

# **THE CAVARADOSSI KILLINGS**

by

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*The Cavaradossi Killings*

For Leonore

La Prima

## ONE

When he could no longer deceive himself about his guilt, he left, returning to a place few people chose to leave. The person most important in his life had left that place, too, but surely she had not chosen to do so.

He took with him what he considered appropriate pay for the services he had rendered.

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Tom could smell the cologne before he opened the door. He looked up at the tall, beefy, middleaged man waiting impatiently on the doorstep.

“Yes?”

“Tom!” the man boomed. “You haven’t changed at all! You look just the same!”

The other man’s face and body had changed considerably. It was the loud voice and overbearing manner that identified him. “Jack Tourneau,” Tom said. “I didn’t know you were still here.” After the briefest hesitation, he added, “Come in.”

As he led the way to the living room, Tom asked, “Want something to drink?”

“What’s that you’re drinking? Looks like urine with ice in it.”

“Why, you haven’t changed either, Jack.” Tom held his glass up to the light for a moment. “You’re right.” He sipped his drink. “Fortunately, it tastes like bourbon. Want some?”

Jack shivered. “Brr! Alcohol! Never touch the stuff.” He slapped his thick middle. “That’s how I’ve managed to keep my schoolboy physique. Got any Diet Pepsi?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, then, I’ll have a bourbon on ice.”

Tom raised his eyebrows.

“*Almost* never touch the stuff. Today doesn’t count.”

“And why is that?” Tom asked as he went behind the bar.

“Because today I’m greeting an old school friend I haven’t seen in over twenty years. So this is a special celebration.”

Tom put a couple of ice cubes in a glass and poured bourbon over them. He glanced at Jack,

already sprawling at his ease on the couch with the best view.

“You can see the whole damned city from here,” Jack said. “Hell of a view. Hell of a dropoff.”

“About a hundred feet.”

“Better be careful when you mow. But I bet you hire the mowing.”

Why don’t you go outside and stroll along the edge? Tom thought. Swallow all of your drink first. “I don’t have a lawn. I went for the natural look.”

Jack snorted. “That figures. I always wanted a house up here. This place must have cost you a fortune.”

“Mm hm.”

“Quarter mil? Half? More?”

“A fortune.”

Jack grinned at him. “Close-mouthed bastard. You haven’t changed in that regard, either.” He reached up to accept his drink from Tom. It was the gesture of a monarch accepting a drink from a servant.

Tom shook his head in silent wonder at Jack’s old talent for taking center stage. “I just moved in yesterday. How did you know I was here? Or is this a coincidence? Maybe you came to my door to sell encyclopedias.”

“Nice try, Tom. You went into the license bureau this morning to get a driver’s license. The woman who took care of you was Janice.”

“Janice?” Tom frowned for a moment, recalling the face. She had seemed familiar at the time, he remembered. “Wait a minute. Not Janice Sheridan? Janice the cheerleader?”

“That’s right.”

“Jesus,” Tom muttered.

“Twenty years,” Jack said. “And fifty pounds.”

“I didn’t move back here to get depressed,” Tom said, “but now I am.”

“So why *did* you move back here?”

Jack must have thought he was being casual, that he was disguising his interest. But reading other men, seeing through their armor, had become a survival skill for Tom during his twenty-two years in Chicago. “Just looking for peace and quiet, Jack. Early retirement in the old home town.”

“Pretty damned early,” Jack said. “You’re the same age I am, and I won’t be able to retire for more than twenty-five years. What’ve you been doing since you left town?”

“Saving carefully. What have *you* been doing since I left?”

“Why, I’ve been following in my daddy’s footsteps, Tom. Some of us have reason to want to do that, you know.”

I actually looked up to this jerk when I was a kid, Tom thought. Amazing. “So you’re teaching at the college?”

“Not *just* teaching at Triple C. I’m teaching English, just like my father. Been there for ten years, now. Ever since I got my Ph.D.”

“How is your father?”

Jack shrugged. “Dunno. He got old enough to retire, the lucky bastard. He and my mom are off

somewhere in the Pacific. They spend all their goddamned time traveling and squandering their savings. They gave us the house, anyway. You remember the house.” He held up his empty glass. “Like another.”

