Finding Charlotte *
(A Zinnea & Nightstalk Mystery)

Cassandra Zinnea called them “C.O.N.C.s”. Cases of no consequence. She could be snooty like that sometimes. I told her once, hey, even Sherlock Holmes realized they can’t all be Studies in Scarlet or whatever. When you get handed a lemon, y’know, make lemonade.

She didn’t buy it. She got bored pretty easily. Very Holmes-like that way. Only she had different diversions than a seven per cent solution of cocaine. It’s debatable if they were any healthier in the long run but, well, that’s a discussion for another time.

The affair involving the disappearance of Charlotte Bednarski didn’t have a promising beginning and you’ll have to decide for yourself if everything worked out for the best in the end. I’m not what you would call big on analysis. That’s my partner’s domain. Smart and gorgeous, the complete package. Miss Marple and a Victoria’s Secrets model all rolled into one. As kind and decent a human being as you’re likely to encounter this side of Heaven. And that’s why it was nearly killing her giving the Turnbulls the bad news.

“—so terribly sorry,” Cassandra said, standing in front of our shared desk, her voice quaking with emotion. “It’s official policy and I’m afraid there are no exceptions. We don’t handle missing persons cases or divorces. We’ve found they both involve too many…complications. You say you’ve already been to the police—”

Dennis Turnbull snorted. “Fat lot of good they were. Wouldn’t give us the time of day, would they, hon? What’s this world coming to?” He was chubby, forty-ish, some

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kind of nerd. Baby fat and large, soft features. Likely cried during sappy movies and was
good about helping with the washing up. A “girly man”, as my buddy Arnold would say.

I was hearing warning bells. The cops in Ilium may not have been top drawer in
many respects but they tended to ramp up their game when there were children
involved. “How long did you say your kid’s been missing? Two days?” They nodded,
tired and discouraged, leaning into each other. The wife seemed older, utilizing a full
palette of makeup to disguise her true age. Offhand, I’d say she applied it with a trowel.
But they were nice people, just addled, desperate. “You gave us the impression she was
quite young…”

“Around nine, I would say,” Cheryl Turnbull confirmed, “but small for her age.”

That sounded funny but at that point Cassandra jumped in. “So this isn’t any
ordinary runaway. She’s under-aged, alone out there…” She choked up. Mrs. Turnbull
nodded, the two of them close to blubbing.

“That’s what we tried to tell the police,” she croaked, “but they wouldn’t listen.”

I could see my partner wavering and decided enough was enough. “Yeah, that’s,
uh, definitely strange and if I were you I’d, uh, definitely go back there and get them to
put out an A.P.B. on your daughter and—”

Dennis Turnbull was shaking his head. He tapped his wife’s leg and they rose
together. “We’ve been humiliated enough, thank you very much. That Detective-
Sergeant or whatever he said he was. Snowden…” I glanced at my partner. “You must
know the man. He’s the one who told us to come down here. ‘The court of last resort’, he
called you.”

“He’s an idiot,” Cassandra said.

“What she says,” I added.
The Turnbulls helped each other on with their coats. We could only stand there and watch.

“arrett you on one point, Mr. Nightstalk.” Dennis Turnbull tugged brown leather gloves over his thick fingers; it was a cold night, a week ’til Christmas, the wind off Lake Erie downright lethal. “Charlotte wasn’t our daughter. My wife and I are childless by choice.” She offered us a thin smile. Not entirely by choice, it seemed to say.

Now I was really confused. “So…she was a niece? A neighbor--”

“Oh, no, she lived with us.”

Cassandra and I exchanged befuddled looks. “Adopted?” she ventured.

“A lodger?”

“No, she was there when we moved in.” She saw our bafflement. “She came with the house.”

Ah…

Nope, still didn’t get it. But Cassandra did, I could tell from her spreading smile. Suddenly the case had become much more interesting.

I blundered on. “She was living there? Like…squatting?”

“No, Nightstalk,” my partner corrected me. “She’s always lived there.”

The Turnbulls smiled at each other. “She’s the reason we bought the place,” Cheryl Turnbull confided. “The location is nice but the backyard is far too small for our tastes.”

“We both like to garden,” Dennis chimed in.

“But once Charlotte made herself known to us…we knew we couldn’t let it go.”

They were standing by the door. “It’s been ten years now and we’ve never regretted it a moment.” They clasped hands. Forming a common front.
Cassandra’s demeanor had undergone a radical transformation; all at once she was in full hunt mode. “Now that we’re more fully apprised of the situation,” checking with me for confirmation, “I think we might be of service to you after all.”

