

"I feel his presence, Otis. He's looking for a murderer, Violet's murderer."

"Stop scaring yourself with crazy notions, you sound like you're on the bottle again."

Crow strode ahead.

"I didn't mean that, Crow, honest. Look up there at that moon. Isn't it romantic?"

"Somebody's in real danger, Otis, and I think it's me."

23 ♦ *Strange Answers*

Lawyer Plum was there and one pair of heirs when Otis Amber danced into the game room. "He-he-he, the Turtle's lost its tail, I see."

Turtle slumped low in her chair. Flora Baumbach thought the short, sleek haircut was adorable, especially the way it swept forward over her little chin, but Turtle did not want to look adorable. She wanted to look mean.

The dressmaker fumbled past the wad of money in her handbag. "Here, Alice, I thought you might like to see this."

Turtle glanced at the old snapshot. It's Baba, all right, except younger. Same dumb smile. Suddenly she sat upright.

"That's my daughter, Rosalie," Flora Baumbach said. "She must have been nine or ten when that picture was taken."

Rosalie was squat and square and squinty, her protruding tongue was too large for her mouth, her head lolled to one side. "I think I would have liked her, Baba," Turtle said.

"Rosalie looks like she was a very happy person. She must have been nice to have around."

Thump-thump, thump-thump. "Here come the victims," Sydelle Pulaski announced.

Angela greeted her sister with a wave of her crimson-streaked, healing hand. Turtle had convinced her not to confess: It would mean a criminal record, it would kill their mother, and no one would believe her anyhow. "I like your haircut."

"Thanks," Turtle replied. Now Angela had to love her forever.

Most of the heirs had to comment on Turtle's hair. "You look like a real businesswoman," Sandy said. "Well, that's an improvement," Denton Deere said. "You look n-nice," Chris said. Only Theo, bent over the chessboard, said nothing. White had moved the king's bishop since the last meeting. It was his move.

At last the stares turned from Turtle's hair to a more surprising sight. Judge Ford strode in as regally as an African princess, her noble head swathed in a turban, her tall body draped in yards of handprinted cloth. She slipped a note to Denton Deere then sailed to her place at table four. Goggle-eyed Otis Amber was speechless; they all were, except for Sandy. "Gee, that's a nifty outfit, judge. Is that what you call ethnic?"

The judge did not reply.

Applaud, the local hero has arrived! Doug raised his arms, pointing his index fingers to the flaking gilt ceiling in the I'm-number-one sign, and acknowledged the clapping with a victory lap around the room.

"Here come the Wexlers," Mr. Hoo remarked, seating his puzzled wife at table one.

Turtle exchanged an anxious glance with Angela. The last time they saw their mother she was crying her head off; now the tears were gone from her bleary eyes, but she was staggering, giggling, her hair was a mess.

"Sorry we're late," Jake apologized. "We lost track of time." They had been clinking wineglasses in a small cafe (the cafe they used to go to before they were married), toasting good times. They had had many good times together, many good memories shared, it seems—three big wine bottles full.

Happy Grace waved at the heirs. She felt so wonderful, so overflowing with love for Jake, for everybody.

"Hi, mom," Turtle called.

Grace blinked at a young short-haired girl. "Who's that?"

Jake greeted his partner with a "How are you this fine day?"

"Doug win," replied Madame Hoo.

Having opened the door to the last of the heirs, a tense and troubled Crow took her seat next to Otis Amber. Ghost-threatened, she waited for the unseen.

"Hey, lawyer, can we open these?" Otis Amber shouted, waving an envelope. A similar envelope lay on each table.

His forehead creased with uncertainty, Ed Plum fumbled through his papers. "I guess so" was his opinion.

Cheers erupted as the heirs withdrew the checks.

Again Judge Ford signed her name to the ten-thousand-dollar check and handed it to the doorman. "Here you are, Mr. McSouthers, this should tide you over until you find another job."

Sandy's heartfelt thanks were muffled by Sydelle Pulaski's loud "Shhhh!"

"Shhhhhhhh!" Grace Wexler mimicked, then she dropped her head into her crossed arms on the table and fell asleep to the sound of the lawyer's throat-clearing coughs.

