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A NOVEL  
MURDER  
BOOK

"A MODERN MASTER." —BOOKLIST

# MURDER BOOK

THOMAS PERRY



THE MYSTERIOUS PRESS  
NEW YORK

*For Jo*

# 1

Larson parked the car in the lot behind the Mini Market where there were no lights over the lot after closing, and he and Kirk got out and walked. The streets of Groomsburg were so quiet and deserted late on a weeknight that Larson thought he probably could have parked in the middle of the street and nobody would have noticed. That was an exaggeration, but the store windows along here had all been dark for hours. People in these old towns on the river all seemed to get up with the sun, and go to bed with it too. The stop light at the intersection ahead of them that blinked red in the daytime was blinking yellow now.

Their destination was just past the light, so it wouldn't be long. As they walked closer, he and Kirk scanned the area for signs of life, and saw nothing worth mentioning—no pedestrians, no headlights, nothing to worry about. They walked up to the electronics store, past the sign that said, “Computers, Phones, Warranty Repairs.”

The big problem with electronics stores was that every last one of them had cameras recording everything that went on inside or outside. Larson and Kirk never paused or looked up, so there wouldn't be a recording of them peering into the shop or anything. They kept going past the window before they turned and went down the side of the building toward the back. They put on black face masks and Larson took out the roll of trash bags and peeled one off before they emerged and stepped toward the back door. Larson looked behind him and saw a car edged up to the rear of the building. What was that doing in the alley? But it wasn't a police car, it was empty, and not running, so he didn't let it distract him. He looked forward and saw Kirk standing under the first security camera pointing up at it.

Larson joined him, squatted and let Kirk, who was only about 160 pounds, climb up onto his shoulders. Larson stood and waited while Kirk slipped the trash bag over the camera and taped it closed with electrical tape. Then Larson carried Kirk to the next camera and stood still while Kirk put another bag over that camera and slid down to the pavement. Larson took out the crowbar, stuck the flat end into the space beside the metal door, and pried the door away from the jamb far enough to let Kirk push the blade of a screwdriver in to depress the lock's plunger and push the door inward.

As the door swung open, they were surprised to see lights on inside. They both slipped in and Larson quickly swung the door closed behind them, but it didn't seem to fit right anymore, probably because the door had gotten bent a little when he'd pried it aside. He saw a rubber doorstep on the floor, held the door shut, and jammed the doorstep under it with his foot.

He didn't expect to be in the store for long anyway. All they had been sent to accomplish was to smash the computers and phones that were there for repairs and mess the place up, and

that wouldn't take much time. They were supposed to leave all the new computers and phones in the front alone. The bosses didn't want Donald Whelan to go bankrupt and stop earning money. They just wanted to show him who he was dealing with—people who could get to him, his store, his family anytime they wanted and make him hurt. Steel doors and locks wouldn't stop them.

Kirk was ahead of him, going through an open doorway into a larger space that was clearly a workshop. Larson followed him in, and then saw a spotless white table on each side of the next door, with a couple of stools under it. Above them and around the walls were sets of metal shelves with boxes that held cell phones, chargers, laptop computers, big-screen desk models, some with handwritten notes taped to them that looked like descriptions of computer problems, and bills that implied some of them were already fixed, waiting for somebody to pick them up and pay.

Kirk reached to the top shelf of the biggest set of metal shelves and stepped backward to pull it over. Boxes slid off shelves, dumping computers, phones, and parts onto the floor, and then the steel frame crashed down on top of them. Kirk looked back at Larson with a gleeful, delighted expression. Larson smiled too. Whelan would have to tell all those customers why he hadn't fixed their stuff. It would pass the fear to the others like an infection.

Suddenly the door between the two workbenches swung open, and an older man looked in, already staring in shock at the floor. Larson knew it had to be Donald Whelan confirming what he thought he'd heard. Whelan gaped when he saw Larson and Kirk, but he didn't shout or swear at them. He instantly pulled back and slammed the door behind him.

Kirk was after him in an instant like a dog after a squirrel, through the door and into the showroom. Larson was a few steps behind, and he saw Whelan crouch at the counter, reach under it, and pop back up to face Kirk holding a pistol. Kirk's eyes widened as he stopped short, but Larson kept coming. He swung the crowbar into Whelan's head, splitting his skull and sending a spray of blood across the counter and onto the white floor beyond.