“Just don’t call her a ghost,” Cheryl Turnbull pleaded, crossing toward us, holding out her hands, a big purse looped over her wrist. “That awful Snowden man kept saying that. I hate it. Ghosts are feeble and sad and pathetic. Charlotte is none of those things. She has a personality, a—a—”

“Easy now, dear,” her husband coaxed her, “we’re among friends here.” He regarded us hopefully as he patted her shoulder. “It’s nice to be with folks who don’t make you feel like you’re, y’know, coo coo.”

“We’ve lost friends, even our families won’t come to visit.” Cheryl Turnbull managed to look hurt and defiant. “Just because we set an extra place at the table or put on her favorite show when it’s time. What’s that to any of them?”

I could only manage a sickly grin so they focused their attention on my lovely colleague. She, in contrast, gave off waves of understanding and empathy.

“Come over here and have a seat. We’ll start again.” Signaling me. “My associate, Mr. Nightstalk, will take down the particulars. Give us a bit of background and talk about the day she went missing. All the details you can think of, no matter how inconsequential they might seem.” I found my steno pad and a pen. “Let’s see if we can get to the bottom of this…”

Which turned out to be a tricky and circuitous process, owing in large part to the Turnbulls’ habit of interrupting each other and constantly adding details and tidbits of irrelevant information that turned into long, pointless digressions. After twenty minutes I
was ready to bang their heads together, putting an end to their cross-chatter once and for all.

What became immediately clear was that their lives revolved around their home. They had no friends, no one dropping by for a visit, estranged from their families...so they fell back on each other. And Charlotte, of course. Charlotte seemed to be their primary source of joy and entertainment, the bright star they circled...and served. They spoke of her with doting affection and pride, as they would a beloved daughter.

She had her own special room, filled with her favorite things. She was quite particular. Spoiled was more like it but, then again, I wasn’t a parent and never would be (if the gods were as kind and benevolent as I hoped). A closet full of clothes she couldn’t wear, a cell phone she couldn’t use and a big screen TV someone had to turn on and off for her.

She could be mischievous and cruel. Sometimes she had tantrums but for the most part she behaved like a proper young lady. She usually manifested herself after 6:00 p.m. and was at her strongest around ten. Then she got sleepy, gradually dissolving away by midnight.

“We knew something was wrong when she didn’t show up for Jeopardy,” Cheryl chewed a thumbnail, worn to a frazzle by the ordeal. “It was Tuesday, my day off. I made chocolate brownies. She loves how they smell.”

“And nothing unusual happened that day?” Cassandra pressed her.

“I made brownies, I paid the utilities...oh, there was the little man.” She giggled. “Silly person. Some sort of salesman, peddling these vaporizer things.”

Cassandra leaned forward. “Tell us about him.”
She waved it away, dismissing the episode out of hand. “He barely made it inside the door. Trying to peddle a gadget that did something to the ions in the air.” She frowned. “Are you sure this is even—”

“I’m sure,” my partner urged her, “please continue.”

“He set this thing, this silver tank on the floor, turned it on and some lights went from red to green.” She paused. I wanted to strangle her.

“And?”

“And nothing. The air was just as dry as ever and I told him so. There was kind of a funny smell but it might have been the new furniture polish I bought. He thanked me for my time and that was that.” She hesitated again but on this occasion it was because she was genuinely perplexed. “It’s funny…I keep the chain on the door and never, for any reason, let anyone in unless I’m expecting them. I’m usually very, very careful because it’s just Charlotte and me until Den gets home at five.”

“Yet he managed to talk his way in.” I glanced at Cassandra. Both of us thinking the same thing: *some kind of glamour?*

“I guess so…” Cheryl sounded doubtful. “I don’t remember what he said. Just him putting that big tank thing down and turning it on. I think he may have explained what it did but it didn’t make any sense to me.”

“He called it a vaporizer?” Cassandra asked.

“Something like that. I wasn’t really paying attention. I was glad when I finally shut the door on him. I should never have let a stranger in my house.” Her eyes were welling up again. “Dear Lord, I’ll never forgive myself if I’m the one responsible for this.”

“Now, Sherry—”
“No, Den, I’m serious. I was her guardian, entrusted with her safety.” She gazed at us beseechingly. “I want to know if I did wrong.”

