

The Mayor and the Midwife

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A stylishly dressed young woman let herself out of the modest home where I, midwife Rose Carroll, was headed. As I approached my pregnant client's abode, the girl turned and we nearly collided.

"Pardon me, Miss," she exclaimed before sweeping past. Her day gown, of a lawn fabric sprigged with tiny pink and red flowers, was cut in the new narrower style, with wide lace added at the neck and waist. Her flamboyant scarlet hat, worn at a jaunty angle nearly hiding her face, looked like one of the designs from Mrs. Hallowell's Millinery.

Amused by this devotion to fashion, one which I neither shared by nature nor was allowed to indulge in by my Quaker faith, I knocked at the door, above which hung a small brass Jesus on a cross. A maid showed me in.

The mother-to-be, Venice Shakspeare Currier, sat in her bedroom cradling her well-rounded belly. A white candle flickered on a low table in the corner, where a small brocade rug invited kneeling to pray to a gilded image of the Virgin Mary.

After I greeted Venice, I said, "I passed thy caller in the lane just now." I unpacked a tape measure and Pinard horn from my birthing satchel.

"That was Addie Daigle," Venice replied. "She recently married my cousin Anton, who's my husband's business partner. It was sweet of her to stop in, since I'm certainly not going out these days."

I proceeded to measure her belly from top to bottom. I pressed the flared end of the horn against her taut skin and listened to a strong, rapid fetal heartbeat. "It's fine for thee to take some air in the lane."

"It's mild now. But, Miss Rose, I don't know how I'll care for my little fellow when

winter comes. It's going to be awfully cold here in Massachusetts, isn't it?" This was the young wife's first year away from her family in New Orleans. She'd expressed to me on several occasions her apprehensions about having married Zachary Currier and moving all the way from Louisiana to Amesbury. She didn't question her love for her husband, but she worried about the weather.

"Indeed, it will be quite cold this winter." I took her pulse.

"Zachary tells me he's going to have to halt his steamboat excursions when the Merrimack River freezes over. I've never seen a river go solid." Her honey-colored eyes widened.

"Thee shouldn't worry. Thee will bundle thy child properly and thyself, as well."

"I'll try. Zachary wants to name the baby Joseph after my papa. He's the mayor of New Orleans, you know," she boasted in a gentle tone, pronouncing the name of the city something like "Nah-linz."

"Thee knows we cannot discern before the birth if the child will be male or female." I pushed my spectacles back up the bridge of my nose.

"*Mais oui*, of course." She smiled, then cast me a look. "You know, my grandfather speaks Quaker talk like you do."

"Really? Thy grandfather is a Quaker?"

"He is. *Grandpere* came to Louisiana all the way from Delaware," Venice said. "My papa doesn't talk the way you do, but he's a reformer because of what *Grandpere* taught him. Trying to fix politics in New Orleans isn't easy." Venice let out a long yawn.

"I'm going to let thee rest now. All seems well."

I let myself out. Zachary Currier hadn't made an appearance, but he was no doubt at work in his steamboat office a mile away on the Merrimack. A native of Amesbury, he'd been apprenticing on a steam paddleboat on the Mississippi when he'd met and fallen in love with Venice.

I stepped out onto the lane. The afternoon sun on this lovely autumn day illuminated the red and golden leaves like a gilt-edged painting.

A fine Hollander rockaway carriage pulled up to the house, its high graceful wheels crunching on the paving stones. After the uniformed driver pulled the glossy brown Morgan to a halt, a man in a handsome suit and top hat stepped out of the coach, his dark mustache well oiled, his midsection well fed.

“Good afternoon, Miss,” he said, tipping his hat. “I’d be much obliged if you would show me into this fine abode.” He widened the vowels like Venice did, with the middle of “obliged” and “fine” stretching into “ah” sounds. “If it is the home of a Mister Zachary Currier, that is.”

I extended my hand. “I’m Rose Carroll. This is indeed Zachary’s home, and that of his wife, Venice. But I’m not employed in the household. Thee will have to ask the maid for admittance.”

The man stared at me for a moment, then threw his head back and laughed before shaking my slender hand with his meaty one.

“A Quaker, are you?” he exclaimed. “*Mon Dieu*, just like my dear *Papere*.”

“I am, and a midwife, as well.” I cocked my head. “Would thee happen to be Venice’s father, come from New Orleans?”

