

Coincidence

Simon Snaeth was drinking coffee, smoking a cigarette and studying the recently published volume of cases from the Courts of Appeals and the state Supreme Court. He was wearing a grey pin-striped suit, a light pink silk shirt and a tie derived from a print by LeLong. He heard a tentative knock on the outside door and went to answer it. Standing outside was a small young woman dressed in an inexpensive blouse, blue jeans and tennis shoes. He asked her to come in and guided her to a chair across from his desk.

Before Snaeth went around the desk, he introduced himself. Then he sat behind his desk, bookmarked his place, and asked how he could help. She looked rather bewildered. “Your office... are all offices like this?”

“I certainly hope not,” Snaeth said, leaning back and looking relaxed. “I am here much of the time, and the front room, especially, has things that I like. If everyone liked the same things, life would be dull, wouldn’t it?”

She smiled a little. “I suppose it would.”

“If I can’t help you with a problem, I’ll gladly spend some time with you. I’m always willing to show off the paintings out there, the plants in the terrarium, the lizard, and tell all about them.”

“There’s a lizard?”

“Not a large one.” Snaeth leaned forward over his desk. “But, I’ve just been talking, because I see that you have a problem and I want you to talk to me. Come on, tell me. And tell me your name.”

“My name is Violet Cope. My boyfriend was murdered.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but that won’t do. Not by itself. I only handle civil cases, not criminal ones. The police should be handling the case.”

“The police are not interested. They told me it was ‘unexplained causes.’ Unexplained causes... when he had a bullet in his head,” she said bitterly.

“That seems extreme. That was probably their way of telling you nothing, which is their policy. Sometimes the police make mistakes, though. Helping them to correct their mistakes is in fact a civil matter, since it might involve a lawsuit involving civil rights or police misconduct.” Snaeth shook his head. “Suing the city and the police force is a long and expensive process. I would guess that you don’t have the resources to finance it, and I wonder if you have the will to go on with it for the years that it might take. I also wonder if you have standing... but never mind about that.”

Snaeth went on. “Is there something you can tell me that would convince me to help you? For instance, did your boyfriend – what was his name? – have a substantial amount of property? Or, perhaps, an inheritance that he had not yet acquired? Did he leave a will? Do you have any legal interest in what he left behind?”

“No... he had nothing, just like me, except his car. I don’t think he had a will. What for?” Snaeth nodded. “I’m sure he was killed by his next-door neighbor, who hated him and me. I signed a statement for the cops that said that.”

“Have the police found a gun?”

“No, there was no gun. He didn’t answer the door after I banged on it for a long time. Finally, I called 911. They had to break the door down to get in. He was lying there on the floor, dead.”

“There was no gun? I think I remember reading this in the news. What was his name?”

“Bob. Robert Vinson.”

“All right. At first they called it a suicide. But that idea had to be abandoned when there was no gun. I thought they were investigating it as a murder.”

“I think they gave that up, too, because the deadbolt was locked. No one could have killed him and he couldn’t have committed suicide. Only Robert had a key. He gave me one, but it wasn’t me.”

“They would suspect you, if you have a key. You’d be a ‘person of interest.’ Why didn’t they arrest you? You could have shot him and then locked the door, taking the gun with you, and thrown it away.”

“That’s what the cops said at first. But, I work as a waitress, you see. Bob drove me to work in the morning and the people who work there saw him. I never left work until the end of the day. Then I called and called and he didn’t answer. Then I went over there. They finally said he was killed when I was at work. I spent two days in jail while they figured that out. After I got out, I went home and changed and came to you.”

“It doesn’t make sense. I mean, ‘unexplained causes’ doesn’t make sense. If there was no gun, it’s a murder. Someone took away the gun.”

“Yes. They asked me lots of questions, but didn’t do anything. They said they would have to get a search warrant for the woman next door, and they couldn’t.”

