

The Limelight

A MAGGIE GALE MYSTERY

I'm Maggie Gale. I'm fairly tall, have light brown hair, in pretty good shape, and I'm a Lesbian. These days I'm a private detective, but this story is about a case I investigated when I was on the Fenchester Police Force, several years ago, around Christmas time. In those days I was single...and not loving it.

by Liz Bradbury

As I worked my way down a rabbit warren of halls to find the Technical Services Department of Irwin College, I was distracted by a picture of a beautiful woman.

"Wow," I whispered at the poster. Below the image I read, Poetry Reading, December 21st. Today was the 21st.

I mentally filed it under: 'You really should get out more.' Which is where most of my good intentions go to die. I walked on, after all, I was on duty.

In a windowless workroom crammed with electronic gadgets, I explained to Cam Lawrence, Irwin College's geeky Director of Tech Services, that I was there to investigate the equipment thefts.

"We just found the discrepancies yesterday," drawled Lawrence lifting a stack of spread sheets from his desk. "Here's a list of what was, uh, stolen over the last two years. We put this together yesterday." I scanned it noting the bottom line. The replacement value could have underwritten ten guest lecturers at Irwin College, for a year. He added, "I have some work study students you should talk to, they're really the ones who, uh, uncovered the losses."

This was surprisingly frank. A circus parade of inventory had marched out of town right under Lawrence's nose and he hadn't even caught a whiff of the peanuts. It was the students who had blown the whistle.

"We come in at eight and each grab a handful of these green or pink slips. Then we go around all day setting up equipment or bringing it back here," said Oren Baylor, a college version of Beaver Cleaver.

"And when we started the inventory yesterday afternoon, like, half the list was gone," continued Tim MacGonigal, a tall, lanky teenager with sandy hair.

"Somebody must have grabbed some of the slips. They'd go pick up the stuff and just carry it off. The thieves must have had keys." Tim had emphasized thieves like a Hardy boy, hot on the trail of a shifty suspect.

"The only record was the pink slip? What about the green set-up slips, what happened to those?" I asked as I took notes.

"The green slips are missing too," said Tim MacGonigal.

And...there was a theft the day before yesterday?" I asked, flipping back over some briefing notes. They both nodded. "Who reported it?"

"Some English teacher," said Oren Baylor. "That's when Mr. Lawrence

decided to do inventory. He's telling everyone that it's the end of the year inventory, like we do it every year, but it's been like, I don't know...decades since anybody's done it."

Oren Baylor started describing pieces of missing equipment, I stopped him with, "Any ideas who's doing this?"

He hesitated, then shook his head, "I don't think so. I mean, I don't want to get anybody in trouble. It's not like I know anything," He even had the Beaver whine down.

I didn't have time to wheedle, so I said sharply, "Withholding information from the police is obstructing the law, we could continue talking about this down at the station..." That's me, good cop/bad cop, the economy version.

Baylor stared at me open mouthed, then said after some thought, "I really don't know anything, it's just...I can't see how anybody could do this unless they'd worked here. I don't mean Tim or anything. Um...I have a final...I gotta go soon."

Baylor was right, the thief had to know the department's routine. "Oren, who else has worked here in the last few years?" I asked them.

Baylor piped up, "Just one guy I know, Gary Argon. He quit a few months before he graduated last year."

"I don't want to get anybody into trouble, either..." balked MacGonigal when I turned to him.

I sighed, "Look Tim, don't you think a person stealing a bus load of equipment should get into trouble? Your tuition dollars paid for that loot."

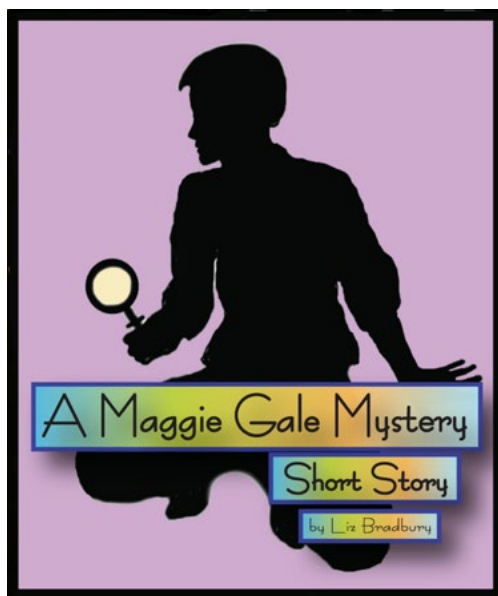
He nodded, then shrugged, "Um, like Oren said, Gary was here last year, and since then we've heard that people seen a ton of AV equipment at his parent's house?" He looked at Oren for confirmation.