“That’s the truth, young lady. I’m Joseph Shakspeare. Has my grandson arrived yet?”

“Not yet. It could be another six weeks, although the baby will likely arrive in about a month’s time.”

“And how fares my girl?”

“Thy daughter is quite healthy.”

“*Tres bien*. Her mother sent me to check on Venice’s welfare, as the missus is involved with her own nursling. Our youngest of six is only a year old and quite attached yet to his meals of mother’s milk.”

“As it should be,” I said. “Farewell, then. Enjoy thy stay.”

He twirled one end of his mustache and regarded me. “*Mais*, I’ve just come from a visit with the selectmen of this fair town. Thought we could exchange some honest words about city government and all that, seeing as how I’m a mayor looking to reverse a terrible situation of corruption. But those fellows were *pas vaillant*. You know, standoffish.”

“It is New England, land of the Puritans.” I tried to suppress my smile. “And I know the term. I speak some French with my French-Canadian clients.”

“Well, what’s a man got to do to buy his colleagues a drink in this town?”

I thought for a moment. “I can introduce thee tomorrow to our town’s police detective. Kevin Donovan is a competent and forthcoming officer. He’d be willing to talk with thee about government. He also enjoys a spot of drink.”

“Splendid, my dear Quaker, splendid. Send word as to the time and I shall appear.”

“I will, Joseph.”

“*Merci*. Now I must find my Venice.”

I was surprised to see tears well up in his eyes. He may have been a metropolitan mayor fighting corruption, but he was a tender one.

At nine o’clock the next morning I sat in Kevin’s office with Joseph. He’d picked me up in the hired carriage and now we waited for Kevin to appear.

“Venice was happy to see thee yesterday, I’d guess,” I said.

“Indeed she was.” Joseph beamed. “We’re going out on the river later today on Zachary’s pleasure boat, since the weather is so fine. We’re going to pass a good time.”

“It’ll be a pleasant ride.”

Kevin burst into the room mopping his high rounded brow with a handkerchief. “Pardon my tardiness, sir.” He pumped Joseph’s hand, then greeted me. “Hello, Miss Rose.”

“Joseph, I’d like you to meet Detective Kevin Donovan,” I said. “Kevin, Joseph Shakspeare, mayor of New Orleans.”

“Excellent to meet you, Detective. Miss Carroll here says you run a tight ship.”

“We do our best.” Kevin sat behind his messy desk. “But don’t you mean Shakespeare, Miss Rose?” He cocked his head.

Joseph laughed. “Everyone thinks I can’t spell my own name. No, Miss Carroll was correct. I share the bard’s name minus one letter.”

“I see.” Kevin nodded. “Now, what can I help you with, Mayor?”

“My mission is to reduce corruption in city government. We have a group called the Ring down there, and they oppose me at every turn. I’m here visiting my daughter, Mrs. Currier, and thought I’d see what the fine town of Amesbury had to offer.”

“I will leave you gentlemen to it.” I rose. “I’m off to see clients.”

Both men also stood. Kevin opened his mouth to speak when a young officer appeared in the doorway. “Excuse me sir, but there’s been a death near the Merrimack, a Zachary Currier. The death might be suspicious.”

I gasped. Not Venice’s husband.

Joseph’s eyes widened. “*Maudit!*” he whispered.

“Currier. That’s your daughter’s married name, you said?” A frowning Kevin asked Joseph.

“Her husband’s Christian name is Zachary.” Joseph, his face pale, turned to the young officer. “He’s a paddleboat owner. That the one?”

“Yes, sir.”

I brought my hand to my mouth. Another suspicious death in our quiet town.

“This is a disturbing turn of events.” Kevin shook his head.

“Has his wife been informed?” I asked. This kind of shock could easily bring on labor. Her baby might be mature enough by now to survive the birth, or might not.

“Not yet, ma’am,” the officer said.

“I must go to her. My *pauvre fille*,” Joseph said. “You’ll come along, Miss Carroll?”

“Of course. Let me quickly pen a note to my next client saying I need to cancel. I can hail a boy outside to deliver it.”

I looked at the detective. I’d assisted him in several cases by keeping my eyes and ears open in the community, especially in the bedchambers of my birthing women, where secrets were often revealed during their travails. The detective had reluctantly grown to accept my participation.

“If it’s murder, I’d like to help by listening, watching, and reporting to thee as I have done in the past.”

Kevin nodded. “Then meet me at the Currier steamboat dock after you see to the wife, will you?”

