

Roccinate

Author's Note

"Roccinate" introduces John and Melody. John is a discredited CIA agent. Melody is a newly minted State Department agent with the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. This is a story of a partnership between young and old based on mutual respect, shared hardship, and friendship. They're a good team. Think you will like knowing them. I'm already working on another idea for the 'Reluctant Spy'. John and Melody will work together again. Let me know what you think. Always open to suggestions for new adventures, characters, situations. Enjoy "Roccinate".

September 06, 2015

Chapter 1

I was on my deck watching the sun set behind the mountains. Not many clouds, so the ridge top was etched against the reddening sky. Nice way to end a Sunday. Hell, it's a nice way to end any day. Became brisk after the sun lost its power. Won't be long before my mountains wear a mantle of white. Would go in after finishing my drink. The insistent phone hastened my departure. "This is John," I answered.

"Mr. Henry?" Pause. "This is Melody, George's daughter."

"Mr. Henry? Why so formal?" I took a deep breath. "What's the matter Melody?"

"Dad's missing. I need your help." Her voice broke at the word help.

"Missing? When?"

"Don't know exactly."

"Talked to him last week—Tuesday, I think."

"Tuesday? I talked to him Monday, haven't heard from him since. I left you messages."

"Haven't checked my machine."

"I got worried and called around. No one has heard from him." Pause. "This is the first time you answered your phone."

"Been busy."

"You may be the last one to talk to him. Did he say anything to you about where he was going or how long he'd be?"

"Not that I recall. Just the usual 'Hi, neighbor, how's it going' sort of thing. We met at the mailboxes. He didn't mention a trip."

"That all?"

"Told me you submitted your dissertation and were waiting for your defense. Was glad you were spending time with him while waiting. That's about all he said. Nothing about a trip. Sorry, wish I could help."

"I'm worried, John. Do you mind if I come over?" Her voice sounded a lot younger than the twenty-something she was. Melody was George's only child. Her mother died when she was young.

"Sure, I'm about to start dinner. Would enjoy the company. If you're getting a good signal where you are, put your phone on call forwarding—just in case someone calls? Don't get the best reception here. Come over whenever you're ready."

"Thanks, see you in fifteen minutes. Should I bring anything? Wine?"

"Was planning on opening a bottle of St. Chappell Riesling. If you like that, then you don't have to bring anything. If you prefer something else, bring it."

"Thanks, I really appreciate this."

"No problem. See you in fifteen."

"Okay, bye." She hung up.

I turned my attention to the hydrating pasta dough. She knocked on my door ten minutes later. Her eyes were red and swollen. Other than that, she was a moderately attractive co-ed. Shorter than average—about 5'3". Melody had Mediterranean skin and dark brown hair worn long with a small braid off to the right side. She was hiding under her father's leather jacket—looking small and vulnerable. Felt like I was taking in a stray kitten. "That was quick."

She nodded.

I stepped back so she could enter. "Come in. You look cold."

Another nod. She pulled the coat tight about her.

"Go stand by the fire. It's only a gas log, but it should take the chill off." I pointed to the fireplace on the East wall. "I'll get your wine."

"Thanks, turns chilly up here fast when the sun goes down, doesn't it?" she said, moving towards the fire.

"Combination of altitude and low humidity. Nothing to hold the temperature. Not like Houston, the swamp."

"You sound like my father." She turned and looked into the fire.

"Guess once an engineer, always an engineer. We like to know the why of things."

"That's why I came to you. If anyone can find my father, it's you."

"Oh?"

"He regards you as his best friend. He likes you. Will you help me? Please?" That please had three syllables and about ten 'e's in it. This was a small child asking someone to find her missing doll.

"Feel the same about George. Why do you think he's missing?"

"Like I told you, no one's heard from him in almost a week. It's not like him. He wouldn't go away without telling me and he wouldn't be away this long without calling, or sending me an email. I've heard nothing, nothing in six days." She took a breath.

"Have you called the police?"

She nodded. "Talked to Rudy, the deputy sheriff. All he could do was put out a missing persons report. He didn't know who to call since I don't know where he went."

"Did your father take his car?"

She nodded twice. "Yes, he took the Explorer. Gave the license number and description to Rudy. He put it out with the missing persons report. I don't think there's anything else he can or will do. He's not too concerned."

"Don't be too hard on Rudy. He's new at this. I'm sure he's doing all he can. Any idea where your Dad went?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "No, not a clue."