“There was no evidence to support an application for a warrant, based only on your theory that his neighbor hated him. The police need more than that. Usually. As I said, sometimes they make mistakes.”

Violet frowned. “Sometimes they kick in the wrong door. I’ve read about that.”

“Yes. Rarely. But that’s not what I mean. I am interested but I don’t know how I would be paid, or what I am supposed to do. It’s a criminal matter. Nevertheless, I think I would like to take a look to satisfy myself. You don’t have to pay me.”

“I have one hundred dollars.”

“Hold on to it. No, wait, let me have a dollar.” She gave him one. Snaeth turned to his computer and printed out a contract. He filled in the blanks to say that he conditionally and temporarily represented Violet Cole in a civil matter, which he left unspecified. He added that he was going to investigate the

matter, and if he decided not to represent her, he would return her one-dollar retainer. He asked her to sign.

She asked, "Shouldn't I see a lawyer before signing this?"

"You are."

"I am what?" She smiled and signed.

"Seeing a lawyer. My curiosity is engaged, not my cupidity. You are my client for now, and perhaps in the future, on the condition that my investigation of your problem results in something with which I can help you. Let's go."

Snaeth escorted Violet out, first showing her the terrarium and the lizard, and called a taxi.

"Now," he said in the back seat of the car, "I would like to know why you think the neighbor killed Bob and why she hates you."

"It's hard to explain. She seems to hate everyone. She's deranged. She has severe personality changes. She's stood out front and yelled until people called the cops on her. More than once. She takes a lot of pills. We've seen her accept deliveries of bags of pills."

"I see. Well, this visit to the scene may be fruitless, of course. The door was kicked in, so we can't look at it. Your boyfriend's body is no longer there. The police don't have the gun, and I can't think of a way to find it."

"That woman has the gun, I'm sure."

"Then how did she lock the door behind her after shooting him? There might have been a way but the old door is no longer there to find out. There is a new door and a new lock, I'm sure. You had the only other key, right?"

"Yes, I have it in my purse now."

They were both silent for the rest of the ride. Then she said, "Here we are."

It was a standard inexpensive apartment building called the Briony Flats, with some brick facing but constructed of prefabbed wooden trusses and sheetrock interiors. There were three stories of apartments, but no elevator. Violet led Snaeth to the second floor.

"This was Rob's apartment."

Snaeth noted the new door, and especially the new lock. "There's really nothing to see here. All I can hope for is that the police saved the old door and the lock. But I have an idea. It's a one-in-ten-thousand chance. Hmm, well, maybe better than that. Which apartment belongs to the neighbor that hates you?"

Violet indicated the apartment to the left. "This one." Snaeth looked at the lock on that door. He walked down the row of apartments, looking at the doors and the locks.

“We need to go back downstairs.”

When they were back outside, Snaeth said, “I brought you down here because I want to try something and I don’t want you to know about it. Moreover, if I am seen, you might be seen, too, and that could ruin everything. Please give me the key to Robert’s apartment.”

Violet looked at him oddly, and then dug into her purse and extracted her keys. She took one off the key ring and said, “This is it.”

“Thank you. Please wait here.”

Snaeth mounted the stairs again and went directly to the neighbor’s apartment. He put the key in the lock, as silently as possible, turned it and it worked. He turned it back, just as silently. Apparently no one heard him or saw the lever move on the inside. No one opened the door.

Downstairs, he returned the key to Violet. “Now,” he said, “I think we can get the police involved again. It depends on them. Fortunately, I know someone.”

He pulled out his cell phone and called Sergeant Murphy. When he finally got through, after talking to a policewoman and a policeman, Murphy rasped, “What do you want this time, Snaeth?”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Murphy. I want to know if you’ve saved the door and the lock from Robert Vinson’s apartment, and his keys.”

“How did you get involved in that?”

Snaeth said, “I have a client with an interest.”