I climbed out of Joseph’s carriage in front of the dock an hour later. He’d instructed the driver to take me down to the river. Before I’d left Venice’s side I ascertained that, so far at least, the distraught young woman had not started her labor. I left her father to console her and said I’d be back.

The dock bustled with police. A coroner’s wagon was parked nearby, its gray horse waiting patiently in the traces. The open upper deck of the long white steamboat, a deck I’d seen full of weekend frolickers recently, now sat empty and forlorn.

The door to a small building opened. Kevin and another officer walked out grasping a struggling young man between them.

“*Moi*, I never did!” the fellow exclaimed. “I wouldn’t kill Zach. We’re in business together.” His speech lilted in the southern way like Venice’s.

“Yes, but you’re also employed sewing sails as a side business, I hear,” Kevin said. “That puncture wound in the victim’s neck could’ve come only from a needle, and I very much doubt it was self-inflicted.” He caught sight of me. “Ah, Miss Rose. We’re taking Anton Daigle in for questioning.”

Anton’s eyes pleaded with me. “I didn’t kill *mon cousin*, Miss. I didn’t.”

“Come along, now.” Kevin and the other officer bundled Anton into the back of the police wagon parked behind the ambulance. As the door shut, Kevin turned back toward me, dusting off his hands.

“What reason would Anton have to kill his partner?” I asked.

“He probably had a deal where he’d inherit the victim’s half of the business. Sometimes they write up contracts like that.”

“Did thee find the murder weapon?”

“Not yet. I’ll show you the body.”

“Very well.” As a midwife, I was acquainted with death, beyond the several murder

victims I'd had the misfortune to encounter. I did my best to bring women and babies safely through the normal but dangerous journey of birth. But sometimes I lost a mother or a newborn, or an infant succumbed to disease in its first weeks. I'd seen lifeless bodies before.

I followed Kevin into the office building, barely more than a shack with a window where tickets were sold. A wooden desk faced the door and another lined the back wall.

Zachary Currier lay half on his side behind the front desk. One hand grasped a tipped-over chair as if he'd reached for it as he fell. A dark pool soaked the floor under his neck and red marks slashed the side wall. An officer guarded the body.

"Watch the door from outside," Kevin instructed him. After the man left, Kevin moved the victim's head slightly and pointed. "See here? Stabbed in the neck. Daigle there knew exactly how to hit the vital vein."

I gathered my skirts in my hands to keep them away from the blood and leaned down to examine the neck. Indeed, a small round puncture wound pierced the skin above where Zachary's right carotid artery would be. The spray on the wall would be from the pressure of the heart continuing to pump out blood until the poor man had lost enough to die.

"Looks like a needle wound, wouldn't you say?" Kevin asked.

"Certainly a thin sharp object. Thee hasn't found it?"

"Not yet, but we will."

"Who reported the death this morning?"

"It was Daigle himself." Kevin's mouth turned down in disgust. "A fellow reported that Daigle had just arrived when he dashed back out and raised the alarm. Probably killed Currier earlier, went home for breakfast, and came back all calm and easy like."

"Of course thy officers will closely question the neighbors and other businesses here on the river." I stared at him over my spectacles. "Thee has a penchant for jumping to conclusions a bit too hastily, Kevin."

He cleared his throat. "Of course we will. And we'll find the bloody needle, too."

After they carried out Zachary's body, and with Kevin's permission, I made my own

search of the office. I pulled out desk drawers, knelt to peer under the furniture, and checked the dusty corners. I examined the ticket counter, with its used tickets stuck on a spike.

I didn't locate the weapon, however. I peered closely at the spike. While its tip was certainly sharp enough, the rest of it was too thick to have caused the small wound. The carotid rested about an inch and half in from the skin of the neck, if I remembered my anatomy studies correctly. No, a long sharp needle or pin was going to be the culprit. Unfortunately, it could be deep in the river by now.

I did find one small item that seemed out of place in an office. I pocketed the slim white feather, thinking to pass it along to Kevin. Perhaps it wasn't suspicious. There were gulls and other birds aplenty along the wide river, still tidal here ten miles inland from the Atlantic. But the detective might want to take a look.

When I went outside, though, Kevin had left. The officer on guard said he'd gone back to the station. I began my walk back toward the grieving young widow. Could Kevin's posited motive could possibly be true?