“Like, okay,” Tom said. He set his own almost full glass down on the coffee table and stood up. He took Jack’s glass and went to the bar with it. “I always liked your father,” Tom said. He refilled Jack’s glass, but this time he put in four ice cubes first. He brought it back to Jack, who had slid lower on the couch.

“More than you liked your own,” Jack said. “For which I never blamed you. No fault of yours. I understood why you were always over at our place. Especially after your mom – ” He paused and had the grace to look embarrassed. “After you lost your mom.”

Tom went to the window and stood looking out over Ransom, his back to Jack. The window extended from floor to ceiling and across most of the east wall of the living room. The builder had assured Tom that he would install glass capable of withstanding the winds up here. How about bullets from resentful people living below, Tom had wanted to ask. “Do you enjoy teaching, Jack?”

Jack grunted. “Most of the time, I hate it. But I like the hours. And the coeds. You should see them, Tom. They don’t dress the way they did when we were young. Oh, I’m sorry, you didn’t go to college. I forgot.”

Tom laughed despite himself. “Sure you did, Jack. So, let’s see. You’ve checked out my house and me and my liquor. We’ve renewed our dear, close friendship of boyhood days. What else did you come here to do?”

“To invite you to the opera,” Jack said.

Tom spun around. “*What?*”

Jack chuckled. “Caught you, didn’t I? Well, it’s not my idea. I hate opera. It’s Ellen’s idea.”

“Ellen?”

“My wife. The former Ellen Chernikov.”

Again, Jack had managed to get him off balance. “Ellen married *you?*”

“*I* married *Ellen.*” He radiated self-satisfaction. “You’d know this stuff if you’d kept in touch with the old gang, Tom.”

“You have children?” Tom shivered inwardly with disgust at the thought of Ellen Chernikov pregnant with Jack’s babies.

But Jack shook his head. “Turned out Ellen couldn’t. It used to bother her at first. Just fine with me, though. I hate kids. Anyway, Ellen runs the Ransom and Central Colorado Opera Guild. The name’s bigger than their whole damned budget. Or the size of their audiences. Ellen always did love music, but you probably don’t remember that.”

Tom remembered everything about Ellen Chernikov with painful clarity, and he was sure Jack knew that. “So Ellen knows I’m back?”

Jack drained the last of the bourbon from his glass and set it on the coffee table. “I told her as soon as I found out. And she insisted I come up here and invite you to the opera they’re putting on.” His speech had become slurred. “Tomorrow night is the first performance. They rent the auditorium at the high school. If you want, I could tell her that you hate opera as much as I do, and you said you couldn’t

come.”

“I love opera.”

“Ugh! You do?” He stared at Tom for a moment. “Where *have* you been for the last twenty plus years, Tom?”

“Listening to some of the best singers in the world. I got addicted. However, I do hate amateur opera. Opera’s like ballet – brilliant or awful. There’s no middle ground.”

“Christ, I bet you like ballet, too.”

Tom nodded. “All real men like ballet, Jack.”

Jack snorted. “We have a different definition of real men.”

“Very likely.”

Jack stared again at Tom, then looked around the living room. Then he shrugged. “Your business. Anyway, these folks aren’t really amateurs. Not entirely, I mean. A lot of them are from the music department at Triple C. And the locals Ellen recruited have some background, too. She says they’re pretty good, and I trust her judgment on this. I can’t tell the difference. It’s all crap to me.”

“What opera are they doing?” Tom asked, hoping it would turn out to be a light musical and not an opera at all. Or at the worst, an operetta.

“Tosca.”

Of course, Tom thought. He wondered why amateurs always aspired too high.

“At least it’s being done in English,” Jack said.

Tom groaned inwardly. Of course it is, he thought.

“There are only a few of the old gang still living here.” Jack said. “Most of them will stay as far away from this thing as they can, but a couple of them might show up. And some of Ellen’s and my friends will be there. This would be a good chance for you to get yourself involved in the social life of Ransom, such as it is. Unless you’re rather spend your *retirement* – ” he grimaced “ – up here by yourself. I know Ellen was looking forward to seeing you again.”