It was midafternoon and Harry Duncan was in the office in his apartment on Huron Street in North Center Chicago. From the window above his desk, he could look between two old gray stone buildings and see the North Branch of the Chicago River a bit over a block away. He was gathering the last notes and records of the investigation he had just finished and adding them to the case's fat loose-leaf notebook to be stored, when the desk phone rang. He picked it up. "Harry Duncan."

"Mr. Duncan, this is Lena Stratton in the office of Ellen Leicester. She asked me to call because she'd like to meet with you this week. Would you be available for that?"

It took Duncan enough time to consider it that he had to cover the delay by saying, "Let me just see when I'm free. When and where would she like to meet? Her office?"

"She'd like to meet you at the Atwood Restaurant on West Washington. If you could make it tomorrow after three, that would work."

Duncan realized his strongest response to the idea was curiosity, so he said, "I'm sorry, I'm busy tomorrow. Does she have any time today?"

"She could be available after six today, if that's better."

"I can do that. Let's say six-thirty. And you said the Atwood?"

"Yes. I'll make the reservation."

“Thank you,” Duncan said, and hung up the phone. He couldn’t help wondering if Lena Stratton knew who he was. Assistants eventually came to know just about everything about their bosses, which was one of the reasons why when his last one left he had never replaced her. He decided that this woman probably didn’t know he and Ellen had once been married. To her Ellen was probably just US Attorney Ellen Leicester, and he was—what? Nobody. Ellen had been good at keeping a wall between what she knew and what others knew. He wondered what she wanted from him after all this time.

He finished the case record and stood the notebook upright on a shelf that held the last dozen, waiting for him to put them into storage when he got around to it. As he always did, he reminded himself to do it before the weight of them broke the shelf and dumped them on the floor. He had learned to call these notebooks “Murder Books” when he had worked Homicide. Too often these days that name wasn’t inaccurate.

At six-thirty he walked up to the restaurant. It was all windows, right in the State Street shopping district, and he spotted her from a distance, sitting alone at a table for two, facing the back of the room. She had just turned forty-two on March 20th—there was no way he could erase his ex-wife’s birthday and get that memory space back—and she still looked young. He stepped inside and she waved. As he walked toward her, he noted that she didn’t smile.

He arrived and said, “Hello, Ellen. How are you?”

“Fine, Harry,” she said. “Thank you for coming. She made a slight gesture to indicate the two coffee cups. “I assume you still take it with no sugar and a little bit of cream.”

“Yes.”

It was business. Her tone told him that, so he said, “What can I do for you?”

“Please sit down,” she said. When he was seated across from her she said, “You know that I’m a US Attorney now, right?”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you. I’ll try to give you the reason I called, as briefly as I can. Some disturbing trends have been emerging in the crime reports we’ve been getting lately. In the past year or so, there have been a number of career criminals showing up in unexpected places. The way this first came to me were reports that certain past offenders from this district began to disappear from here and turn up committing crimes in places like rural Indiana.”

Duncan said, “What sorts of crimes?”

“Assaults and robberies by teams rather than individuals, extortion, and that sort of thing. There have been a few robberies that included murders. If it had been happening here, some of these crimes might not have made the TV news. It isn’t that one crime is a big deal. But having a lot of them at once where there weren’t any before might be. What we’re noticing could be the very start of an organized crime syndicate.”

“It’s possible,” Duncan said. “There’s always somebody trying to be the next mafia.”

“I’ve talked to a few colleagues inside Justice, trying to find people who might take something like this seriously. What I’ve found is that nobody else thinks it merits taking FBI agents away from espionage, homeland security, and financial crimes to look. Some people point out that we’ve got a huge backlog of criminal cases, as though I hadn’t noticed. And so on. Everybody’s got a reason not to do anything. And technically, most of this stuff should be the business of the state of Indiana, or at least the Indiana US Attorney’s office.”

“But you want to look into it.”

“I can’t see ignoring it,” she said. “But I’ll need more than a suspicion to launch a full-scale investigation, especially in another district. I think the solution is to have an outside expert take a look and either verify it or rule it out. It has to be done quietly. I looked at the

private consultants and investigators who have been hired by the department in the past and kept on a short list. I saw your name.”