Oren nodded back, saying, "And Gary had a big argument with Cam Lawrence."

I made a note to track down Argon after I spoke to the professor who'd reported the recent theft.

"Professor Pearson?" I asked the woman erasing the chalk board.

"Oh!" she said turning, "I didn't hear you come in." She paused, her eyes darted over me for an instant then rested on the badge I held up. She nodded.



Her hazel eyes flashed with amusement as she brushed a strand of shoulder length blond hair behind her ear.

“Campus Security told me you were coming over. I’m so sorry, I can’t speak with you for very long. I have a student conference in about five minutes. Grades. Always stressful for students at the end of the semester, and so near the holidays.”

Yipe! This was the poetry poster woman! Geez, what a hottie. I don’t think I’d ever seen such a pretty face. And her body was magnificent. Not skinny like snap-in-two straight girls, she was full and womanly. Zoftig, like a Reubens painting. The type to turn heads. Certainly Lesbian heads, mine for example. I nearly tripped over a box of books reaching for her extended hand.

“I’m Lieutenant Maggie Gale, Fenchester Police,” I said, shifting from fluster to business. I covered by looking at my notes. “You called in the theft? What happened?”

Her hazel eyes flashed with amusement as she brushed a strand of shoulder length blond hair behind her ear. “You’re a Lieutenant? And you’re investigating a theft?”

I exhaled, “Just a favor I’m doing, and so many of the other investigators are already off for the holidays.”

“And you like the investigations? You do, don’t you?” she smiled. When I smiled back slightly she went on, “Well, I’m not sure I have that much to tell. Two days ago, I did a final using a projector hooked to my laptop. I packed up my laptop, I never leave it anywhere...and then I realized I needed the projector for my next class. So I locked the classroom door and carried my laptop and bag to the office down the hall to call the tech department to arrange it, but he said there was no record of my having a projector. I didn’t know how to respond to that. He seemed adamant about it.” She paused recalling it with a head shake, then went on, “I wasn’t sure whether to insist he was wrong or just shrug and use it during the next class. I finally suggested he send someone to pick it up at 3pm, adding that it had the words Irwin Tech Department painted plainly in white on its side. I even remembered the painted inventory number, 105. He seemed to believe me after that.”

“You remembered the inventory number?”

“I’m not Sherlock Holmes,” she laughed. “It happens to be the same number as this room.”

“And you were talking on the phone to a student or...”

“Oh, it was Cam Lawrence, the head of the department. I recognized his voice.” She was looking at me closely, her head tilted just a bit to the side. She said in a very different voice, “What beautiful eyes you have, I don’t know many women with green eyes.”

I could feel my face flush. “Thank you, that’s a nice thing to say...um...then what happened...with the projector?”

“I came back here, unlocked the door to the classroom and the projector was gone. I called the tech department back but they’d all gone to lunch, so I phoned campus security. Did I open a can of worms?” she asked curiously.

“Bucket of snakes on speed...is there anything else?” I asked meeting her eyes.

She shook her head then smiled. “Anything else would be guessing...I’d rather leave something out than give you the wrong impression. But...on a completely different subject...”

She invited me to her poetry reading that night, then glanced at her watch and apologized again for needing to leave. The space was far less interesting without her in it.

Read part two of *The Limelight — A Maggie Gale Mystery* below...

Gary Argon was running a computer repair business from a tiny saltbox on Fenchester's East Side. The simple postwar home didn't have a second floor or a garage but there was a rather elaborate display of Christmas lights outlining the porch, the windows, the eaves, and the chimney. And a big blow-up Santa-on-a-sleigh was rocking in the wind on the roof ridge. I gave it about a 7 on the Christmas kitsch meter.

Inside the living room, next to a big artificial Christmas tree decorated with dozens of old CDs, was a work table covered with computer parts. Argon sat down at it, swiveling his chair to face me. "I'm usually out on calls," he said in a patient voice. He sounded like Mr. Rodgers but he had a Barney shaped body. He leaned back and asked, "What can I do for you, Lieutenant?"

I posed a few general questions, then landed on, "You stopped working in the Tech Department last year because...?"

Argon gazed at me for several seconds, finally he said, "Somebody stole something, didn't they?"

"Why do you ask that?" I returned passively.