Tom looked at him sharply, but this time Jack maintained a bland expression that Tom couldn’t see through.

Finally, Tom nodded and said, “Okay, Jack. Tell Ellen I’ll be there.”

Jack sprang to his feet with surprising vigor, but then he swayed a bit and put one hand on an arm of the couch for support. “Tomorrow night, eight o’clock, high school auditorium. Buy your ticket at the door.” He laughed. “There’re *always* plenty of seats available. Get there early, so I can introduce you around. You remember how to get to the high school, don’t you? Of course you do. Hell, you practically grew up in that place, right? Okay, Tom, see you tomorrow night.” He walked to the front door in a fairly straight line and let himself out.

Tom stood watching Jack leave, making no move to accompany him to the door.

After Jack was gone, Tom locked the door, dumped the ice cubes from Jack’s glass and the remaining liquor from his own into the sink, picked up the book he had been reading when the doorbell rang, and resumed his quiet evening.

## TWO

The next morning, Saturday, Tom ate a leisurely breakfast and read both the Ransom *Roundup* and the Denver *Post*.

The Denver paper seemed remarkably shallow after the two Chicago dailies. He could subscribe to those here, of course, but he had chosen to leave his old life behind, and reading the papers that concerned themselves with that life wasn't the way to do it. Even more important, it seemed unwise to him to give anyone in Chicago, even a newspaper subscription department, his current name and address.

Although the *Roundup* was smaller than the *Post*, it was actually the more interesting of the two to Tom, because its news concerned life in Ransom. It echoed the life Tom had lived before Chicago. The names of city officials and other local notables were virtually all different, but the place names were the same. Tom felt an almost physical click of fitting back into place.

Maybe I do belong in Ransom after all, he thought. The previous evening, enduring Jack Tourneau's visit, he had had his doubts.

After he had finished breakfast and the papers, Tom headed for town.

He spent a couple of hours in the downtown area, marveling at what had changed and what hadn't. Later, there'd be plenty of time to leave downtown and drive past his old house. Maybe.

The sky was cloudless, the air was clean, the temperature was in the mid-eighties, and the humidity was fifteen percent. After twenty-two summers in Chicago, it felt wonderful.

At first, something seemed to be missing. Then he identified it: noise. Traffic was light and the streets were quiet. When he passed people talking to each other, they weren't yelling. He thought the quietness of the place would take the most getting used to.

Toward noon, Tom began to wonder if the license bureau was open on Saturdays. There was a good chance that it was, he suspected, at least in the morning. He knew it was silly of him, but he wanted to talk to Janice Sheridan to see if he could tell why she was watching and reporting on his doings. It was probably natural, he thought, for her to be inquisitive about him. He hoped it was nothing more than that.

He got to the license bureau just in time. According to the hours painted on the glass door, the office closed at noon on Saturdays. An employee, a young man, was turning the sign in the door around to

read CLOSED just as Tom entered. “Could you come back on Monday?” the young man asked hopefully.

“I’m just here to talk to someone for a moment,” Tom assured him. “No paperwork required.” He looked around and spotted the woman he had dealt with the day before. She was standing in front of her desk, cramming things into her purse. Tom stared at her, trying to see in her the lean, tanned cheerleader of his high school days, but he could find no trace, no remaining hint.

He walked over to the desk, not sure how to go about this. Maybe this woman wasn’t Janice Sheridan. Maybe Jack had been playing one of his old hostile games. Tom stopped in front of the desk. “Hello,” he said.

She smiled widely at him, a smile that exposed strong, white teeth. It was the smile of woman who saw herself as still attractive, and for that moment, Tom could see again the girl of twenty-two years before.

“How have you been, Janice?” he said.

“Hi, Tom. I didn’t say anything yesterday because I could tell you didn’t recognize me. I was waiting to see if you finally would.”

Tom smiled at her. “I recognized you right away, but I was trying to slip back into town without being recognized myself.”