“Well, I’ll tell you, that’s an open case. We know damn well that a bullet to the head is a murder, unless it’s suicide, and we didn’t find the gun. If he got up after he killed himself and threw the gun where it couldn’t be found, that would explain it.”

“Sergeant, I hadn’t considered that possibility.”

Murphy snorted. “Anyway, you know better. This is a police matter.”

“I have some information that might be useful. If my client and I could visit you, maybe we could help.”

“Who is your client?”

“Violet Cope. I think you know her.”

“Yes. I do. She’s been badgering us about the next-door neighbor, but there’s nothing there.”

“Can you see us in half-an-hour or so?”

“Yes, I can. I can send a car to pick you up, if you want to be a material witness.”

“Nothing that formal will be needed, Mr. Murphy, if you still have the door to Robert Vinson’s apartment and his key to it.”

“The door was junk and got thrown away, but we have his keys. They were on his body. Snaeth, what is this?”

“That remains to be seen, sir. We’ll be there soon.” Snaeth hung up.

Snaeth called another taxi. Once they were in the back seat, he told Violet, “Now, listen. We are involved in shenanigans. You don’t need to say anything. In fact, you shouldn’t say anything. If I can get the police interested in this again, and then if my guess is correct, you’ll have more opportunities to tell your story. Unfortunately, some of your opportunities will probably be in court.”

“I’m going to take your advice, Mr. Snaeth. I don’t know what you’ve found out, and I’ve already told the police everything I know, but they didn’t listen.”

“I haven’t really found out anything, but you’ll hear what I say to Sergeant Murphy. I’m also telling you, I will not represent you in a criminal case where you are a witness.”

“And I won’t need you to do that.”

“There’s only one thing: your key to Robert’s apartment. Since it’s a duplicate that he had made, it doesn’t have identifying numbers. And it’s no use any more. So, please, open the window and throw it away. If the police ask you where it is, tell them you threw it away after you were released from jail. No more.”

She looked at him oddly again, but did what he asked.

They talked about the buildings they passed as they rode to the police station downtown. Snaeth learned that she had grown up in the city and remembered what the buildings were when they were built, and when they had changed. For instance, one had been a Wendy’s and now it was a Thai restaurant. She also knew a little about the architecture of the larger buildings, and they discussed that.

When they arrived at the police station, Snaeth made it known that he had an appointment to see Murphy. After the desk man checked, a uniformed officer escorted them to Murphy’s small office.

Murphy was not in the mood to see Violet Cope again. “Miss Cope,” he began angrily, and Snaeth interrupted.

“Mr. Murphy, I’ve asked Miss Cope not to say anything. I am the one who wants to talk to you.”

Murphy calmed down with an effort. “All right, Snaeth. I’ll listen to you. Why are you interested in the door and the key?”

“It’s not really the door, it’s the lock. I noticed that the apartments there all have Rabson locks. It’s an inexpensive brand. Companies that make inexpensive locks mass-produce them, and they do it cheaply. They could make as many as 10,000 or 20,000 different locks and keys, but they only make 1000 or so.”

“So that’s why their locks are cheap. Cheap equals cheap. That’s what you are saying.”

“Yes. I suggest you call Lieutenant Simpson in the Burglary Division to verify what I say. There is a possibility, and not really an unlikely one, that one of the other tenants in the apartment building has a key that fits Robert Vinson’s old lock. You could compare keys. They probably have a code number on them.”

“It would be interesting to know that, even if it doesn’t get us anywhere... OK. Sit still for a minute.”

Murphy picked up his phone and dialed two numbers. “Hello, this is Murphy in Homicide. ... Yes. I want to talk to Simpson for a minute.... Thanks...Hello, Jim? You remember Snaeth, the lawyer? ... Yes... He’s telling me about Rabson locks, how they are cheap and they don’t make many kinds...” Murphy listened. “Oh?... OK...” There was a silence for about 30 seconds. “OK, yes...” Murphy took notes. “Thanks, Jim.”