TWELFTH ♦ Welcome again to the Westing house. By now you have received a second check for ten thousand dollars. Before the day is done you may have won more, much more.

Table by table, each pair will be called to give one, and only one, answer. The lawyer will record your response in case of a dispute. He does not know the answer. It is up to you.

1 ♦ MADAME SUN LIN HOO, *cook*
JAKE WEXLER, *bookie*

Bookie? He really must have been distracted when he signed that receipt. Jake studied the five clues on the table:

OF AMERICA AND GOD ABOVE

Even knowing his wife's clues didn't help; he'd have to gamble on a long shot. "Say something," he said to his partner.

"Boom!" said Madame Hoo.

Ed Plum wrote *Table One: Boom.*

2 ♦ FLORA BAUMBACH, *dressmaker*
TURTLE WEXLER, *financier*

Turtle read a prepared statement: "In spite of the fact that the stock market dropped thirty points since we received our ten thousand dollars, we have increased our capital to \$11,587.50, an appreciation of twenty-seven point eight percent calculated on an annual basis."

Flora Baumbach slapped a wad of bills on the table and two clinking quarters. "In cash," she said.

Ed Plum asked them to repeat their answer.

"Table two's answer is \$11,587.50."

Sandy applauded. Turtle took a bow.

3 ♦ CHRISTOS THEODORAKIS,
ornithologist
DENTON DEERE, *intern*

Ornithologist? His brother must have given him that fancy title when he filled in the receipt. Maybe he would become an ornithologist someday. He was a lucky person, getting that medicine and all. He didn't want to accuse anybody, not Judge Ford (apartment 4D), not Otis (grain) Amber, not the limper (just about everybody limped at one time or other—today Sandy was limping). "I think Mr. Westing is a g-good man," Chris said aloud. "I think his last wish was to do g-good deeds. He g-gave me a p-partner who helped me. He g-gave everybody the p-perfect p-partner to m-make friends."

"What is table three's answer?" the lawyer asked.

Denton Deere replied. "Our answer is: Mr. Westing was a good man."

4 ♦ J. J. FORD, *judge*
ALEXANDER MCSOUTHERS, *fired*

"We don't have an answer," the ex-doorman responded as planned.

The judge looked at table three. Denton Deere, her note in his hand, shook his head which meant: No, Otis Amber has not had plastic surgery done on his face. The judge turned to table six. Otis Amber could not be Sam Westing (she was right to have trusted him). But Crow is expecting something to happen. Crow knows she is the answer, she knows she is the one.

5 ♦ GRACIE WINDKLOPPPEL WEXLER,
restaurateur
JAMES HOO, *inventor*

Grace raised her head. "Did someone say Windkloppel?"

"Never mind Windkloppel, it's our turn," Hoo snarled. The lawyer got names and positions all fouled up, and I've got a drunk for a partner. He prodded Grace to her feet.

Faces were swirling, the floor was swaying. Grace grabbed the edge of the floating table and gave her answer in a thick, slurred voice. "The newly decorated restaurant, Hoo's On First, the eatery of athletes, will hold its grand reopening

on Sunday. Specialty of the day: fruited sea bass on purple waves.”

Grace sat down where the chair wasn’t. Turtle gasped, Angela looked away, the heirs tittered as Jake helped his wife up from the floor.

“What is table five’s answer, please,” the lawyer pressed.

“Ed Plum,” said Mr. Hoo.

“Yes, sir?”

“That’s our answer: Ed Plum.”

“Oh.”

6 ♦ BERTHE ERICA CROW, *mother*
OTIS AMBER, *deliverer*

“Mother? Did I write *mother*?” Crow mumbled.

“Is that your answer?” Ed Plum asked.

“I don’t know,” Otis Amber replied. “Is ‘mother’ our answer, Crow?” He could have sworn she had again signed the receipt *Good Salvation Soup Kitchen*.

Crow repeated, “Mother,” and that’s what the lawyer wrote down.

7 ♦ DOUGLAS HOO, *champ*
THEO THEODORAKIS, *writer*

Their clues: a chemical formula for an explosive and the letters *o-t-i-s*. Doug, basking in glory, didn’t care. Theo stood, turned to the man he was about to accuse and saw the scene in

the soup kitchen, saw Otis Amber cooking soup for the dirty, hungry men. “No answer,” Theo said, sitting down.