"You're a cop. You're investigating," Argon sighed, shook his head and stopped sounding like Mr. Rogers. "Look, Cam Lawrence is a nice guy, but his system to track equipment is thirty-years-old. All hard copy, no e-data. Too easy to misplace or confuse. It's the tech department for chrissake. Wouldn't take a rocket scientist to steal anything out of there. Shit, it wouldn't even take a sociology major. I offered to change the system over but Lawrence said something like, 'If it ain't broke why fix it'...But now it is 'broke', and a horrible pixilated hot mess...isn't it?"

I nodded slightly, "Is that what you argued with Lawrence about?"

"Daily," he groaned.

How hard would it be to convert equipment like that into cash?"

"Tricky. Used electronics aren't worth much. Flea Markets and auctions you get next to nothing...Everyone assumes it doesn't work. Selling on-line leaves a trail. Best to go as far out of the area as possible."

"Your family lives in Fenchester, Mr. Argon?"

He shook his head, "Not now. This was my parent's house. They moved."

"Not buried in the basement or anything like that?"

"Well, if they are, then why the hell is some little old lady in Miami calling to nag me about not having a girlfriend, every week?" He pointed at a framed snapshot on the wall. A retired couple in Bermuda shorts waved back.

"Mind if I use your restroom?"

"Last door to the left." He pointed me down the hall toward the back of the house.

I snooped Gary's spartan bedroom on the way to the green and black tile bathroom, then poked my nose into the other empty bedroom on the way back.

"If you think of anything, give me a call," I said as I left him my card.

In the driveway, I ambled to the side of the house and stooped down to peek in the basement windows. Cement walls, washer, dryer,

furnace, some old milk crates and a foozeball table. No mounds of freshly turned earth with a hand sticking out, no weapons of mass destruction, nothing to write home about.

That evening, when Olivia Pearson came on stage after a short introduction, my best friend Farrel Case sighed as she ran her fingers through her slightly graying blonde hair, "My, goodness, your description was an understatement."

"Uh huh," I nodded.

Farrel shifted in the hard theater seat. Her long-time partner Jessie was sitting beside her. They were holding hands but Farrel leaned to me and whispered. "Don't tell my beloved spouse, but I'm straining to think of a way to get that lovely young woman to pose for the life drawing class I'm auditing in the Winter Break. Not that I'd ever be unfaithful, but..."

"You'd just like a peek?" I snorted.

"Well, the class is two hours, but OK, I'd settle for a peek, wouldn't you?" said Farrel glancing back at the momentary object of her purely aesthetic desire.

"I'd like a lot more than a peek," I admitted in a low growl. My desire went beyond the aesthetic.

Jessie nudged Farrel, then said something in her ear. Farrel turned back to me and whispered, "Jessie says we're sluts, but I think pigs might be a better description."

"Oink," I agreed.

Jessie laughed.

In the limelight, under a key spot, Olivia Pearson read a group of poems to a large audience. The poems seemed richly erotic, but maybe it was just my mood. On the other hand I heard both Farrel and Jessie breathing a little more rapidly after Olivia finished a poem about kneading bread. Farrel whispered something to Jessie, who chuckled deeply and distinctly whispered back, "Later."

Before the next poem, Olivia Pearson looked out over the audience. She focused in our direction and smiled. I felt a tingle of sexual excitement. My little head voice said, "This is why you should get out more!"

When the program ended, a thesaurus of English majors swarmed the podium. I glanced around and saw Cam Lawrence waiting for Olivia to finish, so he could take the sound system back to the horseless barn and lock the door.

I turned to Farrel and Jessie and suggested we ask Olivia to come out with us for a drink or something. They smiled a little too knowingly, but when we turned back toward the podium, Olivia Pearson was gone.

"Oh crap," I groaned with disappointment.

"I'll find out where she went," said Farrel. After speeding down the aisle, Farrel came back saying the students thought some other professors had taken Olivia out to dinner.

Jessie said decisively, "Let's go over to Fen-Ultimate Pizza. It's the last

Friday before break, everyone'll be there, maybe she will too."

Minutes later we edged into the crowded restaurant tavern. The noise level was high, there was a strong smell of oregano in the air, and the wait for any kind of food serve was going to be long. A group of Farrel's students waved her over. One of them was Oren Baylor, who nodded to me. Tim MacGonigal took Farrel aside and spoke to her for a few minutes with Oren adding comments. Tim's face was ruddy with distress.

Jessie and I found a table as far from the jukebox as possible.