“You didn’t,” Cassandra hastened to assure her. “We’ll find this man and determine if he has any knowledge of Charlotte’s whereabouts. His visit may be entirely unrelated but we certainly can’t rule anything out at this point.”

“I’m sure I’d recognize him again.” She smiled. “He was barely five feet tall. A bowler hat, skinny moustache and a—”

“—little yellow bowtie,” we finished for her.

She stared at us.

“I believe we know the chap,” I informed her.

Relief and hope flashed across her face. “You know him? Oh, thank the Lord…”

“Now, dear, they said he might not be involved—”

“It was him! I know it was! That was Tuesday and we never saw her again.” She was sobbing. “Oh, please, please, find him. Find him and bring her back.”

I’d written a name on the steno pad, now I added our next likely stop:

_Lakeside Inn_

Showed it to Cassandra, earning a curt nod. “Except the last name has two _ls_, not one.” Always the stickler.

I made the correction. “It’s been awhile since he made a circuit through here.”

Cassandra tried to be tactful for the Turnbulls’ sake. “The individual in question can be…difficult.”

Cheryl looked up. Crooked tracks of tears had done terrible things to those carefully applied layers of makeup. She looked like a suicidal clown. “But you’ll bring her back to us? You promise?”
“Oh, yes, ma’am,” I assured her, rising to my feet and glowering my best glower.

“One way or another, we’ll get her back.”

But I couldn’t help noticing my partner didn’t look nearly as confident.

It was a long, messy drive to the west end. Traffic was glacially slow, the slush nearly up my bumper and, since it was after hours, there were no city crews anywhere in evidence. My Taurus wallowed through the ruts like a drunken whale and it seemed like every light in the world was against us. It was enough to make me very, very testy.

Cassandra didn’t help matters. She fiddled with the radio until she found Andy Williams crooning some old time-y Christmas tune that soon had my gorge doing backflips. I changed channels and she immediately switched back. So I dealt with the situation by snapping off the knob and throwing it out the window. Enduring her pouting for the next thirty-two blocks. And don’t think I didn’t count every single one.

Lionel P. Terwilliger (two l’s), III. Once encountered, never forgotten. What would you call someone like Lionel? A middle man? A broker? He worked purely on commission, employed by not infrequently super-wealthy clients to add a certain pizzazz to their ancestral heaps, some atmosphere to their not so little hideaway on the Scottish moors.

What was a castle, after all, without a ghost? People (apparently) willing to pay good coin to have a spectral visitor put in an appearance in an upstairs hallway or materialize on alternate Thursdays in the kitchen pantry. A well-authenticated spook added a certain cachet…and maybe an extra zero to the selling price when it came time to unload the dump on some other unsuspecting sap.
People like Terwilliger served as talent spotters and skilled facilitators. At least once in my presence he’d referred to himself as a “spiritual landscaper”. I sure hoped that one didn’t stick.

Cassandra and I were back on speaking terms by the time we reached our destination. The Inn’s main attraction was that it was off the beaten track, unfashionable but discreet. The perfect home away from home for con men, grifters and ne’er do wells. The wind was really gusting as we slogged from our parking spot back to the building. There was a guy in a secondhand Santa suit positioned outside the front door, listlessly rattling a tambourine while keeping one bleary eye on a plastic-topped canister containing about a buck forty-eight in change. My partner pitied him; I wanted to sucker punch the poor, half-frozen bastard into the middle of next week.

I guess you can tell, I hate Christmas.

My mood wasn’t too good at that point and the clerk on duty, a senior citizen with the nose of a committed souse, wisely coughed up Terwilliger’s room number with hardly any display of malice on my part.

There were only seven floors so it wasn’t a long elevator ride. She asked me to play nice and I smiled. She asked me again and got the same response. There’s a part of me that loves exasperating people. Gives me a real charge, I don’t know why.

I knocked and he answered right away. Surprised to see us, guarded, but not giving any ground. Tough by reputation, tough in person. I sympathized. I was somewhat lacking in the height department and had my own admittedly cruder methods of compensating.

“Hello, Leo,” I said.
He winced. “Nightstalk. You’re the only person I know who calls me that.” He was already looking past me. My partner’s presence tended to do that to people. I don’t know what Terwilliger’s sexual preferences were (couldn’t care less) but it didn’t matter. He spotted Cassandra and you could see it register, his face momentarily relinquishing that pinched, pained expression, appearing almost congenial. “Cassandra, my dear. Please, enter…”

“Lionel,” she purred, “we’ve come to see you about a matter of some urgency.” We watched her sashay in. I have to say, she could sashay with the best of them.

