

Ernest Lockridge
FLYING ELBOWS
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CHAPTER 13

Billy Graham was the Patron Saint of Thieves, and as such pocketed most of whatever he fenced as an Offering to his smelly self. But for all his stink, like fish bloated belly up in their tank, he fobbed off Charlie's junk for enough so we could limp along, the hottest items, he said, being the credit cards, and all those gold teeth, which bit right into the market's raging inflation. Billy dumped the Ithaca shotgun for a nice sum, he said, though of course kept the total amount secret from us. I kept the wee automatic in my nightstand to blast any crazy night visitor. The huge conch stayed as a doorstep in my bedroom. The LTD still gleamed at the curb with my battered Chevy. And \$50,000 in phony bills gathered mung under my bed.

"What did Billy say about all those bogus hundreds?" I asked Ethel.

"Nothin," she said. "I'm keepin them back in case of dire need. Besides, we done goofed printin them so big. Got greedy. Bigger they are, harder they are to pass. But don't you fret. I'll put them to good use when the time is ripe. And only I know when that'll be."

Still, I was able to keep electricity and water, to hold back the bank from repossessing my home, and, most important, to pay half what I owed Gorgeous George and persuade him to unlock my credit once again. As for doctor, dentist, auto insurance, and Macy's, well, they could keep

till I found another source of treasure—which I soon did after getting a letter signed, “Guess Who.”

This time no censor had imposed a decent blackout on Superstud, the Hoosier Bluestreak. “Ho there, sweetheart,” it said. “Ain’t heard from the woman who is the most woman, so thought I would slip out this here by underground railroad, in case my last never made it past them shits upstairs. True to form, I been movin through this place like Ex Lax. In less time than a teenage boy gets his jollies I am a trustee working on cloud nine far from cornhole country. I am a servant in the mansion of His Royal Hindend, the Warden. Things is so slick, I ain’t so anxious now to hack the world outside them gray walls.

“Some home comforts is hard to come by, which don’t mean a man with brains and more than a ordinary amount of animal beauty can’t get plenty. And the Warden sure is got a goodlooking strong wife.

“The two other servants is murderers, which is the most trustworthy crooks, but I can put on such a shine when there is a need to. When I land in this Holiday Inn, it hits me through the grapevine that the Warden is a fool for Jesus. So I start praying like a banshee, till my cellmate hollers, Won’t you please ship this freak off to the convent? Next thing, I’m alone with the Warden in his office, lookin into his wet peepers, and we flop to our knees and beller Jesus! Jesus! All of a sudden the Warden throws hisself all over me like a dern fruitcake, blubberin that another lost soul is come to Glory. Which is how I come to serve him and his big hot wife.

“Me, the Warden and wife hit chapel together last Sunday. They give me a guitar and I done soloed Satisfied Mind, which ain’t no hymn, but sure does pack some punch. By the time I finish warming them strings, that woman had her lap well watered, you could grow lilies in the bog, ha ha. Promised she’d slip out this here to a mailbox. Sure hate some pissant stranger sifting through my inmost thoughts.

“Back in the lonely slammer, my mind dwells on my wonderful ex, and I keep calling up mem’ries of old. Like when me and you got married that first time, and Bill Flank,

who always hungered for your snatch, rounded up that batch of cut throats and trailed us to the Ron-Lee Motel. Before me and you could get down to business, the door busted open for a chivaree, which would of been a gangbang if I had not of still had on my shoes, and kicked them old boys ever which way. We had to move on to the Sundown Motel, clear over east of Goldengrove, across from the Police Lodge on that there little lake. We was mighty tired. But I bet the Sundown sold our mattress to a sideshow, she was so riddled with holes.

“How come you ever ditched me for that shit Errol, when you knowed it’d break my heart? Whether it’s been through a carwash or inside a atom smasher, shit is shit is shit.

“Of course you say, if I loved to swing on your trapeze, how come after all those years I made that little detour with your old buddy Lillian Jones and wrecked our second go at marriage? Well, how come you needed that dang summer at the university when we was first married? Wasn’t we doing great busting into them Naptown houses while fatcat owners soaked sun and grease in Florida? After another year, we would of retired free as kids. Then you got hots for your English teacher. When me and you got married again in Elm City, the East had done dried your sap. It was the straight and narrow, you said, which is dumb. No hill person wrote them laws, so they wasn’t made for hill people to get by under. But try and tell some narrow minded judge.