Murphy turned to Snaeth and Ms. Cope. “He looked them up on his computer and here’s their profile, as he calls it. Their design allows for 16384 combinations of pins and levers. The pins are inside the lock, the levers are on the key. But they only produce and sell 1,024 of those combinations.”

Murphy barked at Violet Cole, “Why did you go to Snaeth?”

She looked at Snaeth, and he nodded. She did fine. “I’ve seen his name in the paper.”

Murphy shrugged and continued. “So, you were right, Snaeth, and someday you’ll tell me how you knew about this. I didn’t. But anyway, it’s easy now, right?”

“No, sir, it isn’t.”

“I know that, dammit. Suppose one of the other people there has the right key? Then how do we find out who, and then get evidence that he’s the killer? I’ve learned something, but I don’t know any more.”

“Perhaps I can suggest something...”

Violet remained silent while Snaeth explained a plan.

Murphy shook his head. “It’s a long shot, Snaeth, but it’s probably the only way to find out more. Even if it doesn’t help, it shows that I’m doing my job. It would look good on my record if I cleared this case. But why do I get the feeling that you know something that I don’t know?” He threw up his hands. “OK, you can wait here while I go to the property room and look at Vinson’s keys. Don’t rummage around in my desk. You’ll mess it up.”

Snaeth looked at the disordered stacks of papers and folders on the desk and said, “I would never do that, Sergeant.” Murphy went out.

He returned about 15 minutes later. “I got a code off of Vinson’s key. All right. Let’s go and see.”

The apartment management company was not on the apartment premises. Snaeth observed on the way that this always created problems for the tenants who had to call and wait on hold before they could

talk to someone who could arrange for repairs or deal with other problems. Violet knew what he was talking about but Murphy was unsympathetic. "That's just the way it is, Snaeth. Sure, these people get jerked around when they have a leak in the plumbing or something, but in the end, the apartment has to fix the damage."

"Then they raise the rent to cover the repairs." Murphy had no reply.

Murphy had already visited the management company's office, on the fifth floor of a downtown building, and they remembered him. They were not happy to see him again. Murphy showed that he had a little bit of charm and politeness, and they were all shown in to the office of Ms. Susan Dudley, a very tall and pretty woman. Murphy introduced Snaeth as a lawyer and Ms. Cole as his client, and said they were not really involved because it was a police matter. Ms. Dudley silently noted Snaeth's clothes and accepted that. She listened to Murphy for a few minutes and then said, "All you want to do is look at the duplicate keys of the Briony Flats?"

"That's right, ma'am," Murphy said, still being charming.

"Don't you need a search warrant?"

"I don't really want to put you through that kind of trouble, Ms. Dudley. I could get one if I wanted, but then I'd have to come back with at least one uniformed officer, and people might talk. It might make the news, who knows?"

"We don't want that, certainly," she said with a frowning smile. "I suppose there's no harm in it. Come with me."

She led them to a room with file cabinets and opened a locked drawer. "We replace the lock on the apartment whenever a tenant moves out, of course. We file a duplicate key here. Years ago we kept a master key, but companies had incidents with employees who used them in unauthorized ways, so duplicates are now the business standard... never mind. Anyway, even though you are a police officer, I have to remain here and watch you. Did you bring along Mr. Sayth and his client to help?"

Snaeth ignored the mispronunciation of his name and answered, "No, Ms. Dudley. Ms. Cole is my client in another matter. We do not need to remain here. We can wait outside... I would like to use the rest room."

"To the left as you leave our offices."

Snaeth and Cole left, going past the receptionist. Snaeth headed straight for the elevator, and Violet said, "I thought you wanted to use the rest room."

"No. I wanted to have a little chat with you."

