

DEADLY HOLD-UP

The Third Art Fraser Bridge Mystery

Jim Priebe



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Master Point Press

331 Douglas Ave.

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M5M 1H2 (416)781-0351

info@masterpointpress.com

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Editor

Suzanne Hocking

Interior format

Sally Sparrow

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DEADLY HOLD-UP

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CHAPTER 1



ON A BITTER FRIDAY AFTERNOON in late November, a strong, icy wind chilled those in its path and harassed them by propelling the lightest forms of plentiful Boston trash in random, unpredictable paths along the streets. Only rugged Bostonians braved these conditions for any length of time. More delicate folks chose indoor activities. Several hundred of them gathered in the Westin and Marriott hotels on Copley Place to challenge one another at duplicate bridge. The bridge players may have been delicate physically; their banter was anything but. Many conversations included phrases like “*Only an idiot would make that bid*” or “*You have to be brain dead to take that line of play.*” These words were not meant to be overheard by the perpetrator of the alleged fault. When they were, even more indelicate exchanges surely followed.

Starting shortly after noon on this particular Friday, entries went on sale for the first Life Masters’ Pairs event at the Fall National North American Bridge Championships. The business was transacted at four desks just outside the main ballroom on the third floor of the Westin hotel, and the bridge game was due to start at one o’clock.

While entries were sold, money raked in, stories told, bidding understandings reviewed, a figure was busily at work. The figure arrived on the 2nd floor of the Westin Copley Place with a good-sized bag slung over one shoulder. The bag contained two blowguns as well as two darts loaded with immobilization chemicals sufficient to neutralize a medium-sized animal, say a pig or an ostrich. The bag was light enough not to be a burden, old and tattered enough not to attract attention. It was also large enough to hold plenty of cash. A bill of any denomination weighs a gram. Two hundred and fifty twenty-dollar bills—five thousand dollars worth of cash—weigh half a pound. The figure hoped to be carrying, very soon, twenty thousand dollars worth of bills weighing about two pounds. Of course, if there were a large number of fifty-dollar bills in use, the take would weigh less. If folks used a lot of tens and ones, or if the number of players entering was large, the take would weigh more. So a payload of three or four pounds would be no problem when the time came to scurry away.

The figure stopped in a washroom on the second floor of the hotel, made use of a vacant enclosure, opened the bag to remove a shirt identical to those worn by the hotel cleaning staff, slipped off a t-shirt and donned the hotel garment. No

one was paying attention, so getting rid of the t-shirt along with a wad of paper toweling was quickly completed. With a heartbeat approaching one hundred and eighty and sounding to its owner like a kettledrum, the figure headed for the employee service elevators, picked up two yellow signs saying “TEMPORARILY OUT OF SERVICE” and took an elevator to the third floor.

The plan called for the placing of the yellow signs at the doors of the women’s and men’s washrooms, conveniently located side by side near the playing area. If the timing was right, and it had to be, hotel employees would be just finishing their scheduled cleaning of the two washrooms and they would be empty. The added signs would ensure that both washrooms stayed empty for the few minutes that the figure needed.

The good-sized bag also contained two lots of fireworks, each attached to a length of slow-burning Visco fuse rated to burn at five seconds per inch, or a foot a minute. Eight feet of fuse in the ladies’ washroom and five feet in the mens’ would allow three minutes to light the charge in the ladies’ and then get to the men’s, install the second charge and light it. The few additional minutes without use of the washroom would be an inconvenience to the players, but they would have to walk a little further for that time. When the job of placing the fireworks and lighting the fuses was completed, the doors would have to be left open to make sure that the noise had maximum impact in the playing area.

A pretty young Mexican girl, also in a hotel uniform and maneuvering a kit of cleaning tools, was just leaving the ladies’ washroom. She looked askance at the figure who appeared with official-looking signs. When the figure smiled in a confident, familiar way, the girl shrugged and continued to her next assignment. After completing the ladies’, the process was repeated at the men’s washroom, right next door. Very little time was needed to accomplish these tasks and so far, everything was going well. The figure suppressed an urge to laugh hysterically.

By now, three of the four desks selling entries had closed, and the fourth was wrapping up its business, serving the last remaining person who had paid for his entry and was waiting for change. The other three sellers had tucked their money and checks away in fabric bags to be carried to a conference room, re-counted, documented, and banked.

