

The Investigator

by Marc Lowe

The investigator starts by accumulating facts, as many facts as he can. He sifts through them with meticulous precision, leaving no leaf unturned, no page unread. He thinks of the corpse, dismembered much in the same way he had dismembered insects as a boy by pulling off their limbs, one by one, before tossing their thoraxes into the trash. He sighs, sifts some more. It is late, but he does not rest. He lights a cigarette, drinks another cup of coffee.

When there is a knock at the door he does not startle, does not show any hint of surprise on his face or in his movements. He puts down his pen and purple notepad, looks up from the pile of facts on his desk, and walks, calmly and without the faintest hint of hesitation, to the door. One hand is rubbing his stubbly chin, while the other rests upon the pearl-inlaid handle of the .45 caliber at his side. He may appear composed, but he is not stupid.

And now his hand is on the doorknob, is turning it in a clockwise direction, and the door is opening: slowly and with purpose. She stands before him, the woman both of his wildest dreams and of his worst nightmares. She looks the role: tall, blonde, busty, etc. A true femme fatale in the flesh. Well, come in, he says, still rubbing his chin with one hand while fondling the handle of his gun with the other. She does, and the door closes behind her.

Here you are, she says, placing a brown, rectangular package tied up with brown string onto a corner of his desk, directly beside a volume with a green cover entitled *The Investigator*. I nearly got killed trying to retrieve it. Did you—? he says, but before he is able to finish his sentence her dark-red lips are upon his own, and he is sinking, sinking, allowing himself for one single moment of self-deception to believe that she might be completely innocent.

But when she removes her wet lips from his, he realizes his mistake, for she has a gun already pointed at his belly. Get down on all fours, she says, but he does not move, remains as placid as he was when we first saw him at his desk. I have work to do, he says,

and nobody, not even you, is going to stop me from doing it. That's what *you* think, she says, the corner of her mouth perversely upturned. She cocks the gun, her finger massages the trigger.

The frame freezes, and the man sitting in front of the television screen takes a single cigarette from the pack lying on his cluttered desk and lights it, then sips from his coffee, which has gone quite cold. He reaches out and picks up the unmarked, rectangular brown package that someone had apparently dropped off for him earlier today. How had he missed this before? As he leans forward to lift it up, a piece of ash falls into his coffee, and he curses.

At the precise moment he is about to open the package there is a knock at the door. The man puts the package in the top drawer of his desk, stands up, and walks toward the sound, his hands at his sides. As he does, a book with a green cover falls to the floor, though he does not seem to notice it. He places a sweaty hand on the doorknob, begins to turn it to the right, but then realizes that the door is locked. He unlocks the door, opens it.

No one is there. Strange, the man says to himself, and then returns to his desk, leaving the door open a crack. He then pulls the top drawer open and extracts the package. He holds it up to his ear, shakes it, but after doing so he still does not have any clue as to what it might contain. He looks back at the television screen and wonders what will happen to the man with the gun pointed at his belly. He picks up the remote and...

Bang! She is standing in the doorway, a smoldering pistol in her hands. The man is slumped over in his chair, blood running from the hole in his belly, staining the unopened package in his lap. She picks up the package, puts it in her bag (made of recycled paper, of course), and glances at the television screen, where it appears that a film has been paused mid-scene. Curious, she takes the remote from the dead man's hand, presses **>Play**.

Bang! The woman goes down. I'm sorry, Bessie, the man with the .45 caliber, which boasts a pearl-inlaid handle, says, but you were bad. You killed Frederick P. Cobblestone, killed him because you knew he was sleeping with your best friend, Kate. And then you

dismembered him just for kicks, didn't you? Well, looks like I've got my work cut out for me, eh? And, by the way, did you really think I don't know what you did to his girlfriend.

The woman gasps, stops the tape, kills the television. So, he did know after all, she says to herself, clutching the blood-spattered package under her arm. She leans in toward the desk, takes a sip from the dead man's cold coffee, and then lights a fresh cigarette. She knows she should leave immediately, but something catches her eye. It is the book with the green cover, lying on the floor. Wait, no, it isn't the book she had expected. She turns toward the door.

But now, in the doorway, stands one Frederick P. Cobblestone, all sewn up like new, sporting several scars. He is holding a gun. *Bang!* She goes down, her belly bleeding all over the already-stained package. Fred smirks to himself. He turns on the television set and the VHS player, presses **>Play**. The film's plot, however, he finds completely implausible. Ignoring the bloody package, he picks up the green book, tucks it under his arm, and exits.

