



MURDEROUS INTENT

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RICHARD LUOFF PHOTO CREDIT ALVAN MEYEROWITZ

RICHARD LUOFF • ROBERT RANDISI • STEVEN WOMACK

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THE B RULES

Which rules should one live by—the A rules, or the B rules? In “The B Rules,” Katherine Pickering discovers that always being nice can have nasty repercussions.

—Jacqueline Freimor

It was while Dr. Royce was informing her that her secretarial services would no longer be required that Katherine Pickering had another of her visions.

“Tightening our belts,” Dr. Royce said, and “forty-five years of loyal service,” and “can’t be helped”—and then it happened. Although Katherine knew she was sitting in the guest chair beside the grand mahogany desk, her hands folded quietly in her lap—her father could never abide a fidgety woman—she saw herself fly from the chair, snatch the silver letter opener from the blotter, and plunge it into Dr. Royce’s heart. Then there were three in the room, a tableau: Katherine sitting in the chair, the other Katherine with her hand on the knife, and Dr. Royce, his leonine head thrown back against the leather chair, his pupils already fixed and dilated, a thin ribbon of blood bubbling from between his lips.

“...since your father’s death,” Dr. Royce was saying.

Katherine blinked, and the other Katherine ballooned and popped in a shower of angry sparks. “Pardon me?”

“I asked if you were all right. You’ve seemed a bit distracted since your father’s death.” Dr. Royce regarded her with the mild, mournful gaze that had so exasperated her father: of all the cardiologists on Park Avenue, he had joked, you would think I could have chosen to partner one who did not look like a mortician.

“I’m quite well,” Katherine said. “Thank you for your concern.”

“You should look upon this as an opportunity,” Dr. Royce continued, favoring her with a dyspeptic smile. “Take some time to rest. Travel, see the world. Much as I respected Dr. Pickering—well, we all did—working for your father all these years must have been...”

“Yes?”
Dr. Royce cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t like to speak ill of the dead, but...an exacting employer...a man of high standards...”

Katherine didn’t hear the rest of it, because it seemed the other Katherine had not quite finished. A spark of her that had been smoldering on the carpet jumped to the hem of the heavy velvet drapery and billowed into flame.

“Yes,” Katherine said, raising her voice over the crackle and hiss of the fire. “Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps I should travel.”

Dr. Royce cocked his head and furrowed his brow. “Katherine,” he said, “are you sure you’re all right? I’m a little worried about you.”

“Quite sure.”
He rose and enveloped her hands in his. “Well,” he said, “if there’s anything I can do...”

Katherine closed the door behind her just as the window exploded and a jagged pane of glass severed Dr. Royce’s head.



“He lay you off?” Luz said. “No lie?”

"I assure you that I'm telling the truth," Katherine said. As upset as she was, she couldn't help noticing that Luz's desk was in its usual state of disarray, strewn with correspondence and patients' charts and capless pens, a coffee stain bleeding into the first page of Dr. Royce's speech to the American College of Cardiologists. Who would monitor Luz's work after she was gone? Certainly not Dr. Royce, who had no eye for this sort of detail.

"What about severance?" Luz said. "You get severance or what? And notice? What you get? Two weeks, four weeks?"

Katherine tried to remember what, if anything, Dr. Royce had said about the logistics of her termination. "I couldn't say," she said. "I assume so."

"He got to give it to you. It's not right, he don't give it to you, you been here all this time."

"I'm sure Dr. Royce will do whatever is appropriate in these circumstances," Katherine said. She was not entirely sure that Luz should be speaking so familiarly to her.

Luz snorted, her delicate nostrils flaring, and let fly an epithet in Spanish. Luz's temper had always worried Katherine—although what could you expect in someone with Luz's breeding, half Negress, half Puerto Rican? Her father used to say that such people were quite volatile. Although Katherine had to admit that Luz always displayed her fits of ill temper only to her, never to the physicians or the patients.

"He disrespecting you," Luz said, shaking her head. "He disrespecting you, you gotta disrespect him back, you know what I'm saying?"

"I can't say that I do."

"He disrespect you, you disrespect him. You say, give me this amount of severance, this amount of notice, or I sue your butt. Like, age discrimination, you know? You show him he better treat you right or he gonna pay."

"I'm sure Dr. Royce has no intention of cheating me of my severance pay," Katherine said. "After all, I've worked for him for more than 30 years. He was Father's partner, and one of his closest friends."

Luz was shaking her head again. "I tell you, you gotta watch out for your own self," she said. "You can't trust nobody. How long he wait after your father passed on to tell you you was fired? Two months, maybe? It's just not right, you know? You playing by the A rules, he playing by the B rules."

"Pardon me?" Now she was sure Luz should not be speaking to her this way. She winced as a dull throbbing began behind her eyes—the aftermath of one of her visions.