Janice whooped with laughter. “Tom, you’ve hardly changed! Of course anyone who used to know you would recognize you. And of course I’ve changed. Don’t play games with me.”

Tom nodded his acknowledgement of her point and her honesty. “Can you spare a few minutes, or do you have to get home right away?”

“Actually,” Janice said, “I was going to have lunch before going home. With a couple of the other girls. Just a sec.” She looked around and spotted two women, younger than she, waiting by the front door. “Change of plan,” she called out. “Gonna eat with an old high-school friend.”

The two looked at Tom and then at Janice. You must be joking, their expressions said. Then they shrugged and left the office together.

Tom knew that look of dismissal. Twenty-two years ago, it had wounded him every time. Now it had no effect.

Tom had reached his full height by the time he was sixteen. He was five foot four inches tall, slender, with light-brown hair, an unremarkable face, and an introverted personality. He had never had a date during his adolescence in Ransom. Chicago had been a different matter, although he had been careful not to form any close relationships while there. During those twenty-two years, he had managed to build in himself the self-confidence and self-respect he should have been developing during the preceding eighteen.

Janice looked embarrassed on her friends’ behalf. “I guess I just assumed you’d come have lunch with me,” she said. “No place expensive. Just a local sandwich shop. Although with your address, I guess you could afford better, right?”

Tom laughed. “I don’t remember you being so inquisitive. Of course, I didn’t remember that we were such good friends before, either.”

“Oh, hell, Tom, twenty years later everyone’s friends with the people they went to high school

with.”

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Later, sharing a booth with Janice in a sandwich shop a couple of blocks away from her office, Tom said, “This place wasn’t here twenty-two years ago.” He looked around the sterile room. The sterility was strictly visual; the place smelled of stale grease. The restaurant was part of a national chain, and it was identical in appearance and even smell to the outlets of the same chain he had seen in Chicago. “The homogenization of America.”

“You still talk the same way,” Janice said. “Lighten up, Tom. Our food’s ready. I’ll go get it.”

While she was doing so, Tom tried to remember what had occupied this building’s place on Howard Street during his youth, but he couldn’t. He hadn’t trained himself to remember things in those days, the way he had later. It hadn’t been so important to remember details in the old days. I guess it’s not important any more, he thought. I could start lapsing into my dotage right away, and it wouldn’t matter. I’m safe here, and I’m retired.

Janice returned with their sandwiches and began eating hers immediately. Tom stared at his. He asked her, “Have you been working at the license bureau ever since the old days?”

“Not all that time. Only for the last sixteen years. I went to college for a couple of years, but I flunked out. Then I got married, and that also lasted for two years. He flunked out of marriage.”

“Anyone I’d know?”

“Chuck Hathaway. He was a year ahead of us in school. Remember him?”

Tom called up an image of a tall, beefy blond boy with an eternal scowl and a temper as quick and vicious as that of Tom’s father. Tom had always been careful to stay out of the way of both of them. He nodded. “Uh huh.”

“Exactly,” Janice said. “Well, I was twenty years old. What did I know? But I learned. So after trying college and then marriage, I tried working for the state. That one lasted. It’s not a bad job, and the retirement package is a good one, so I came out okay in the end.”

“No kids?”

“Thank God, no.”

“Does Hathaway still live in town?”

“Oh, don’t worry about him. He’s not around anymore. After I kicked him out, he joined the Army. I hear he’s a sergeant in charge of Basic Training in Georgia, now. Can you imagine being an eighteen-year-old kid just joining up and having to deal with Chuck?”

“Easily.” Tom took a bite of his greasy sandwich as a way of creating a pause and a transition. He managed to chew and swallow, and then he said, “Jack Tourneau came to see me yesterday. To welcome me back, you could say. He mentioned that you had told him I was back and that you had given him my new address.”

Janice looked distressed. “Oh, dear! Was that wrong? I didn’t realize you didn’t want anyone to know about you. I’m sorry, Tom! I won’t tell anyone else, I promise. Although I guess it’s too late for that, isn’t it?”