8 ♦ SYDELLE PULASKI, *victim*
ANGELA WEXLER, *person*

Sydelle was dressed for the occasion in red and white stripes. Leaning on crutches decorated with white stars on a field of blue to match the cast on her ankle, she hummed into a pitch pipe and began to sing one note above the pitch she played.

*O beautiful for spacious skies
For amber waves of grain
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain.*

What a spectacle she made, her wide rear end sticking out, singing in that tuneless, nasal voice. The derisive smiles soon faded as, pair by pair, the heirs heard their code words sung.

*America! America!
God shed His grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea.*

“Such a beautiful song,” Grace Wexler slurred, but the others sat in somber silence. Even Turtle thought table eight had won.

“What is your answer?” Ed Plum asked.

“Our answer,” Sydelle Pulaski announced with certainty, “is Otis Amber.”

The heirs listened to the lawyer read the next document, but their eyes stayed fixed on table eight’s answer: Otis Amber.

THIRTEENTH ♦ Okay, folks, there will be a short break before the big winner is announced. Berthe Erica Crow, please rise and go to the kitchen for the refreshments.

Dazed with fear, Crow rose. The thirteenth section. Thirteen was an unlucky number.

Judge Ford told Sandy to follow her. “Hey, Crow, old pal, do me a favor and fill this for me,” he said, handing her his flask as they left through the door. “I’ll go on the wagon starting tomorrow. Promise.”

Angela left the room, too, concerned over Crow’s trance-like state. Turtle followed Angela to make sure she didn’t end up in the fireworks room again. The judge remained seated, watching the remaining heirs who were watching Otis Amber. The delivery boy had had enough of their suspicions; he swept a pointed finger across their range, imitating the sound of a machine gun: “Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat.”

Crow and Angela came back with two large trays; Turtle returned empty-handed, puzzled but much relieved.

The judge joined Denton Deere and Chris at table three, bringing a plate of small cakes with her. “None of the heirs

have had plastic surgery as far as I can tell,” the intern remarked. “But your partner sure could have used some.”

The judge studied Sandy McSouthers’ prizefighter’s face as he leaned against the open doorway. Their eyes met and he lifted his flask in salute. “Anybody want a drink?”

“Sure,” Grace Wexler replied with a giggle, but Jake gave her a cup of strong black coffee instead.

“We must keep our wits about us, Mr. McSouthers,” Judge Ford said, walking toward him. “Sam Westing has not made his final move.”

“Nothing like Scotch to clear the head,” he replied. He took a long swig, coughed, wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his uniform and glared at Crow with narrowed, watery eyes.

Theo grinned down at the chess table. White had made another move, a careless move. He licked the cake crumbs from his fingers, wiped his hand on a Westing Paper Tea Napkin and took his opponent’s queen from the board. At least he had won the chess game.

Perched on the corner of table eight, the young lawyer tried to start a conversation with Angela, ignoring Sydelle Pulaski, who twice asked, “Surely you must have the answer, Mr. Plum?” She nudged her partner.

“Surely you must have the answer, Mr. Plum,” Angela repeated sweetly.

“Oh, of course; at least, I assume I do,” he replied. “My instructions are to open the documents one by one at the scheduled time.” He checked his watch. “Oops!” He was one minute late.

Ed Plum hurried to the billiard table, tore open the next envelope and pulled out the document, cutting his finger on the paper's edge.

FOURTEENTH ♦ Go directly to the library. Do not pass Go.

24 ♦ *Wrong, All Wrong*

Grace Wexler clung unsteadily to Mr. Hoo's arm. "Where are we going?"

"Who knows," Hoo replied. "We didn't even pass Go."

Partner sat with partner at the long library table, moaning with impatience as Ed Plum opened another envelope, removed a tagged key, tried to unlock the top right-hand desk drawer, reread the tag, unlocked the upper left-hand drawer, and found the next document:

FIFTEENTH ♦ Wrong! All answers are wrong!

"What!" Sydelle Pulaski cried.

*I repeat: Wrong! All answers are wrong!
Partnerships are canceled; you are on your own. Alone.*

The lawyer will leave and return with the authorities at the appointed time. And