"They keep turning it up, I really hate the loud music," said Jessie. We could see Farrel's head nodding as she patted Tim on the arm. Jessie and I ordered pizza, as Farrel made her way back to our table.

Farrel's voice was grave as she told us, "Tim and Oren are being evicted on Christmas Eve. Tim wants to go home for the holiday break, but he's afraid all his things will be thrown out if he doesn't resolve this. He's so upset, he says they're being cheated. He asked me to speak to the landlord tomorrow."

"I know those guys, I talked to them today. I didn't realize they were roommates. They're your students?" I asked with interest.

"They're both woodworking majors. And don't read anything into the roommates thing, they really are just roommates. Oren had this small place, a little apartment that used to be part of the old College Inn Motel. Tim moved in to share the expenses in September...Maggie, you're investigating the thefts in Tech Services aren't you," Farrel said decisively.

"Nobody's supposed to know about that," I returned flatly.

"Everybody knows about it Maggie. Hell, I knew about it before Cam Lawrence. I've heard some guy named Gary did it," said Farrel.

Jessie said emphatically to Farrel, "Those boys always want you to be their mom. Why can't you get them to come over and do teenage son things for us, like mowing the lawn or shoveling snow?"

"Jessie, we don't have a lawn..." said Farrel.

"But still..." insisted Jessie who was far more practical than Farrel.

Farrel sighed with concern, "Really, this is serious. Oren's been through so much. Earlier this year his parents were killed in a car accident in Europe and just a few days ago, someone smashed the project he'd been working on. Really crushed it, just before it was due. I had to give him an incomplete for the semester. It's so tense in the workshop. Up until this, the students all had unlimited access, but what do I do now? I may have to lock it down next year. Suspicion is so thick you can cut it with a dovetail saw...I can't figure it out... To destroy someone else's work...why? So cruel and pointless. It just doesn't make sense."

I thought back fifteen years when I was in art college in one of Farrel's woodworking classes. She was a great teacher, willing to give all her time and support to any student, but she expected dedication, insisted on hard work, ruthlessly stuck to deadlines, wouldn't tolerate

excuses for late projects and urged the very best from everyone. Her majors understood it was Farrel's guidance that built their foundations for success. Some of Farrel's past students were now the finest woodworkers and furniture designers in the country.

"Was it a great piece?" I asked.

"A detailed poplar carving of a moose head. At the half-way mark it was promising, but it's splinters now. His other work has been fair to middling. He's not going on in woodworking. He's going into the Coast Guard in the Spring."

"Who did it? Do you have any ideas?" I asked.

"Oren said another student named Rob doesn't like him, but he wouldn't go so far as to suggest Rob did it. Some of the other guys think it was Rob. But I don't think Robbie did it. He's not the type... This really scares me Maggie, it's freaking the students out too. Would you investigate it?" Farrel's expression lightened, she quipped, "After you finish legal beagling the stolen tech dreck, will you work on the mystery of the unpopular poplar?"

I groaned then laughed, "Farrel please...stop. Promise me you'll never say anything like that again and I'll try to look into it."

"Maggie, don't laugh, it only encourages her," said Jessie, then with a quick intake of breath she nodded at a table near the door. "Look, there she is, sitting over there with Kay and Howie Standard." Olivia Pearson was sandwiched at a small table between two of Irwin College's dullest professors, nodding her head politely with a slightly glazed expression.

"Maggie, you're staring," said Jessie nudging me. Then she said to Farrel, "Let's introduce Maggie to Olivia."

"What a very good idea," smirked Farrel. "And I bet Howie and Kay would love to leave her in someone else's company. They hate to be up past 9:30 and it's already ten. Look, Kay is stifling a yawn...and Olivia looks pretty desperate. C'mon."

Farrel and Jessie threaded their way between crowded tables, greeting people they knew. I followed, suddenly feeling shy.

"Kay, Howie!" called Farrel above the jukebox. Then, facing Olivia, Farrel said, "I can see why even my students, who frequently brand themselves illiterate, have been raving about your seminars. We loved your reading." Farrel introduced herself and Jessie, and then me.

Olivia rewarded me with a lovely smile saying, "It's so nice to see you again."

"I enjoyed it very much," I said.

"May we join you?" said Farrel, making a brilliant strategic move. There was barely room for three people, impossible for six.

Howie, desperate for a polite exit-line chimed, "Hey, it's late and we have to go. Take our seats, you'll see that Olivia gets back to where she's staying, won't you?" Mouthing goodbyes, Kay and Howie zipped out the door like Cinderella hightailing it for the last pumpkin.