“No, no, it’s okay,” Tom said reassuringly. “I’m not trying to hide here. I was just a bit surprised, that’s all.” Tom Hamilton wasn’t trying to hide anywhere. He had gone by a different name in Chicago.

“That’s a relief. Still and all, I am sorry, Tom. You do know that all that license information is public record, don’t you? So anyone can come in there and look through our files. You can even fill in a form, and for a few bucks we’ll search our database for you and give you the home address of anyone who has a driver’s license anywhere in the state.”

Tom nodded. “Yes, I’m familiar with that. Although that’s changing in some places.”

“Violent places where there’ve been problems,” Janice said. “We don’t have any real big celebrities around here, and nothing has ever happened to make us change our rules.”

Tom concentrated on his sandwich. It was disgusting, but Janice was gobbling hers down, and he felt obscurely that she’d be hurt if he left his, so he forced himself to work his way through it. He was satisfied now that Janice had not been keeping an eye out specifically for him. It wasn’t a logical conclusion but rather one based on intuition and his reading of her personality. He had learned to trust that ability.

“You haven’t told me what you’ve been doing for the last twenty-something years,” Janice said suddenly, as though she’d been reading him as well.

Tom was momentarily startled, even though he knew her asking him that question at that moment was merely coincidence. “I’ve been out of town,” he said, and took a large bite from his sandwich.

Janice chuckled. “No kidding! And?”

Tom waited until he had managed to swallow. “This and that. Around and about. Supporting myself and not writing home.”

Janice’s face grew serious. “No happy memories for you here, I guess. So why did you come back?”

“To visit again all the places where I would have spent so many happy summer days with my dog, if I had had a dog. And to take advantage of the fine bargains in the local real-estate market.”

“You’ve just bought one of the most expensive pieces of property in town!”

“It’s a bargain compared to prices where I last lived.”

“What’re you going to do for a living?”

“I’m retired.”

Janice waited for more. When it didn’t come, she finally said, “You always were a close-mouthed kid. Did anyone ever tell you that?”

“Just recently, although not quite in those words.” He pushed his sandwich away from him. Half of it remained on the plate. “I ate a pretty big breakfast.”

“Doesn’t measure up to what you’ve been eating all those years in – where did you say?”

“Out of state.”

She laughed. “May I?” Without waiting for Tom’s response, Janice pulled his plate over and transferred the remnants of his sandwich to her own plate.

“Do you like opera, Janice?”

“Tom, that’s just the kind of weird thing you used to say back in high school. No wonder you never had any dates. No, I don’t like opera. I only listen to country and western. Do you like country and

western?”

Tom grimaced. “I think country and western music is a symptom of the decline and fall of Western civilization.”

“Yeah, I thought that’s what you’d think. Okay, so you would never want to go to the concert I’m going to tonight, and I would never want to go to that thing the Tourneaus are putting on.”

Tom nodded. “Fair deal.” He pushed himself out of the booth. “I’m going to spend the rest of the day reacquainting myself with the town before I get ready to go to that thing. Have a good time at your concert.”

“And you have a good time at the opera. Even though it won’t be as good as the ones in – where was it?”

“Europe.”

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Tom drove around for a couple of hours, surprised at how poorly his memory of the town jibed with the reality. There had been real changes in Ransom since he’d left, but even things that surely had not changed – such as the direction a given street ran in, or the location of one building in relation to another – were not as he remembered them. Had his memories changed as the years had passed, or had he, as a boy, not noticed the world around him in a clear, precise way?

He had learned since those days to value precision of observation and clarity of memory. More than once, a detail noticed and remembered had saved his life. Only now, though, did he realize just how much he had changed and even recreated himself during his time away from Ransom. To an extent, he seemed to have recreated Ransom as well.

He parked outside the high school and stared at it for a while. This place, by contrast, was exactly as he remembered it. His boyhood self had taken note of every detail and committed each to memory.

If the outside was exactly as he remembered it, then the inside might be unchanged, too. But he felt an enormous reluctance to go inside and see it all again. Well, he told himself, it’s Saturday, so it’s probably locked up. The janitor will have locked it up.

The janitor.