“So I gathered,” he retorted, “but please believe me when I tell you that whatever your mission is, it’s a waste of time. I doubt very much if I can help you.”

“We’ll see about that,” I growled.

He shrugged. “Well, you’re here and obviously you’re after something. Let’s get this over with.”

I stationed myself by the door, folding my arms, making sure I looked suitably sinister. Cassandra scowled at me, guiding Terwilliger toward the sofa, turning on the charm. “It’s really quite simple…”

But it turned out this was one of those rare occasions when she was completely wrong.

The testimony of Charlotte Bednarski was the deciding factor.

Terwilliger could hem and haw as much as he wanted but when we insisted the girl speak for herself, he knew he was in no position to deny us. He retrieved a long, metallic cylinder from a closet by the door, rolled it out into the middle of the floor. He
pushed a button, reversed polarities (or whatever *), and pfffft! there was Charlotte, a bit see-through in places, but corporeal enough to be pissed off.

“Goddamnit, you little dwarf, I told you never to…” Then she realized he had company and quickly changed her tune. “Uh, hey. Who’re you?”

Cassandra brought her up to speed but at the mention of the Turnbulls, Charlotte started shaking her head. “Hey, I like those people and everything but, y’know, it’s time for a change. Mr. T. says he can get me on at this place in Hungary. They’re promoting it as the real Castle Dracula. Sounds cool. All I gotta do is rattle some chains and move furniture around and shit. I wanna see the world, not hang out watching sitcoms.”

I tried to imagine relaying the gist of this conversation to the Turnbulls. They weren’t going to like it. “But your folks—I mean—”

She laughed. “I know what you mean and, hey, they’re nice people, don’t get me wrong. But they don’t do anything, never take me anywhere. I’m stuck in that house day in and day out and it’s, like, a complete drag. Then I heard about Lionel and let him know through the grapevine I was ready to make a move.”

Cassandra looked at me and I could see her tank was dry. Clearly my rash promise to a stricken couple was starting to seem like a lost cause. Until I thought of something, one of those rare, smashing great ideas that never earn me enough credit for their sheer logic and undeniable genius.

“Hey, Leo…” I saw him wince. “Sorry, I mean Lionel.” Trying to soft soap the pompous bugger. “Charlotte here ain’t your only, uh, find, is she? I mean, you make the rounds, you’ve probably got quite the collection in your closet.”

He was aghast. “Mr. Nightstalk, surely you’re not suggesting—”

* I have no idea of the science involved; I’m an investigator, not a particle physicist.
“Oh, come on! Nobody’s going to miss one, right?” Turning to Cassandra for backup but she was staring at a spot on the ceiling.

“Can I, like, fade?” Charlotte asked, striking an insolent pose. “No offense meant but there’s other places I’d rather be.”

I knew what she meant.

Give him credit, Lionel P. Terwilliger III was one stubborn man. I went to work on him and Cassandra eventually chimed in but he wouldn’t be moved. “I have placements for each and every one of my finds,” he snapped. “Clients who expect satisfaction for the substantial investment they’ve made in my services.”

“How’s your health insurance, twerp? How’d you like to invest in a full body cast—”

“Nightstalk,” she broke in, “there’s no need to make threats. Mr. Terwilliger has professional standards to maintain. But perhaps, in lieu of your suggestion, he can come up with another idea, some alternative that would be acceptable to all parties involved.”

Unfortunately he couldn’t. None of us could. And there was no way we were leaving the premises with one of those cylinders unless it was over his dead body. I was willing and able, should it come to that but, sadly, Miss Sweetness and Light wasn’t having any of it.

She allowed the creep to steer us out into the hallway. I looked up and damned if there wasn’t a sprig of fake mistletoe tacked over his door. The Lakeside Inn’s idea of holiday cheer? I thought it verged on the surreal.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more assistance.” His smile as thin as his sissy moustache. “I trust there will be no need of further contact.” Eying me. “I think we’ve had enough of each other’s company. And so I’ll wish you good night.”
“Merry Christmas, Lionel,” Cassandra said. Sounded like she meant it too.

He paused as he was shutting the door. “Thank you.” I could barely hear him.

I think it was the closest we came to reaching him.

Too little and far too late.