When they were outside, Snaeth said, "Mr. Murphy will find that the key to the lock on the door of the woman you accuse is the same as the one on Bob's door. Then there will be hell to pay. I want to warn you that I never went back upstairs with your key. Erase it from your mind. We have been to Bob's old apartment, but all I did was notice that all the locks were Rabsons, and you never knew that until you heard me tell Sergeant Murphy. We have been together the entire time since you came to my office."

“You are very, very sneaky. Sneaky Snaeth.”

Snaeth winced. “Please. That was uncalled for. I don’t want to give Murphy any idea that I was breaking and entering. The truth is, that I will tell only to you, is that I only tried the key in the lock and never opened the door. It’s probably not a crime of any kind because I had no idea whether it would fit, but I had to try it. Murphy might say that we have played a trick on him if he knew anything about that. Are you with me?”

“You bet I am.”

“We’ve gotten this far, and we can’t mess it up. The police don’t need to know anything but what Murphy finds. The only problem would be if he finds two matching keys.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that.”

“It may not happen. But Murphy is going to be very suspicious of me, and you should say nothing. If you have to lie, I’ve never been out of your sight. I’m going to say the same thing.”

“It’s a done deal. I’m sorry I called you sneaky.”

“It’s all right. We wouldn’t have to have this talk unless I got Murphy interested. I’ve done that, and we are out of it. It’s up to him. See? By the way, he lied to Ms. Dudley. He probably couldn’t have gotten a search warrant. A judge might call it a ‘fishing expedition.’ But it’s OK for him to lie, he’s a cop.”

“That sucks. But it’s going to work out, isn’t it?”

“I hope so.”

They waited a while.

“Here comes Murphy now.”

Murphy was both aggravated and pleased. “There’s something fishy here. Snaeth, I knew you knew something that I didn’t know. Cole, I don’t know what you know, either. I’d like to interrogate you both and get the truth.”

“What are you talking about, Sergeant? Did you get a match?”

Murphy snorted. “You know damn well I did. I’m not going to waste time on you, Snaeth. You always do something like this, and as long as you are right, I’m not going to complain. If you are ever wrong and give me a bum steer, I’ll have you arrested for meddling with police business, disorderly conduct, unlawful interference and... and everything else I can think of for every time you’ve ... you’ve interfered.”

Murphy unlocked his vehicle, jumped in the driver’s seat, and left. Snaeth shrugged at Violet Cole and called a taxi.

* * *

The next day, Simon Snaeth gave the airplants in the terrarium their weekly watering and left one of the the top glass pieces askew for a while for excess water to evaporate. It would not do to have excessive humidity in the terrarium. The lizard was not a species that climbed and it would not try to escape.

He was lounging in his chair behind his desk, reading the same volume as yesterday. He was wearing a tan light-weight worsted suit with a subtle check, a light-blue silk shirt, and a Hermes tie with a pattern that looked like pushpins in red and white on a dark background. Violet Cole came in.

“It’s my day off again,” she said. “They almost fired me when I spent those days in jail and now I have to work part-time until I get my shift back.”

“You shouldn’t be penalized for something you didn’t do. I heard from Murphy last night. He got a search warrant based on your statement and the coincidence of the keys, and they found a gun in the woman’s apartment. It’s the right kind of gun.”

“How did she know that her key fit Bob’s lock?”

“That requires speculation. Perhaps Bob opened her door by mistake once using his key. Perhaps the other way around. The doors all look the same. You might have to testify that Bob’s door looked the same as all the others.”

“Huh. So I was right, she did it.”

“They are doing a ballistics test on the gun, but it would be an negative coincidence, you might say, if it wasn’t a match. Also, Murphy agrees with you that the woman is crazy. She attacked a policeman when they served the search warrant. Murphy was still ranting, not thinking clearly, and just about accused me of changing the locks. There are coincidences, and there are impossibilities.”

Violet laughed. “Cops. Listen, can you help me get my shift back? That’s a civil matter, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I’ll go down there with you now and talk to your boss. It will cost you the rest of that hundred dollars.”

“Show me your paintings, first.”