Tom started his car again and drove down the streets he had walked down every school day.

The house was a mile from the high school. “The house,” he still called it in his thoughts, even though it was now somebody else’s house. Well, it had always been someone else’s house. Tom had never felt that it belonged to him in any sense, or that he belonged in it.

133 North Elm. An address he was unlikely ever to forget. It sounded so peaceful and idyllic. It sounded like gracious homes shaded by huge trees, big houses where trouble never intruded, where people lived peaceful and happy lives undisturbed by loud noises or violence.

Tom parked a block away and walked slowly down the sidewalk.

The neighborhood had been a poor one twenty-two years earlier, and it seemed still poorer now. Like so much else that seemed to have changed, he thought, it might really be his viewpoint that had changed with the passing years and his growing wealth.

He passed the house Nick Jaruzelski had lived in and stopped on the sidewalk in front of number 133.

He had once read that people revisiting the scenes of their childhood found everything smaller than they remembered, because their memories were of things as seen from a child's perspective. It didn't seem to be quite true in this case, though. The trees had grown with the passage of time, and the buckled sidewalks were buckled more than he remembered.

And the house looked even bigger.

The house still had about it an aura of pain and danger. Tom walked even more slowly as he passed by it.

It's my imagination, he thought. It must be.

How could the dead material of which the house was built have retained his boyhood suffering? How could it radiate that suffering? Why hadn't that changed when new people moved in?

Perhaps they're the same as the man who lived in it before, Tom thought. Perhaps another man lives here now who terrorizes his family and fills their days with violence and dread.

Well, Tom told himself, enough of this. You're being self-indulgent.

He turned to head back toward his car.

Two young men were coming toward him on the sidewalk. One was white and one was black. Both were much taller than Tom, and both wore tank tops displaying impressive muscles. They filled the sidewalk, and they exuded a familiar menace.

The neighborhood thugs were all white in my day, Tom thought. Social progress.

Back in Chicago, he had never had to worry about this sort of thing. He was known in all the dangerous parts of town. Rather, it was well known who his protectors were. He had grown too used to that protection; it had made him incautious. And he had not realized just how much his old neighborhood had changed.

Tom turned and walked rapidly away from the two young men. He walked as though he had urgent business and was about to turn into one of the houses he passed. He didn't look back to see whether they were drawing closer. He wasn't sure what he would do – what he could do – if they were to catch up with him.

He reached a corner, turned to the right, and kept walking.

End of the block. Turn to the right again.

This time, he was able to check the sidewalk behind him from the corner of his eyes as he turned the corner. The two were still following him, still keeping their distance. Maybe there was nothing to this. Maybe they were innocent kids out for a walk, no violent intentions at all. Or maybe not.

Third corner. Another turn to the right. Tom took his car keys from his pocket as he turned, selected the right key by touch.

He sprinted suddenly. He sensed the two young men breaking into a run at the same time. He reached his car, key held out, thrust it into the lock, turned it, jumped inside, closed and locked the door.

The two were right behind him. They pounded on the closed windows of his car, furious at him. There was no doubt now about their intentions.

Tom smiled at them and then reached calmly toward his glove compartment. The two young predators backed away, hands up placatingly, and disappeared.

Tom sat in his car for a while before starting it. He was sweating, his heart was pounding, and his hands were trembling. “Damn,” he muttered. I don’t belong here anymore. I haven’t changed at all since I was a teenager. I never did belong here.

Maybe I should have a real gun in the car, he thought, not just a pretend one. What if my bluff hadn’t worked?

But he hated guns and always had. He hated violence of all kinds.

Violence, he thought. It makes some men feel more alive. It had always made him feel dead.

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When he got back to his house in the foothills above Ransom, he stood outside for a long time on the narrow rocky strip between his picture window and the dropoff, looking down at the town. He thought he could pick out his old neighborhood. He was now on the opposite side of town from that cramped neighborhood, that cramped house, that cramped life – across town and high above it all. The stony edge of the cliff at his feet separated his new world from his old one and kept the old world at bay.

He hadn’t bought this house with any attention to that symbolism, but now he decided he liked it.