"Boil water," I directed Venice's maid as a clock chimed noon. "And I'll need a stack of clean cloths and two basins." As I'd feared, Venice was experiencing regular and increasingly frequent pains of labor when I arrived. I was glad I'd left my birthing satchel here this morning before departing for the dock. Joseph paced in the back of the room.

He hurried to where I stood. "Did the detective figure out how Zachary died?" he whispered.

"He appears to have been murdered," I murmured. "Kevin thinks it was your nephew Anton."

"*Quoi?*" Venice screeched. "Anton wouldn't kill my Zach."

"Anton said as much," I told her. "But the detective took him in for questioning, regardless."

Venice groaned as another contraction set in. "Thee must wait in another room," I said to Joseph. "I need to examine the baby's progress. And we can't be having a man in the birthing

chamber.”

He nodded. “Just one moment.”

He knelt in the prayer corner, crossed himself as he bowed his head, then folded his hands in front of his chest. He murmured prayers for a minute, then crossed himself again.

“*Fait du mal!* It hurts, *Papere*,” Venice wailed, her eyes squeezed shut and her face crunched in pain.

“*Cher*, you’ll be all right.” Joseph stood and stroked his daughter’s forehead with a gentle hand, but he wore one of the most anguished faces I’d ever seen on a man. “I look forward to meeting *le petit*, and we’re going to bring you and him home to *Maman* as soon as we can. Don’t you worry about a little thing. Miss Rose here is going to take good care of you.”

He left and the young maid returned, eyes wide. She placed the kettle on a dresser, setting the folded linens and basins next to it. “Do you need me to help, Miss?”

I let out a breath. I very much wished to have an apprentice at my side, but the one I was training was away. “I should be fine. But please don’t be far in case I call for thee.”

She nodded and scurried out as Venice lay curled on the bed, moaning through another pain.

When her contraction ended, I said, “I need thee to sit up.” I propped pillows at the head of the bed and boosted her up until she was sitting almost straight. “Bend thy knees. I’m going to check the opening to thy womb.”

“I want my *defunt* Zach.” She gazed at me, tears streaming down her face. “My baby won’t have a *Papere*, Rose. Whatever will I do?”

“Thee has a caring father and family back home. But let’s get this baby out first.”

I washed my hands, wishing I could also wash away this dire situation. A baby coming too early, a murdered father, and a mother far from anything familiar.

I pushed up the sleeve of my gray work dress and slid my hand inside her. Only a half-knuckle’s worth of dilation remained. I slid my hand out as I held her and the baby in a moment of silent prayer, that they would both make it through the next hour in good health.

With her next pain, Venice grabbed her knees, emitting a guttural sound. When the

contraction subsided, she collapsed back on the pillows. “Rose, I’m afraid. Some *bon de rien* killed my husband. Am I next?”

It was my turn to stroke her sweaty brow. “There, there. No bad person’s coming to kill thee.”

“Anton never would’ve hurt Zach. His wife, Addie? She’s a different story.”

But I didn’t get to hear that story. With the next pain Venice grabbed her knees again. Her scrunched face reddened with exertion. I grabbed the top couple of cloths off the stack and spread one under her buttocks. I drew the cord scissors out of my satchel even as a tiny dark-haired head appeared at the opening. Such an early baby was likely to be small and present little difficulty in birthing. Whether its lungs would be mature enough to sustain life was a different question.

A blessed hour later the swaddled babe was in his mother’s arms, with his grandfather in a chair at the bedside. The birth had been as easy as they come. Venice’s passageway had not torn, the afterbirth had been intact, the little fellow had breathed well, and he’d already suckled his first meal. He now regarded Venice with the calm dark-eyed gaze of all newborns.

Venice glanced at her father. “*Papere*, I was going to name him Joseph. But now I must call him Zachary. You understand, *n’est ce pas?*”

He nodded, tears again in his eyes.

“I have something I must do,” I said, patting my pocket. “I’ll return before nightfall to check on thee, Venice. And I’ll bring an herb to help thy milk production.”

“You’re a *traiteure*, Rose. What we call a healer back home.” Venice smiled, just a little.

I smiled back.

I hurried along the lower edge of Main Street back to the river, the mid-afternoon sun glinting off the water. After I chatted with several neighbors of the steamboat office, as well as with a man running a fish shop next door to the dock, I hailed the horse-drawn trolley that ran from the bridge into town. I’d put together two and two and I urgently needed to convey the sum to a certain detective. But first I had a bit of research to do.