Luz misinterpreted the grimace. "Look," she said, "maybe I should keep myself to myself, but I gotta say something because you always treat me fair, you try to help me fit in here, keep this job. And what I gotta say is, Dr. Royce in there, he doing you wrong. See, there's things out there you don't know nothing about, you a nice white lady, growing up with a rich daddy—"

"I don't see—"

"—in a fancy house, I bet you had cloth napkins, I bet you change your clothes to sit down for supper. Not that I'm saying there's something wrong about that. But where you live, everybody say 'please' and 'thank you' and 'I'm sorry' and you think everybody like that. That's the A rules. Being polite, playing straight with people, thinking they gonna play straight with you."

"I have always tried to live by the Golden Rule," Katherine said stiffly.

Luz nodded. "And that's nice, that's good—if everybody else do the same thing. But they don't, you know what I'm saying? Not where I grew up. Everybody out for what they can get, playing by the B rules. Where I live, no-

body gonna give you nothing. Look around you—you see what I mean. People gonna squash you like a bug to get a seat on the subway."

Although Katherine never rode the subway, she had to concede Luz's point—it seemed that New Yorkers were growing increasingly rude. Father used to comment on it. "Gone are the days," he'd say, "when gentlemen opened doors for ladies." He himself had been one of those gentlemen, embellishing the gesture with a little half-bow as the woman passed through the door before him.

"Let me ask you something," Luz said. "When somebody bang into you on the street, what you do? Apologize, I bet. And he don't even see you, or if he do, he look at you like you something nasty growing on the shower curtain. Now when that man bang into me"—she paused dramatically, one hand on outthrust hip—"I say 'Excuse you, ass—mister.' That's what I say. He not about to get away with that."

Luz was right; Katherine did, in fact, apologize when someone bumped into her on the street. "I'm sorry, I just can't agree," Katherine said. "I was brought up to believe that one should never lower oneself to someone else's level. If he was not brought up properly, he should be pitied. There's no reason to respond in kind."

"Luz," said Dr. Royce over the intercom, "I need you to take some letters."

Luz grabbed her steno pad and a pencil but paused just long enough to whisper in Katherine's ear. "Sue his butt!" she said.

Katherine had no time to reply, because just then James arrived and announced that he was taking her to lunch.

"This is a lovely surprise," Katherine said, unpinning her hat and handing the hat and pin to the attendant. She was glad she had thought to wear her hat on the walk to the restaurant—although the day was still warm and sunny, a stiff breeze had begun to blow. "Particularly because it has been a most upsetting day."

"Oh?" James said, raising an eyebrow.

It was remarkable, really, how much he had grown to resemble Father—the same aquiline nose, the same shrewd blue eyes, the same shock of blond, now silver, hair and beard. She really didn't see him often enough—when had it last been? Could it have been at the funeral? Surely she had seen him more recently than that. Well, no matter. He was here now—finally, someone to whom she could speak plainly.

"Yes, most upsetting," she said. She waited until the maitre d' had seated them at their table, then said, "I've had some rather bad news. Dr. Royce has given me my notice. Apparently, the practice is no longer as profitable as it once was."

"Really," James said. "Funny, Father never mentioned that to me."

"Nor to me. But—"

"Perhaps I should look into it," James said, stroking his beard.

"Perhaps. But the point is, you see—"

"I think I should. No telling what Royce has been up to since Father passed away." James leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Father had his suspicions about him, you know."

"Suspicions? About Dr. Royce? What on earth are you talking about?"

James raised an eyebrow. "Certain monies unaccounted for. And a certain, shall we say, predilection, for women of less than savory reputation." He leaned back, and a waiter materialized by his side. "Ah, yes," he said. "The lady will have..."

Katherine held her tongue until the waiter had glided away. "But James," she said, "that's outrageous. How can you think that a man like Dr. Royce—"

James pursed his lips, the very image of Father. "Come, now, Katherine, don't be naive."

Katherine colored. "But Father never said—"
"Of course not. He never discussed such topics in mixed company."

James was right, of course. Father had been terribly strict about maintaining proper relations between men and women. Even though the Bertram Hilliard incident had occurred decades ago, she still remembered Father's words.

"I have never missed your mother more keenly than I do now," he had said to the 21-year-old Katherine, drawing on his pipe and staring into the flames flickering in the fireplace of his study. Outside the French windows, the snow was falling softly on Sutton Place. "Clearly, it is inappropriate for a father to speak so frankly to his daughter about such delicate matters. However..."

And he had proceeded to tell her. About how men were tormented by almost ungovernable lusts. About how civilized men struggled to overcome them so as not to impose their base, animal natures on the refined, more spiritual sensibilities of their wives. And about how he discovered that Bertram Hilliard, handsome and charming as he appeared to be, was in reality a beast who consorted with ladies of the evening and who would undoubtedly subject any wife of his to a nightly ritual of abasement and horror.