“Well, what’s past is dead and gone. And here I am in the Warden’s home smack dab in the middle of offlimit goodies. But I do wish you was in super position ha ha to help out the old boy. It is one easy walk from the mansion to the free life, but how far does your jailbird fly without no money, or even no car? If I ain’t out of here by Christmas time, my big wing will surely wither away.”

Guess who wrote this filth. “That little detour with Lillian Jones” was a six-lane rainslick highway. On the sly, Lonzo paid her bus fare clear from Goldengrove to Elm City and set her up in a motel for one whole week, just to spite me. I don’t greatly blame Lillian Jones, though. She was a good egg and in some ways a good high school friend years before.

But when it came to boys, she always did have the self-control of a lit firecracker, and Lonzo knew it. So it was his fault for taking advantage. By her sophomore year, Lillian Jones tooled through the track team, wrestling team, football team, the brass band, and Mr. Bill Combs, the art teacher everybody called a raving faggot, except Lillian Jones, who knew better. Twelve boys were having a beer blast and phoned her. "What sort of boys do you like, Lillian Jones?" they asked. "Boys with big peters," she replied. So half the hicks piled into a '49 Merc, picked her up at her shack, and went to work. By the time they touched open country, Lillian Jones was awash. One boy said, "Is she a mess." Another sang "Sloppy Seconds," to "Onward, Christian Soldiers." They stopped on the berm and opened the trunk, full of warm beer. A pair spread her legs, while somebody shook up a beer and foamed her clean. "What sort of boys you say you liked, Lillian Jones?" "All boys," Lillian Jones said, wearing only an innocent little smile. Then there was her closest high school buddy, Molly Fiddler, with the bow legs, who had even less self-control than Lillian Jones. Poor Molly wound up with me in reform school. But that's another story altogether.

After I blew my stack over Lonzo's letter, wanting to grab his thick sinewy neck and pull off his pinhead, I cooled down, realizing that he'd given me an inspiration. Why not raid the area around Errol's commune, those gorgeous empty summerhouses, and make off with whatever prizes fell into my lap? It was sinful, with people starving in shacks, for these mansions to stay hollow three fourths of the year. Of course, sooner or later they'd be torn down for some highway or highrise complex. Or the neighborhood would crumble, like mine, and some homes would become funeral parlors. And the red light would twinkle like Mars on the porch of others, and the swollen army of horny men would have yet more cathouses.

When Mr. Moon threw down his lopsided grin, I dressed for battle in black slacks and sweatshirt, and hid my blond hair in a black knit cap, then grabbed Ethel's gunnysack, and

the flashlight off the icebox. I figured that in a posh neighborhood, Charlie's LTD was the ticket, not my battered Chevy.

Ethel saw me leaving. "You look like a dern commando. What's cookin'?"

When I told her, she said, "Once you get set in motion, there's no puttin on your brakes, is there?"

"Only following your footsteps, Mamma. Come help."

"Naw, I'm too sick and creaky for such wild stuff. Just keep me posted on where you go and what you get. That'll give me kicks enough."

The night was like early spring, and few traffic lights slowed me, a pair of cautions that I ripped through. Then it was green all the way. I daydreamed like when I was a child, that I was a fighter pilot, blasting other drivers, shattering storefronts, riddling houses till boards and shingles flew every which way.

Though only a nail clipping, the moon flamed madly. So when I hit the road curving along the Sound, I could see which lawns were kept up and which were shameful messes. For the hell of it, I cruised past Errol's commune. Every light was burning, those snotty rich kids wasting juice like it was free. I triggered my machine guns and gave that pregnant beach house a broadside.

A mile further, I found just the target, a turreted doozy, gigantic and dark, the grounds such a shambles nobody could have touched them in years. Great weeds and beach grass thrust up. On the high porch, windblown sand had drifted like snow. It was more than I had hoped for my first night on the prowl, looming like a fake castle at the end of the world.

I drove past it, then doused my lights and turned up a side road with no houses, only brush, and huge trees dropping tons of shadow. Taking my flashlight and gunnysack, I headed across the wide beach to where waves smoothed the sand of prints. I could tell any deputy who might stop that I was digging clams, though they had long been poisoned by sewage.

A stone porch ate clear across the mansion's front, and

against the wall sand had drifted two feet deep. I found a window with its shutter busted. Somebody had poked a hole through the center pane, above the latch, and I wondered if maybe the Cat Burglar hadn't beaten me. But this place bore the stink of value, whereas the Cat Burglar specialized in getting nothing. And newspapers were more likely to find his poems down a shark's belly than here.