At that instant, a clamor erupted, emanating from the women’s washroom. The eight hundred players, gathered here to match wits in one of the most prestigious championships in the world, fell silent. Seconds later, a second outburst, this one from the men’s washroom, added to the ruckus. A smell of smoke filled the foyer and began to trickle into the ballroom. For a few moments,

everyone in the area was stunned, motionless, wondering what had happened. Hearing a noise that they imagined was surely machine-gun fire, many of the players thought first of a terrorist attack, then of the insane killers who showed up periodically in schools and institutions in the USA. Their first urge was to get out of the place, fast.

Within moments of the cessation of the racket, a loud, confident voice could be heard clearly over the public address system, calmly urging everyone to evacuate the premises. Detailed directions followed, and the players filed out in a surprisingly quick, orderly manner.

Two men and two ladies, employees of the American Contract Bridge League, had been selling entries. Three of the group were not quite sure what to do. Hank, the most senior man of the group, experienced and well respected by his colleagues, decided that someone needed to take charge.

“Look. Why don’t Frank and I take the money and scuttle up to the fourth floor. We’ll take the stairs. The elevators may be disabled. You ladies just go ahead and follow the evacuation orders. We’ll regroup after this blows over. There’s no point in all of us getting involved or hurt, or both.”

Hank’s plan was acceptable to everyone. The ladies laid their bags of money on Hank’s desk and joined the last of the exiting bridge players. Hank and Frank each picked up two of the fabric bags and were about to leave the area. Unnoticed by them, the slim figure, now wearing a ski mask, approached from behind. The figure took an unusual-looking pipe from the good-sized bag, pointed it first at Hank and then at Frank. Within seconds of one another, they fell to the floor, inert. The figure crouched below the level of the desk where entries had been sold, stripped off the ski mask, gathered up the money bags, put them in the bag, checked to make sure no one remained in the vicinity, and hurried to the employee service elevators. The hotel security guards who appeared on the scene did not notice a slim figure in a hotel employee’s garb slipping through the heavy doors marked EMPLOYEES ONLY.



Alan Gilead, well-known genial CEO of the American Contract Bridge League, had been planning to play with his wife, Alice, on the Friday of the first Life Masters’ Pairs game at the national tournament. He had picked up an entry early and was chatting with friends when the melee started. Noise resembling shots from an automatic weapon, the smell of smoke, and then a loud order for everyone to evacuate the ballroom combined to create a fair degree of havoc.

Without really knowing what was happening, Alan took his wife's hand and led her into the crowd that was making its way towards the emergency exit. Huddled outside on the sidewalk, they shivered in the Boston cold for eight long minutes.

Players who knew him approached and asked all manner of questions without realizing that he was as uninformed as they were about the events that had just transpired.

"What's happening in there, Alan?"

"Is somebody shooting the place up?"

"Sounds like a terrorist is on the loose."

Alan could only put on his usual genial smile, shrug his shoulders and utter words of hope. Finally, the coast was declared clear and everyone was invited to return inside. When they returned to the ballroom where the game was to have taken place, he saw several directors at the table where entries had been sold. Fred Jardeen, the head director, approached him and told him about the robbery and the stunning of two directors.

Fred was a personable, energetic fellow who had the job of heading up and organizing the whole group of ACBL Directors across North America. Three times a year, when a national championship was scheduled, his priorities focused on that specific event, and he worked on location for all eleven days.

"How are you going to handle the game?" asked Alan.

"The place is a zoo at the moment, but I see no reason why we shouldn't go ahead and run the game. I know we're out about twenty-five thousand dollars, but canceling the game won't bring it back. We've called an ambulance for Hank, but Frank should be fine. It'll take us a while to get the place under control, but unless you have a compelling reason to change my decision, we'll go ahead with our announcements."

"I agree completely," said Alan. "Alice and I had planned to play, but we'd better drop out of the game. I'm going to talk to a few other board members and get them to drop out as well. I need them to join me and work out how we should deal with this."

Fred gathered the directing staff and advised them of his decision, and the players soon heard orders over the public address system directing them to their tables. Absolute chaos was transformed into a state of orderliness in a remarkably short time. Alan saw two paramedics hurry in with a stretcher and roll Hank onto it. After checking his vital signs, they tucked a blanket over him and carried him out. Within a half hour, the ballroom once again had the normal appearance of a bridge tournament: people sitting quietly at the dozens

of tables, slapping bidding cards on the table surface and murmuring quietly when hands were finished or when they changed tables.

Fred came up to Alan and said, “Looks like we have matters under control now, apart from our twenty-five thousand dollars. I called the Boston police and they should have someone here anytime.”