"Have you checked his computer? There anything on his calendar?"

"First thing I checked. Nothing."

"How about the history file? What sites did he visit recently? There anything in his email files?"

"Didn't check browser history. His incoming folder was clear."

"How about the deleted or sent files?"

"Didn't think about those." She smiled. "Thought it'd be good to talk to you. Feel better already."

"Bet you're hungry, too."

"I could eat."

"Good. Around here you have to sing for your supper. Can you find your way around a kitchen?"

"Around ours, yes. Yours looks more complicated. I can cut and chop with the best of them." She took off the jacket and laid it on the back of the couch in front of the fireplace. She walked to the kitchen. I had her dice a whole onion. We only used half of it. I may be the only one to use onions in my white clam sauce.

My cabin is one large open space with a kitchen, half-bath, fireplace, and room—lots of room—on the first floor. There's the bed, bath, and balcony above on the second floor—a loft, really. The garage/work room is hollowed out of the hillside beneath it all. The west wall is triple pane tinted glass. My view is of Lake Mary and the mountains of Big Cottonwood canyon.

We made small talk while we prepared dinner. Wasn't much, just a salad of mixed greens (from a package), a tomato, and an over ripe avocado. The entrée was homemade fettuccine with a white clam sauce. No bread, appetizer or dessert. She seemed to relax and soften with both the wine and something to do. As we cleared the dishes the phone rang. It was the double ring of a forwarded call. "That should be for you. Take it over there by the chair in front of the fire. Not much privacy, but it's better than here in the kitchen. I'll finish cleaning up."

She wasn't eager to answer the phone. "Hello. Yes, this is she... What have you found out?... Really?... Was it okay?... Anything of Dad?... Thanks, Rudy... I'll get it tomorrow. That be okay?... Call me if you learn of anything else... Bye."

"Everything all right," I asked.

"They found Dad's car at the airport—short term parking. Been there since Wednesday morning."

"Wednesday?"

She nodded. "The parking receipt said 5:43 a.m."

"Hmmm... early."

"Car was unlocked, but no one had taken the radio or anything they could tell. That's not like Dad, he's always so careful. You know what he's like."

My turn to nod. "Yes, I do. Strange."

She walked to the fire.

"How'll you get it?" I asked.

She looked at me. "The car?"

I nodded.

"Haven't thought about it."

"Why don't I take you to the airport tomorrow morning and you can drive it back. We can leave a message with security. When your dad comes back, we can pick him up or he can take the resort shuttle. Might save you a couple of bucks and it'll be more secure here."

"You think there's something wrong, don't you?"

I shook my head. "Doubt it, but this doesn't sound like your father."

"You're worried, aren't you?"

"Not worried, concerned. Don't like it, but I don't want to jump to any conclusions. Let's take this one step at a time. Finish your wine. When you're ready, I'll walk you back to your place. We can take a look at his computer together. Might find something."

"You are worried. Can we go now?"

"Fine, let me grab my coat."

We walked back to her place in silence. It was a cloudless starry night that is almost overpowering in the mountains. The air turned cold. Felt good to be warm in the jacket and have the cold pull at my face. Walking beside Melody, was like walking beside a prepubescent child. She pulled her father's jacket around her. It overlapped by a good twelve inches or more. She seemed so small and vulnerable. We arrived at George's place fifteen minutes later. It was a three-level faux log structure, located closer to the resort. I have a view, he has convenience.

"My father's office is on the top floor. Follow me." The top floor was more attic than habitable space. There was a large mahogany desk with a credenza behind it. George would have the light coming from his left shoulder, but no view of the lake or mountains. Where I would look out on the forest, George had turned his back on it.

"This is the first time I've been up here," I said, looking about.

"Dad wasn't much on having company. Since mother died, he didn't like having people around. Not that I was around that much, what with being away at school. Even when I was home on vacation, there were never any friends of his around. Think you're his first friend I've known. The rest were just people on the other end of the phone. I assume he bought this place for the isolation." This was nervous energy talking. I let her talk.

"Why don't you boot up the computer?" I wanted to change the subject. George wasn't that forthcoming on his personal life. If something had happened to him, I didn't want to be the one Melody turns to for comfort. Comforting is not something I do well.

"It's always on. It'll come back on as soon as I touch the mouse." She sat in George's chair.

"Good. Let's see if there's something it can tell us."

"Okay." She jiggled the mouse. Nothing. "Strange, I'm sure I left it on."