Careful not to slit my wrist on the jagged glass, I twisted the latch, then tugged the sash till it rose with a dusty groan. Open sesame. Heavy curtains coated me with dust. Inside, the thick damp smell recalled my shack on Pigeon Hill.

I snapped my flashlight on. Tangled over an oriental rug lay snake-size slugs, like Nature performed tricks in this dark hole she wouldn't dare in sunlight. Then I saw they were only fucking rubbers. Lowdown, ornery kids! What had gotten into young people, busting into a fine old home only to hold an orgy, then leaving slimy tracks all over? Mean nastiness! When I was a young girl, I wouldn't have done anything so rotten.

Wading carefully through the minefield of uglies, I shone my flashlight about the cavernous room. Some master, it seemed, had carved delicate shapes in the rich wood lining walls and ceilings—grapes, apples, birds singing among tangled leaves, knotted grass, vines circling sapling trunks, sweet faces of children peeking through rosebushes, a wooden sun in a wooden sky. What looked like an organ covered one end of the room, floor-to-ceiling gold pipes, keyboard an old-fashioned crescent doohickey with two wide pedals. Overstuffed chairs and couches squatted everywhere, probably all some famous brand name. The room seemed so rich and lovely I felt I'd walked into a cathedral.

Amelia, I thought, you're here on business. So I moved into a long hallway, covered floor to ceiling on both sides with maybe twenty thousand books, mildewed and swarming with silverfish. I pulled a few off the shelf and saw they had been inscribed. "For Louis. Here's looking forward to the Sun King's next anthology. Ernest." "This copy to dear

Louis, to the memory of outlandish hospitality. Willa.” And then I found one that really shocked me, a copy of the filthy novel I’d read for night class, signed by its author. “Stick this in your next compendium. Henry.” Why, I wondered, would a cultured man like Louis allow such trash in his house, too?

But what could I take with me? The longer I stayed, the harder it grew to even think about business. On I walked, exploring, and reached a vast glass sun porch, with not one pane busted. There sat a long wood table, six wood chairs pushed back as if a family had just risen from breakfast on those plates, food stains underneath the dust. On the table lay a yellowed Sunday paper, November, 1963.

Its front page knocked *my* windows out, because it showed President Kennedy, whose funeral was to be that day, and his wife and little daughter. Sifting through the crackly pages, I saw that photo of Kennedy in swimtrunks, some gal in a bikini looking like she’d love to jump him on the spot. Well, my feelings of eight years back flooded in, because John Kennedy could have put this shoes under my bed anytime. But Kennedy’s eyes did sit too close together, and Camelot was genuine plaster of Paris, and he was rumored to have the morals of certain other great statesman studs like randy old Ben Franklin and Aaron Burr.

One article reminded me that Kennedy had saved a wounded man’s life, swimming him to shore when Kennedy himself was badly wounded. In the fiery circle my flashlight tossed, I saw my tears falling. Really look up to somebody, and you’re bound to get screwed in the end.

So I moved on. And right off the bat, I found plunder. In the kitchen big enough for the Waldorf, I dumped a tray of sterling silver jangling into Ethel’s bag. Upstairs in a carved dresser, spiderwebs spanning its mirror, I found brooches and delicate pins, a class ring, and a square gold medal with Greek letters.

Then I gingerly spelunked a basement that dripped with slimy ooze. The foundation was fieldstone, the floor mostly dirt. An octopuslike furnace sent pipes in all directions, and off in one corner sat a huge deepfreeze. I heard its thick hum

above the crickets. After all these years, A.C. still goosed the house.

Out of curiosity, I lifted the top, half expecting a body, but finding only a heap of frosted packages, clearly meat. I leaned in. But what if I fell and the top dropped? All I could hope for then was that those vandals might come back right away and find me.

Moving away, I came to a small iron grate in the basement wall, which led to a dank room. Lining its four walls were wine racks with room for enough bah-uls to stock Billy Graham's heaven. But mostly they held huge, gorgeous spiderwebs, like clouds. Looking at the most splendid web, its maker a dusty hunk, I wondered what accident lets spiders spin a thing so orderly and beautiful, when they don't know beans about beauty and destroy the creatures they snag.