Twenty minutes after alighting downtown, I laid out my idea to Kevin in his office.

“This is quite a stretch, Miss Rose.”

“I believe thee holds an innocent man, Kevin. Doesn’t thee wish to see justice served?”

He stared at me, finally letting out a long sigh. “All right. I’ll check that one fact, and then let’s be off.”

Half an hour later we stood in the clean but somewhat shabby parlor of the Daigle home, a small house near the rail depot. Addie again wore the pink and red-sprigged day dress I’d seen her in yesterday.

“What do you want?” she asked. “You already have my husband.”

Kevin nodded to me.

“Thee knows thy husband is suspected of killing Zachary Currier this morning.”

She kneaded one hand with the other. “I was just on my way to the jail to visit him. My poor Anton was under such pressure.”

“What kind of pressure?” Kevin asked, pulling out a small notebook and a stub of pencil.

“Working the two businesses up here. He’d escaped the Ring down there in New Orleans where he’s from. But the work was just about killing him. I’m not surprised he cracked.”

“Did he?” I asked. “Where was thee this morning a few minutes before dawn?”

“Asleep here in my bed, of course.”

I gave a brief nod to Kevin, who went into the hall and returned with Addie’s fanciful red hat.

“Sure enough, it’s from Mrs. Hallowell’s,” he said after examining the tag inside.

“What d’you want with my hat?” Addie tried to grab it but Kevin was too fast for her.

I pulled out the feather from my pocket and held it up next to the three small white feathers that were part of the hat’s decoration.

“A perfect match,” I said. “Mrs. Hallowell herself told me these are most rare, feathers from a nearly extinct African miniature heron. She had only the four.”

“And what of it?” Addie scoffed. “I’ve gone into the steamship office many times wearing that hat.”

I glanced at Kevin. I hadn't said the office was where I'd found the feather.

Kevin drew out a handkerchief and carefully extracted a long hat pin from the bow at the back of the hat, a pin with rust-colored stains. "I daresay our microscope will discover traces of Mr. Currier's blood on your hat pin, ma'am."

"And I believe we'll find spots of blood mixing in with the red flowers on thy dress," I added. "A neighbor saw thee enter the office early this morning. Thy own husband said thee was not in the marital bed when he arose." I wondered how she knew to find the carotid, but perhaps it had been luck, not skill.

Addie turned to look out the window.

"Why did you kill him, Mrs. Daigle?" Kevin stood tall, official, stern.

She faced us, head held high. "I deserve a better life than this. We never have enough money." With a curled lip she gestured around the room. "I didn't think Anton would be stupid enough to get himself arrested. I thought we'd get the whole business for ourselves."

"Thee seemed willing to let us think Anton was the murderer a moment ago."

"Well, *I* certainly didn't want to be hauled off to jail." She tossed her blond curls. "And if he's guilty, then the business is mine, isn't it?"

"I guess you never read their business contract," Kevin said in a soft voice. "In case of one partner's death, his half of the enterprise goes to his wife."

"No!" Her eyes went wide. She lunged for Kevin, her fingernails aiming for his neck. Kevin neatly sidestepped and caught her hands behind her. He gave a whistle, and another officer hurried in from the hall to cuff Addie's hands behind her back. He turned her toward the door.

She twisted back to glare at Kevin and me. "You'll regret this."

"I doubt it," he murmured.

I approached the Currier home as dusk fell to find Joseph and Anton leaving the house. I supposed Anton might be angry with me for my role in Addie's arrest, but I greeted them, regardless.

"How is Venice?" I asked. "I brought her the herb I'd promised."

“She is grieving terribly,” Joseph said. “But at least she has her baby.” He clapped a hand on Anton’s shoulder. “And we’re putting up my nephew for the time being.”

“It’s generous of you, *Nonc* Joseph.” He looked at me. “I have to sell my house now, to pay for my wife’s lawyer.”

“I see,” I said. “Perhaps you heard of the assistance I provided the detective. I’m sorry--”

Anton held up a hand. “Addie did a terrible thing, and you made sure justice was served. Please don’t apologize.” His eyes sagged but he kept his chin up and shoulders back.

I nodded in silence.

“We’re off to church to say a prayer for both Zachary and his baby son.” Joseph tipped his hat.

The two climbed into the waiting carriage. I knocked at the house, relieved to leave detecting behind. I had a new mother and baby to see to.