“And you figured I must be on the skids by now and would be glad to take a job looking at muggings in East Jesus, Indiana.”

“No. It’s not like that at all. You should see the evaluations other prosecutors have given you.” She lowered her voice. “The reason I’m asking you is that when I looked at the list of approved names, I saw yours. Our marriage didn’t work, but it left me with all the knowledge I needed about you. I know you have the intelligence, the honesty, and the courage. I know from your record since those days that you have the experience. I don’t really know those things about any of the others. This is also a job that’s delicate. There are a lot of people who are very rigid about things like jurisdictions.”

“I can imagine,” he said.

“All I’m asking is that you go to some of the places where these things have been happening. It’s a scouting mission by a well-respected consultant. You make your observations and write a report telling me it’s something the government should investigate or it’s not.”

“I assume you know I get paid for this kind of thing.”

“And you know the range of fees the Department pays,” she said. “I’ve set your fee at the top level. It’s not a gesture for old times’ sake. I don’t make any gifts of public funds. The record of your other services justifies it. And of course you can submit a claim for necessary expenses.”

“Anybody know I’m your ex-husband?”

“I haven’t mentioned to anyone I was doing this, let alone which consultant I want to contract. Ex-spouses are not relatives, you’re not an employee, and I’m not your supervisor.”

“True enough,” he said.

“Look, Harry. I don’t know what you feel about me after all these years, I suppose because you’re too decent to say. If you don’t want to help me with this, I’m in no position to blame you. But feelings aside, you also know me. I’m not lying to you about any of it.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “I’ll take a look.” He instantly felt a stab of regret. She’d had no right to bother him for any reason, let alone something like this. It wasn’t even a smart plan. It was likely to alienate her colleagues and bosses and accomplish nothing. He considered saying, “On second thought, I take that back. This isn’t for me.” The words didn’t come. Instead, he stood. “I’ve got to go. Email me the details and I’ll start in a day or two.”



A town slid into view as Harry Duncan drove around a curve in the road that ran beside the Ash River in Indiana. The river was a nearly opaque gray flow fifty to a hundred feet wide that meandered for eighty miles through flat farm country and second-growth woods. Duncan was fairly sure this town was the one that he had chosen as the place to start his assignment, but on maps these little towns were just dots along the water, and it was possible this one might be the wrong dot.

He had driven here from Chicago, which was the most recent of several cities where he had built his skills and reputation as a cop, and where he then became a private investigator and added to the number of people who would have liked to see him dead.

He was driving a boxy-shaped Toyota that he had bought in Illinois and driven straight from the dealer’s lot to a custom shop, where they put in a bigger engine, and then removed every piece of shiny metal and all words, numbers, and logos, so the car would have been

difficult to identify by name or to describe. His first act after heading into Indiana had been to install the set of Indiana license plates he had obtained through Ellen Leicester's office.

He wasn't exactly sure why he had agreed to take this assignment. His marriage to Ellen had lasted about three years. A divorce between two law students who had no children and virtually no money was quick and efficient, and then he'd left law school and driven to California. During the succeeding fifteen years they had never been in touch.

Since he had just finished a case, he'd had some time he hadn't yet agreed to devote to anything else, so he had given in to his curiosity about what she could want after all this time. He'd walked into the restaurant with the word "no" waiting on his tongue, but during the conversation he had delayed delivering it until he'd heard too much. He still wasn't sure why he had said he'd do it. She'd assured him this was going to be a simple, undemanding observation of a couple of small towns and a report. Maybe she was right.

Harry Duncan was exactly six feet tall with light brown hair and an athletic body that had sustained the sorts of scars incidental to a history of jobs that involved differences of opinion, but he could keep them unseen without much effort. Over the years he had become adept at making himself seem less formidable than he was so he could observe. The long drive had made him hungry, and he hoped the next town would have a good place to stop.

He drove the next two curves of the river and noticed a large one-story building with clapboard siding that identified it as antique situated in the middle of a vast parking lot with a tall lighted sign mounted above it that read, "The Elbow Room." It looked like a bar, and most bars served some kind of food.