I pulled out the only four bottles that remained, mouldy and damp, Château Something-or-other, 1937, a brand name I didn't know and couldn't pronounce. This is a place you can visit again, I thought, and lounge around like a child's dream playhouse. I took the bottles with me, unaware that the house's real treasure was its wine. Heading for the steps, I tripped over a cord. The freezer stopped its hum.

Upstairs a weird idea came to me. I tore loose the endleaf from Henry's filthy book, then searched till I dug a pencil stub out of an overstuffed chair. I printed:

I specially love to break in houses
Of wealthy fatcats, spoiled louses.
Seems to me its mighty fitten
For this poor chilly little kitten

At which point, I got stuck. Finally I made do with:

To trade in your doojies on a hot wool mitten.

I liked how it began, but not how it finished, rhymes scrapping with sense. A kitten would need four mittens, if

any. And I held a much higher opinion of Louis. But my flashlight batteries were almost dead. Maybe I could rewrite the next time I came back. I signed myself "Cat Burglar" and laid the poem among the rubbers. Then I kissed my Cracker Jack ring for luck, dropped my booty through the window I'd entered by, and stepped gingerly out.

Lord, it was a lovely walk back. The monster under that huge black mass of water lay relaxed. Elm City cast a great halo into the sky. The moon drew fire onto the water, and I saw burning pinpricks of windows across the Sound. Beauty opened me out. I remembered other nights I'd spent by water, a clambake during happier times, Marlene and Jenny small children making sand castles, while Joy, Michael, Errol, and I buried a thirty-gallon whiskey barrel upright, leaving its lip in the air, then dove for seaweed. We heated stones between fuming layers of charcoal, till at last broad-backed Michael shoveled white-hot stones into the barrel. We dumped in sea water. Steam roared from hell. We followed fast with armloads of seaweed. A dozen lobsters clicked to white-eyed death, seaweed, a bushel of live clams, seaweed, corn, potatoes. We lashed the tarp to the barrel's steaming mouth, piled a mound of sand over it, then boozed, hollered, and swam till we threw open the treasure chest savory with cooked flesh, and feasted like kings.

I thought of times still more strange, the sweet water of the L-shaped limestone quarry near my childhood shack on Pigeon Hill, the terrifyingly deep quarry they took the Empire State Building out of. My daddy brought me swimming there on hot days, though a hundred swimmers had drowned in those depths. I clung to his slippery back while he streaked like a dolphin, his poor hands and feet scarcely more than flippers from war wounds and the bite of a moray eel. Remembering, I felt the surface of my heart pop open. And I was thinking of nothing. My heart gulped in Long Island Sound, and I was beach, water, full of filth and sewage, sky, stars, city's smoky halo, flying, winning the only Grand Prize.

I landed breathless, holding a gunnysack, a dead flashlight, wondering where I'd parked my car.

Books & Music

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E-3

'Elbows' Exquisite Madness

FLYING ELBOWS, by Ernest Lockridge. Stein and Day. \$7.95.

By WILLIAM WISSER

This incredibly insane novel is also exquisitely funny — so there must be method to author Ernest Lockridge's madness.

Yet the book seems artless, so skillfully is it crafted.



LOCKRIDGE

All is told in the words of heroine Amelia Biggs, a much-married, sexy woman whose Indiana momma taught her how to steal, lie, blackmail and pass counterfeit money. It comes in handy as Amelia, 34, tries to support three daughters while their two fathers are in prison and a hippy commune respectively.

GODZILLA (A JALOPY), the Fed Devil (a meat-eating fish), the Cat Burglar (a petty thief and a worse poet), Billy Graham (a drunken divine) and Wilson (an honest cop) are denizens of Amelia's world.

To pay her burgeoning debts, Amelia, who has never worked a straight job, imitates the Cat Burglar and raids the rich, leaving terrible poems behind.

Meanwhile her sassiest daughter runs off with a sadistic Vietnam vet. Granny arrives with stolen property, Amelia's first husband skips jail, her second gets clap, and Amelia (somehow) gets pregnant again.

The picaresque plot burns with Lockridge's brilliant language and break-neck pacing.

CRAZY SCENES as real as newspaper stories tumble together so fast that the book seems life distilled into laughter.

Like Huck Finn, Amelia speaks a unique tongue and has a fine eye for hypocrisy.

And like Mark Twain, if not Huck, Amelia talks dirty superbly.

Since this is a family newspaper, we will not quote, but recommend you read "Flying Elbows" for yourself.