“That’s the best you can do,” conceded Alan. “I don’t know what our chances are of recovering any of the money. Our insurance may help.”

Alan heard a low-pitched buzzing sound coming from the general direction of Fred. He looked quizzically at the other man, knowing that all electronic devices, including cell phones, were banned in playing areas. Fred patted his pocket and motioned him back towards the lobby. “I made an exception today,” he whispered as they walked quickly to the hall. “I turned it on when the evacuation order came through.”

When they were clear of the ballroom, Fred flipped his phone on, got the number of the caller and returned the call. His face darkened as he listened. When he hung up, he said to Alan, “That was the hospital. Hank was dead when the ambulance arrived. I guess his system just couldn’t take it.”

“That is unfortunate. Truly unfortunate,” said Alan. “We’re going to miss Hank. It really complicates matters. And now we have a homicide to deal with. I suppose they will have notified the coroner and the police.”

“They say the coroner is there now and he’ll look after notifying homicide. We’ve already let the Boston police know that we’ve had a robbery,” said Fred. “They’ll have to tell us what to do next.”

A trio of Boston homicide detectives showed up in less than an hour. Bruce Lente introduced himself as a captain in charge of homicide in the district. He presented Julia Baker as the detective who would be in charge of the case and Bill Steele, a senior member of the department.

The three police officers began asking questions and Julia acted as the recording secretary, trying to keep up with the conversation as she took notes. The officers seemed unsure of where to start in their investigation and whom to talk to. When Alan joined the circle and introduced himself as CEO of the bridge league, the trio began to direct their questions to him. From the puzzled expressions developing on their faces, Alan could see that the proceedings of the tournament were totally confusing to them. It became clear quickly that the police officers knew next to nothing about the functioning of a bridge tournament. Lente would ask a question, then, minutes later, Steele would repeat the same question. Julia sighed in frustration as she tore a sheet from her

pad, crumpled it up and stuffed it in a pocket. It seemed they would need several days of blundering to get themselves grounded, by which time all of the players would be starting to drift home. When the subject of the ambulance came up, Lente burrowed in and became critical.

“Who was the intelligent person that ordered moving a dead body?” he asked.

Fred answered, “We called an ambulance and they gave him their routine checks. He was certainly alive at the time. Nobody authorized moving a dead body.”

Alan could see that they were spinning their wheels and making no progress. He thought of Art Fraser, a recently retired homicide detective, who was setting up a private investigator’s practice. He knew that Art had been involved in investigating and solving cases of other bridge players who had been murdered and had top credentials as a detective. *If we can get him, he would be ideal.* Addressing the police officers, he asked, “Supposing I could find a person, an experienced bridge player and a former homicide detective, to act as liaison with you folks? Would that help us?”

Bill Steele responded with enthusiasm. “If he could join our team, that’d be a great idea. That would give us a kick-start. I can see us drifting around for days on our own trying to learn all the background we need. We could still be nowhere at the end of a week.”

Lente gave him a frown. “I’m not so sure we want to bring an outsider into this. It may slow us down,” he said. “Well, if you are all in favor, don’t let me hold you back.”

“I’ll give it a shot,” said Alan. “If he’s available, I’d like to hire him and have him join the investigation on a full-time basis.”

Steele, who seemed to act as spokesman for the trio of detectives, nodded energetically. Alan left the officers and went off to call Art Fraser.

MURDER AT THE NATIONALS

Art Fraser, the bridge-playing detective who made his debut in *Takeout Double*, has left Buffalo and moved his new family to Florida, where he is setting up as a private investigator. However, he's soon summoned by the ACBL to Boston, where a robbery at the Fall Nationals has left one man dead and a whole lot of money missing. The local homicide cops aren't overjoyed to have Fraser involved, but they're also struggling to understand the ins and outs of the bridge tournament world. The two camps work out an uneasy arrangement as the mystery deepens...

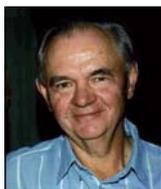
Praise for *Double Elimination*, the second Art Fraser mystery:

"You can if you so wish read this book in a day. Indeed, if you enjoy it as much as I did, I suspect that is exactly what you will do."

- Julian Pottage

"A thoroughly enjoyable mystery."

- The National Post



JIM PRIEBE (Toronto) is a Canadian international player and the author of two previous Art Fraser bridge mysteries, as well as two technical bridge titles. A retired executive, he divides his time between bridge, golf, and grandchildren.



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