It was silent in the elevator on the way down. We passed through the foyer, then the outside door, reeling as that Arctic wind flayed the exposed skin on our faces.

Cassandra trailed after me as I approached the scruffy Santa.

“Hey, pal, I wanna rent your beard.”

“Huh?” Backing away from me. “You robbin’ me, mister?”

“Nah, I just want your beard.”

“Nightstalk…”

I showed him a twenty dollar bill and he darted forward to take it. “That’s for you. Just loan me your beard for five minutes.” He was already pulling it over his head, a sweaty wad of cotton, secured with a band of loose elastic. It looked grey and stained, as if someone had used it to sop up a bad spill.

Cassandra tugged on my arm. “What are you up to?”

“Wait in the car,” I instructed, handing her the keys. “Better yet, pull it around front. Park in the taxi lane. I’ll be right out.”

She called a question after me but I pretended not to hear it. Pulled open the door, walked back into the building.

The clerk didn’t even look up.

This time I decided not to bother with the elevator.
Lionel J. Terwilliger stood in the doorway.

I was wearing the fuzzy beard, probably looking as idiotic as I felt. Wagging my eyebrows at him, pulling a face. “Ho, ho, ho, Leo...”

I opened the back door, slid the big flask across the seat, decided against belting it in.

I could feel the bad vibes the moment I got in. I started to put the Taurus into gear, then changed my mind. Better get this over with.

It didn’t take long.

“What did you do?” She was facing forward, refusing to look at me. The heat was on full but it still seemed cold. She could do that if she got mad enough. Talk about frigid…

“Look,” I said, “I want you to believe me because it’s the absolute truth.” I turned toward her and she reluctantly followed suit. “I never laid a finger on the man or uttered a single threatening word.”

“And you didn’t break anything or eat his chair cushions—”

“Nope.”

She was watching my face. Finally she nodded, reached for my hand. She knew I couldn’t lie to her. “Okay, but now you have to tell me what made him change his mind.”

I squeezed her fingers. “I merely reminded him that I’m a helpful guy to have on your side. You know, if he ever gets in a jam and needs a little of the ol’ wham-bam. Someone dependable watching his back. A friend, in times of strife. That kind of thing.”

“And?”

“I guess he saw my point.”
“I don’t believe it.” She was about a foot away. In less than a minute the city cab pulling in behind us was going to honk and send us on our way.

“If I’m lying, I don’t deserve a Christmas kiss.” I held up the plastic mistletoe I’d swiped from Terwilliger’s doorway.

She hesitated. “I thought you hated Christmas.” Then she relented, leaning forward and pressing her lips to mine. It was magical. *Glorious.* Made you want to believe in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, fairy tales and happy endings.

Except it didn’t quite end there.

A few nights after Christmas, Dennis Turnbull made the long walk up to our office.

He was alone, distracted and, we quickly came to realize, immensely unhappy.

“It’s Vera,” he blurted out, “she’s become something of a problem.”

Cassandra and I glanced at each other. “But I thought you were getting on so well.”

“At the beginning, yes. She seemed like an agreeable sort, kept to herself, but that was before. Now she’s *everywhere.* We don’t get any down time. She’s always lurking about and we feel like we never have any privacy, even when we’re in the bloody bathroom.” He swallowed. “But the worst thing is she *smells.* A wet, marshy stink. It fills the whole house. We spray, but it doesn’t help.”

I didn’t know what to say. He knew the score; we’d explained that Charlotte wouldn’t be returning but that Vera was willing to step in as a substitute. An ex-civil servant, subject to occasional fits of melancholy, her central personality still intact, spotless references…
Cassandra commiserated with him but that was all she could do. He seemed to understand and made his way toward the stairs, shoulders slumped. Halting at the door, facing us again. “I want you to know Cheryl and I appreciate what you did for us. We hope Charlotte’s happy, wherever she is.” He mumbled something I didn’t catch.

“Sorry, Dennis, what was that?”

He cleared his throat. “I, ah, was asking if by any chance you knew the name of a reputable exorcist.” He was shaking, finding it necessary to lean on the doorframe for support. “I have a feeling we’re going to be needing one before long.” Suddenly, he commenced weeping, deep, wracking sobs, a raw and unsettling outpouring of misery and grief. Still desperately missing Charlotte, the little girl who wasn’t, an eternal child who had finally grown up and moved away from home.

We tried offering words of comfort but the man was inconsolable.

Hell, it was almost as if she’d died.

End

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