He had spoken for a long time. Katherine could not bear to look at him. Her face flaming, she watched the friendly snowfall transform itself into a storm of sleet and hail that pelted the roof and rattled the windows.

"Katherine," Father said sharply. She turned to face him. "I have said all I will say on this matter. I will not discuss it again. If you are still determined to marry Hilliard, you are of age, and I cannot stop you. But if it turns out badly, you will not be able to claim that you did not know his true nature, you will never be able to reclaim your status in my eyes. You must choose."

Katherine looked at the fine, strong planes of his face and was startled by the emotion she saw there. Even through her embarrassment and disillusionment and anger at Bertram for deceiving her so, she felt a rush of love for Father so overwhelming it took her breath away. That he should care for her so deeply! That he should raise a subject about which he had such obvious distaste, merely to protect her! And without hesitation, she had chosen.

"While we're on the subject of our financial interests," James said, "I've got a bit of news that will cheer you. I've sold the townhouse. For a tidy sum, I might add."

Katherine stared and shook herself into the present. "You've sold the house? But I thought we agreed—"

"Yes, I know, but I happened to run into one of Father's colleagues at the club, and he expressed an interest. I took him over there last week, while you were at the office. He made such a handsome offer that I could hardly refuse him."

"While I was at...but—"

"The only possible snag is that he'd like to get in there by the end of May. You'll have to find a way to get everything packed in six weeks. It'll be a bit difficult, but I think you can do it."

"Six weeks!"

James waved his hand. "No need to worry about that. I've already taken care of everything." His face wore the same close-lipped smile—the chess-winning, first-up-the-tree, all-A's smile—Katherine remembered from their childhood.

James frowned. "You're not pleased."
"Well, yes, I am, certainly I am. It's just that...I thought we had agreed that I...six weeks. But it's my home, James! Where will I live? How will I be able to find a suitable place in six weeks?"

James waved his hand. "No need to worry about that. I've already taken care of everything." His face wore the same close-lipped smile—the chess-winning, first-up-the-tree, all-A's smile—Katherine remembered from their childhood. "I've found you a charming one-bedroom—doorman building, all the conveniences—on the Upper East Side. I signed the lease this morning."

"I see," Katherine said.

"After all," James said, "with Father gone, I assumed you didn't need all that much space. That'll be a relief, won't it? No more rattling around in that great, big house all alone?"

"Well, I—"
Creases shaped like parentheses framed James's downturned lips. "You aren't pleased, are you? Really, Katherine, I thought you would be a

bit more appreciative of my efforts in your behalf. After all, I merely did what is clearly in your own best interests, as Father wished me to do."

I have only your best interests at heart. Katherine closed her eyes, Father's voice so close and clear that she was almost convinced he was seated next to her at the table. Father had been right, of course. Not only about Bertram Hilliard, not only about the two subsequent suitors whom he discouraged her from marrying—"I am very much afraid, my dear, that your inheritance may be more attractive to these men than your charming person"—but about her attending college, then medical school.

How disappointed Father had been when Katherine, not James, had expressed an interest in continuing the family profession! "Out of the question," Father had said. "By nature, the fair sex is temperamentally unsuited to the practice of medicine." And although Katherine had thought it terribly unfair at the time, she had ultimately come to understand that it was true—she could never have been a physician. Why, when one of Father's patients had had a massive myocardial infarction in the office a few years before, Katherine had nearly fainted.

"Of course," James said, "if you think the move will be too much of a strain, I can look into securing you a place at—what was it called—Sunnyvale? Just for a few months. Until you're feeling...stronger."

Katherine's eyes snapped open.

James fingered his beard. "Yes, I'm sure it was called Sunnyvale." His cool blue eyes appraised her steadily.

Even though Katherine knew she was still seated—she could feel the back of the chair against her back, the edge of the seat cutting into the flesh above the underside of her knees—she saw herself rise and glide to James's side. The other Katherine fingered James's steak knife and winked at her. It was a most vulgar gesture—Katherine would have to speak to her about it. Unperturbed, the other Katherine picked up the knife and in one smooth stroke drove it into the base of James's throat.

Both Katherines watched as James clawed at the object and managed to wrench it free, blood erupting from the wound and flowing down his starched white shirt. Soundlessly, James opened his mouth. Then his eyes filmed over and he pitched forward, his head striking his plate just as the

waiter slid it into place.

"Is there something wrong with your food?" James said, slicing his steak.

Katherine looked down at the plate of linguini that had mysteriously appeared before her. "No, it's fine," she said, and picked up her fork. When she raised her head, the other Katherine had gone.

"You do seem somewhat strained," James said. "Perhaps Sunnyvale is a good idea. Shall I call them?"

