mom..."

It was an antique diamond and emerald ring.

"This was —"

"Grandma's. Her engagement ring." Susan nodded. "I wanted you to have something special. I know you've had a rough time lately, honey. I've been too busy at work. I haven't been as nice to Jake as I should. And some of the men I've dated... well, I know you didn't like them that much." A laughing whisper. "Of course, I didn't like them that much either. I'm resolving not to date losers anymore."

Carly frowned. "Mom, you've never dated losers... More like semi-losers."

"That's even worse! I couldn't even find a red-blooded, full-fledged loser to date!"

Carly hugged her mother again and put the ring on. "It's so beautiful."

"Merry Christmas, honey." . "Now, time for your present."

"I think I like our new tradition."

Her daughter instructed, "Sit down. Close your eyes. I'm going outside to get it."

"All right."

"Sit on the couch right there."

She sat and closed her eyes tight.

"Don't peek."