Jessie leaned to Olivia and said with amusement, "Whew, I thought they'd never leave."

Olivia bent in conspiratorially, touching Jessie's arm and said, "I have to admit, I have no idea what Howie was talking about. Something

to do with a grad student who...I really think Howard said this...isn't inarticulate, he just doesn't use words well!?"

Olivia turned to me and asked, "That really doesn't make sense does it? Or am I missing something?"

I responded, "Not long ago, one of the inspectors told me and the other guys all about a perp who was guilty of bigotry. He went on and on until I finally said, 'Joe, I'm against bigotry as much as the next guy...but do you mean this perp was a Klan member or was he married to more than one woman?'"

I liked the way Olivia laughed, I went on, "It's good to wonder about people who don't make sense. In police work, everybody who gets bilked says something like, 'Now that I think about it it doesn't make sense!' It's always too late by then. I guess when people hear a statement spoken definitively, especially from more than one source, they believe it. It's dangerous to believe things people say, just because they say them with sincerity."

"You don't believe what people tell you?" Olivia asked, touching my arm now.

"I listen to everything. If it all makes sense, good, if not, usually somebody's lying. Last February I questioned the wife of a local drug runner who really believed the reason her husband was gone every Sunday was because he was playing golf...She didn't process that two feet of snow on the ground made sinking putts unlikely."

The deep curve of Olivia's neckline revealed a lovely hint of cleavage that was making me vibrate. I noticed a thin gold chain at her throat with a tiny gold labrys. Yep, the double ax. The ancient symbol of Amazon women warriors, and the modern symbol of Lesbians. She was a scholar, she knew the meaning of that little gold flag.

Jessie caught my eye. I gave her a tiny nod. She turned to Farrel and said, "It's late."

Sixteen years together meant they had their signals down. Farrel said, "Olivia, it's been so nice, but Jessie and I have to go. As a visiting lecturer you're staying on campus aren't you. Well Maggie will take care of you, won't you honey? You can give Olivia a ride back to... Where have they put you up?"

"It's a room in the married student housing dorms."

"Oh, no! Not MSH!" said Jessie and Farrel in mock horror. Olivia shrugged.

Farrel and Jessie shook Olivia's hand, hugged me and were out the door just as fast as Kay and Howie. So now I was on, and I'd have to say something witty, erudite, and smooth. I turned to Olivia and said, "Well..." and I couldn't think of anything else. What a dufus.

But Olivia talked about an art show at the college that Farrel had been in, and conversation began to flow. After she'd told me about some new poems she was working on Olivia paused then asked, "Did your friends set us up?" The sexy glint in her eye, made my ego soar.

"Kind of seems that way doesn't it?" I acknowledged gently.

A tiny dot of glitter flashed on her cheek and then a second later one flashed below her collarbone. A smile played at her lips. Someone

turned up the jukebox. I spoke near her ear, "Does it bother you? Being set up?" She smelled like flowers and spice.

"What bothers me is having to shout a conversation," she replied.

"Shall we go somewhere else? Some place quieter, for coffee?"

She leaned in very close and said, "Yes, I'd like that."

In my car moments later, sleet pelted the windshield as I headed toward the local coffee shop, Brews on the Mews.

Olivia asked, "What do you do when you are not solving crimes?"

"I'm a mild mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper..."

"No...really, tell me," she laughed.

"Let's see, well, in the summer I teach art classes to inner city kids."

"Sounds like fun."

"It is. What do you do for fun in Oregon?"

"Nothing as interesting as crime-solving. Tell me how you do that, it's dangerous isn't it?" She'd tacked away from talking about her own life but her voice was warm and sensual. It was a pleasure to be able to talk without shouting, about anything.

"It's a jungle out there...Gangs, terrorists, the red hat society," I said, "I get the facts, I follow leads, I talk to lots of people. Sort it all out."

"How?"

"Sometimes I make a drawing to help order my thoughts, sometimes I just try to think about things abstractly. Then I formulate questions and try to answer them...Usually, the top questions are; who's lying and who benefits...or, maybe just..." I thought for a moment, "who benefits the most."

She faced me with interest, then reached out and brushed an icy droplet from my cheek. She said faintly, "People generally act in their own self-interest, don't they?" Her touch sent a spark all the way to my toes. Yet, I couldn't help notice something tinting her tone, wariness maybe when she asked, "Can you always tell when someone's lying?"