"Power failure. Happens all the time up here." She looked at me with her left eye closed. I didn't believe it either. "Go ahead, boot it up."

She logged on using George's username and password. She clicked on the history icon at the top of the browser. The last tab was Wednesday. That was a surprise. If he had parked his car at 5:43 in the morning at the airport, and it takes about an hour to get to the airport from here. He'd have had to leave by 4:30 in the morning. Hard to imagine George accessing his computer so early. The IP address was 217.215.113.111. Melody clicked on it. The site came up, but it was nothing more than a logon page. No other identification, just the box that asked for user name and password.

"Any ideas?" she asked.

"Use your Dad's login."

She nodded. Stabbed the keyboard. Nothing—no error message, nothing. "Should we try mine?"

"May as well."

She did. Nothing.

"Damn. I'm reluctant to keep guessing. We may lock up the site. Let's go back to Tuesday to see if there's anything there."

"Okay." She clicked on the Tuesday tab. Only three sites were listed. One was Travelocity, the numbered site again, and the third was George's bank.

"Any way to tell where he planned to go from the Travelocity site?"

"Let's see." She clicked on the link. Several dropdown items were available. One was 'Book Flight'.

"Click on 'Book Flight' and let's see what it has to say."

She did. It showed a 6:10 morning flight to Houston with a return for 9:45 that evening. She looked at me. I rubbed my chin. "Houston? Why would he want to go to Houston for just one day?"

"No idea, but at least we know where he went."

"Anyone in Houston you can call?"

She shrugged. "No one. Never knew of any of Dad's friends. Spent most of my time back East. Dad moved around a lot. When it came time to come home for vacations, he would either send me to summer camp or let me go home with some of my friends from school. Never spent much time in Houston." She was nervous again.

"He never gave me a business card. Do you have his office number?"

"Never been to his office. Don't think I have the number. I might."

"Have you used this phone since Wednesday?" I nodded to the desk phone.

She shook her head. "No, if I had to make any calls I used my phone. Why?"

"Hit 'redial/pause'. Let's see what happens."

"Worth a shot." She pushed the 'speaker phone' button and then the 'redial' button. We let the phone ring for several minutes. No one answered. No machine came on line. We copied the number.

"Since it's 9:30 in Houston, may be worth trying again in the morning. Don't use this phone if you can help it. We'll try again tomorrow."

"Why not?"

"Don't want to lose that number."

"We wrote it down."

"Cautious. We'll want to use this phone when we call."

"Why?"

"Caller ID. They may not answer a call from an unknown phone."

She closed her eyes, smiled and nodded. "Makes sense."

"What does he use for email?"

"Outlook. Checking the address folder now." She turned back to the computer. Went through his list from A to Z. There weren't many. She didn't recognize anyone. We noted all those with a Houston notation in the city field. Others were for various cities scattered around the globe. There were only two with the Houston label. They didn't have phone numbers, only names and email addresses.

There was a Rolodex on the desk next to the phone. "Would your Dad use anything other than that Rolodex to store addresses in?" I pointed to the Rolodex.

She shrugged. "Does anyone use those anymore?"

"Apparently. Let's take it down to the living room where we can be more comfortable. Okay?"

She looked around. "Sure, I don't like this room that much either." She held herself. "It's so oppressive, so cold."

"Thought it was just me. Can't say I like the living room that much better. Why don't I leave you to go through the Rolodex? We can get back together tomorrow for breakfast."

She looked down at the top of George's desk. "May I ask another favor?"

"Sure ask."

She looked up with that helpless little girl look. "May I stay with you tonight? The last several nights in this place have not been pleasant. I promise not to be a pain."

"As you may have noticed, I'm not set up for guests. Only one bedroom. Best I can do is the couch. It's not good for sleeping."

"The couch will be fine. Been sleeping on the couch in the living room since Friday night—less scary. I have my sleeping bag all rolled up ready to go." She smiled the little girl smile. "Don't want to embarrass you, but I'm a lot more comfortable with you around—more secure."

I laughed. "Okay, go pack some things for tonight and tomorrow. We'll come back and try the number, then go to the airport."

"Great, be just a minute."

"Oh, almost forgot. Did we check his email?"

She nodded. "When I opened Outlook. Didn't see anything."

"Hmmm... Just noticed that little envelope in the corner there." I pointed to the computer screen. "On my machine that means there's mail."

"Mine too. Wasn't there a minute ago." She clicked on the mail icon. "It's to me?"