There were a few cars parked around it, which he hoped meant it was open. He veered to the left and coasted across the lot into a parking space near the building, got out of his car, and walked inside the nearest entrance. He sat on a stool at the fifty-foot polished wooden bar and waited until the woman behind it came up to him and smiled. "What can I bring you, sir?" she said.

"Are you serving lunch?"

She smiled. "I'm sorry, sir. Lunch is eleven to one and it's now one-fifteen. You can have the same food, but we can't call it lunch." She reached under the bar and pushed a plastic-covered menu in front of him.

He looked at the menu. "Is the hamburger okay?"

"We've been assured that it's ground beef, made from an animal recently deceased. I'll be cooking it myself, so it will be safe to eat too."

"Then I'll chance it."

"I'll get it started. Before I come back you should think about what you want with it—lettuce, tomato, French fries, beer and what kind, onions and what kind." She went through a swinging door into the kitchen. About thirty seconds later she reappeared.

Harry Duncan confirmed his first impression, which was that he didn't want to stop talking to her, or even look away from her. She had long, straight, reddish-brown hair and green eyes that seemed constantly amused. Duncan had long ago become aware that the most beautiful sight on the planet was an adult female human being. This was a trait shared in some degree by every woman if she was watched by an astute observer, but this woman was striking. She was still smiling as she wrote down the rest of his order and offered him a local lager called "Ash River's Best." She set the brown bottle in front of him.

"I don't know," he said. "Have you seen the water in that river?"

"Drink a little of the beer. If you don't like it don't pay and I'll pretend to spill it." She took the bottle, twisted off the cap, and poured some into a tall pilsner glass.



He sipped it and admitted to himself it was very good, but to her he only held his right thumb up. She curtsied, as though accepting applause. Duncan ate his food while she opened a dishwasher under the bar, polished glasses with a clean white dish towel, and put them in an overhead rack. As he watched her work, he detected very small crow's feet at the corners of her eyes, and guessed she was probably just about his age. He would never see forty again, but his thirties were recent enough so he hadn't noticed any changes yet. She was better off, probably lied about her age and easily got away with it. He felt an urge to get her to talk so he could listen to her voice some more. "What's the name of this town?" he asked. "I didn't see a sign when I drove in."

"A guy clipped it on the turn one night and it flew into the river. We're all waiting for the new one to be delivered. The town is called Parkman's Elbow."

"Unusual."

"It's an old name. The first man here was named Lafayette Parkman. He built a thousand-acre farm along the water and named the river the Ash-Gray River. I guess it was because there was a Blue River and a White River already. Maybe Red was taken too. The name was gradually worn down to the Ash River. As you probably noticed, it meanders. Seventeen turns. People named the meander on Parkman's land Parkman's Elbow."

"I suppose that's why this bar is called The Elbow Room."

"Right."

"Is it a nice place to live?"

"That's probably one of those things we all ought to vote on. It's always been good enough for me." She looked at his empty plate. "Was the food all right?"

"It tasted very good, and I'm still healthy." He started to reach for his wallet.

"Don't get up. Finish your beer," she said. "I'll be back in a minute to give you your check. You can even have another beer if you don't get rowdy." She took his plates and disappeared into the kitchen again.

She was gone again for thirty seconds, and then came back in with her bill pad. She said, "Is your car the black one with no chrome on it?"

"Yes. Did I park in the wrong space?"

"There are two men outside checking out your car. I just thought you should know."

He said, "Thanks," and walked into the back hallway, past the men's room, and then out and around the back of the building. He looked in the parking lot and then up and down the nearby streets. There were no police cars parked on the lot, and no plain cars equipped with aftermarket devices like spotlights or extra electronics, so he knew the two men couldn't be cops.

He stepped to the corner of the building to look and saw a large man with a shaved head that was too small for his body so it seemed bullet-shaped. The man took a slim jim out of a small canvas tool bag, slipped it into the space between the driver's side door and the window, then gave it a tug to unlock his car door and swung it open. The man sat in the driver's seat, returned the slim jim to his tool bag, and brought his hand out holding a large screwdriver.

Duncan said, "I wouldn't pop the ignition lock if I were you."

The man looked up and a mischievous smile appeared on his face. He ducked his head to get out, stood up, and faced Duncan, now tapping the screwdriver on the palm of his other hand. "Why not?"