"Oh, no," Katherine said. "I'm sorry if I seem under a strain. I was just thinking about how much there is to do if I am to move in six weeks."

The throbbing behind her eyes intensified. Mechanically, Katherine began to eat.

The M15 was surprisingly crowded for early afternoon on a weekday, and Katherine was relieved to find an empty seat near the bus's back door. It was disgraceful, really, that she should leave work at this hour, but her headache seemed to be growing worse. She would call Dr. Royce when she arrived home; she was sure he would understand why she'd had to leave, once she explained how ill she was feeling.

Home. How strange it was to think that she would be leaving home, for the first time in her life, in just six weeks. But perhaps James was right—the house was too large and grand for just one person, now that Father was gone. Perhaps a one-bedroom apartment would suit her after all. And if the alternative was Sunnyvale—

A rustling sound broke into her thoughts, and Katherine looked down. The woman sitting to her right was reading the *New York Post*, and the edge of the page was rubbing against the white sleeve of Katherine's new white linen dress, leaving a dark smudge.

Katherine hugged her arm close to her body. "Excuse me," she said. "Would you mind moving your newspaper a bit? I'm afraid the newsprint is staining my sleeve."

The woman looked at her mutely, her eyes heavily ringed with liner, her lips sullen. She was a young woman—a girl, really—with peroxide-white stubble for hair and a gold ring through one nostril. The low-cut brassiere she was wearing, which was clearly visible through the transparent material of her blouse, offered up her breasts like ripe fruit.

"The paper," Katherine said. "It's dirtying my sleeve."

No flicker of acknowledgment crossed the woman's features, but the paper moved away from Katherine a fraction of an inch. The woman resumed her reading.

How rude! Katherine wondered what kind of parents would allow their daughter to act and dress that way. Father, for example, had not allowed Katherine even to pierce her ears. "Barbaric," he had declared, "and blasphemous. The human body is an example of God's perfect design."

Tampering with God's perfect design—that's how Katherine had come to be sent to Sunnyvale that first time, years ago now. She didn't remember much about the incident itself, although she knew it had to do with Bertram Hilliard, and she remembered Father, in his study, and the heat from the fire, and the sleet striking the windows—you will never be able to reclaim your status in my eyes. After that, the details grew indistinct. There was something about a warm bath, and Father's straight-edge razor. There was something about rose-pink tendrils twining themselves around her limbs as she lay in the warm, all-forgiving water.

Why was she remembering that now? It was much too unpleasant, and now she had to think. Think. Should she try to get another job, at her age? Or travel, as Dr. Royce

suggested? And then there was the move. She had to organize the removal of the furniture, the packing—oh, why had James gone and sold the house? He knew she loved that house. He knew it. And his face, with that sly smile—

No. She was being ridiculous. James was looking out for her interests, as he had said. As Father had always done. *I have only your best interests at heart.* She was lucky to have such a protective family. *You will never be able to reclaim your status in my eyes.* She was blessed. *You must choose.*

Katherine became aware of pressure on her arm and looked down. The newspaper was rattling against her sleeve again, leaving a new black mark with every jerk of the bus.

Can't be helped, Dr. Royce said.

Don't be naive, James said.

Gonna squash you like a bug, Luz said.

In one swift motion, the other Katherine removed Katherine's hat pin, knocked the newspaper aside, placed the sharp tip of the pin just under the girl's breastbone, and drove the hat pin upward as far as it would go. The girl gasped, her eyes opening wide. She looked down at the enameled hilt of the pin quivering with each shallow breath, then looked up, horror in her black-rimmed eyes. Katherine marveled at the other Katherine's knowledge of anatomy—the pin should have pierced the left ventricle quite effectively. Without uttering a word, the girl slumped forward in her seat. Katherine and the other Katherine exited the bus at the next stop.

Katherine stared at the street sign, confused. Forty-fifth Street? How had she come to be at Forty-fifth Street? She turned to ask the other Katherine, but she was nowhere to be seen. She checked her watch. Why wasn't she at the office? It was much too early for her to have left work. Dr. Royce would be furious. He—

She relaxed, remembering. She had had lunch with James, and then she had developed a terrible headache and decided to return home. Yes. And then she had boarded the bus and had an unpleasant encounter with that young woman, causing her to leave the bus at the wrong stop. That must be it. Well, she would walk the rest of the way home. The exercise would clear her head.

The sky was a cloudless, robin's-egg blue as Katherine started up the avenue. It wasn't until a stiff gust of wind sent her hat sailing into the street that Katherine thought to wonder what had become of her hat pin. Δ

Jacqueline Freimor's short stories have appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* and *Red Herring Mystery Magazine*. She lives in New York City.

"Nothing Like a Dame"

Agatha Christie

Wrote plotlines so twisty,

Whodunit we never would know

If it weren't all explained by Poirot.

--Tom Kreitzberg