"It's my car, and I don't want it stolen."

"You've got that wrong. It's about to be towed by the transportation department. The plates are not new, but the car is, and the inspection sticker seems to be a fake. You can straighten it out at the department, pay the towing fee, and pick up your car after that. The fine for the fake

sticker shouldn't be more than a thousand bucks, but you'll have to deal with the DMV to get a new registration."

"I'm guessing there's a way to get around all that?"

"Some people like to just pay their fines on the spot, if they have the cash with them. You could do that, but don't take time deciding. Once the car is up on the truck, they don't take it down."

"Since you're from the transportation department, I'd like to see your ID."

"It's in the tow truck. You can see it when they get here."

Duncan nodded. He took out his phone and took the man's picture, then pressed the video icon.

"Give me that phone," the man said, and started walking toward Duncan. He held the screwdriver low against the side of his leg, like a man in a knife fight.

The woman in the bar had said there were two men. As Duncan slipped his phone into his pants pocket he spun his head to look for the other man. The missing man was only a few steps away, walking quietly up behind him. The moment he saw Duncan's glance he started to reach behind his back, but then saw that the turn of Duncan's head had launched his friend toward Duncan, so he ran toward him too.

Duncan knew the one behind him was the more urgent danger, so he threw his left elbow back to catch the man between his nose and upper teeth, pulled him forward and jerked the man's shirt up to snatch the pistol out of the back of his belt, then brought it down hard on the back of its owner's head and then up again toward the chest of the man with the screwdriver.

The big man stopped short, put his hands in the air, and dropped the screwdriver.

Duncan said, "You are both under arrest on suspicion of impersonating a public official, attempted grand theft auto, soliciting a bribe, and assault with a deadly weapon. Get down on the pavement ten feet apart with your arms stretched out. If you don't comply, I'm perfectly happy to shoot you and then handcuff you so you I can keep track of you while you're bleeding out."

The two men obeyed.

"Bring your hands behind you and cross your wrists. I'm sure you know the position."

The two men followed his orders, and he took out of his jacket two sets of handcuffs and applied them to their wrists. "I'm going to search you. If there's something on you that can hurt me, tell me now."

The two men were silent.

He patted them down and found their wallets, glanced at their driver's licenses, and said, "Ray Barstow and Timothy Vance. Your licenses say you live in Chicago. Why would two guys like you turn up in another state shaking down people in a parking lot?"

They said nothing.

"It wouldn't be because there's a warrant for you in Illinois, would it?"

The big man said, "Are you even a cop? Let's see your badge."

"It's in the truck with your ID."

The other man said, "These cuffs are too tight."

Duncan said, "Be glad you have them. The cuffs mean I'll look bad if I shoot you. Get in the car. Remember to duck your head a little." He opened the back door of his car and held his hand on each man's head in turn to guide it in past the roof. Each of the rear doors had a ring welded to it, and a chain ran through them. He slipped it through both men's arms above the cuffs and secured it with a padlock. "One more word of advice," he said. "If you manage to kill me while I'm driving you in, make sure my body tips to the right so I don't drive into the river. You'll never get out in time."

Duncan started the car, drove out of the lot, and headed north along the river. “What are you two doing out here?” They said nothing. “You’re both going to be charged with enough felonies just from the past fifteen minutes to put you away for years. I can make it worse, or I can forget a lot of things that make for longer sentences.”

He took his phone out of his pants pocket, hid it under his road map on the passenger seat, and began recording. “We’re going to know everything about you twenty minutes after the cell door closes on you, but I’d rather know what you’re doing here. How did you even know about this town?”

“We heard there were jobs. We didn’t have any.”

“What was the job?” Duncan asked. “What do you do?”

“We were open.”

“Who recruited you?”

“Where are you driving us?”

“100 North Senate Street, Indianapolis. That’s the State Police.”

“Jesus.”

“It’s for your own good. Would you rather be in a spotless first-rate place run by highly trained State Police officers or some remote village lockup that feeds you bologna sandwiches on white bread twice a day if they remember to? They know me in Indianapolis, and they’ll take you off my hands without making you sit handcuffed to a bench for hours while they fill out forms.”