I glanced at her, "Not always, but someone's lying big time in this case. It doesn't add up." I thought about that silently as I pulled up to Brews on the Mews. "Oh crap, it's closed. I'm sorry, I'll think of someplace else." Ice pellets beat the windshield. The road was becoming slippery.

"I'd invite you to my place at MSH," she said, "but your friends were right, it's grim. I wouldn't inflict it on anyone."

"Give me an example of its grimness," I asked with amusement.

She ticked off things on her fingers, "The walls are paper thin, the lights are fluorescent, the color scheme is institutional green, the sink drips. The couch and easy chair are both made of hard orange plastic..."

"Sounds like a bus station!" I chuckled. "Shame on the College for making you stay in a place like that. Um...we could go to my apartment. It's right over there." I pointed to the Dakota apartment house at the other end of the Mews. "And, I happen to have a very comfortable couch."

"Perfect...I'm easy to please," she said in a low voice. I looked into her

eyes. There was lust there. Then she turned back to the windshield.

“How easy?” I breathed.

“Maybe you’d enjoy finding out,” she replied watching droplets race each other down the heated glass.

I parked behind the Dakota. The night sky thundered, pouring buckets of freezing water on us as we dashed for the lobby. We dripped a melting pond on the elevator floor as we went up to eleven.

“It’s wonderfully quiet here. I’ve been missing that,” said Olivia as I unlocked my door.

“It’s not much. Just two good-sized rooms...but I like the view. Something to drink? Coffee, tea, I have some wine ...”

She’d caught site of a bottle of Jose Cuervo on the kitchen counter as she shrugged out of her wet jacket. “We could do a shot of tequila, do you have any limes?”

I laughed, “Seriously? I got that tequila as a Christmas present from the Captain.”

She nodded as she turned to look out the windows over the city. “Good God, this is the penthouse! Is it just you up here?”

“There are two apartments. A lawyer and his glamorous wife used to live in the other one but they moved to Hooterville.”

“Oh...and then George and Weezie moved in?” she laughed.

“Flavio and Marits... ” I got a lime out of the refrigerator, cut it into sections and put them on a plate with the salt shaker, then explained, “Really...it’s not a penthouse, just the top floor with a nice view. It would be better if it actually overlooked the Mews, but we’re in the back of the building.”

“May I see the rest?” she asked drifting toward the bedroom.

I followed her to the bedroom door, all the while noticing her damp blouse clinging to the lovely contours of her breasts. Her cloth jacket hadn’t been much protection.

Olivia leaned into the bathroom saying, “Nice.” She turned back to me adding, “The water pressure at MSH is like a kindergarten drinking fountain. Would it be all right...” she stopped, smiled a little. Then she began again, “May I take a shower?”

“Now?” I asked incredulously.

My cell rang. The screen flashed. “It’s my boss,” I said with annoyance, “I’m sorry, I have to take this.” She nodded, then purposely stepped into the bathroom and closed the door. I wondered if she’d been serious about the shower as I carried the phone into the living room. Then I heard the water come on and the naughty side of my consciousness assumed a carnal expression.

I briefed Lt. Ed O’Brien on the tech thefts for a few minutes, then said, “Really, Ed, it’s kind of embarrassing that someone of my rank is investigating this dinky little case.”

“The College President is on my back Maggie, and he’s friends with the Mayor. I need you to solve this, pronto.”

“I’m working on it Ed, as a matter of fact, I’m beginning to think

this case is...”

Suddenly, Olivia was there in the living room in front of me, damp hair glistening in the gentle lamp light. She had a sultry expression... and she was wearing my bathrobe. The light terry cloth drawn snugly across her chest made it clear she wasn’t wearing anything underneath. I lost my train of thought. She turned to look out the window.

“Maggie?” tossed Lt. O’Brien into the wordless pause.

“I’m sorry Ed,” I said snapping back to the phone, “I’ll nose around tomorrow. With luck I’ll get some results, but for tonight...I have something else to...investigate.”

“Huh?” he said as I hung up.

Olivia was standing close to the window, looking up at lightning bolts tearing across the black rainy sky. The view was wonderful. For both of us.

Without turning she said, “I hope it was all right to borrow your robe...”

“It’s never looked better,” I said softly, wondering ahead about getting her out of it.

She turned slowly. The open collar plunged. I stared.

“What are you thinking, Maggie?”

I said honestly, “That you’d be quite a muse.” I shifted to make more room on the couch. “Were your clothes very wet?”

“I hung them up in the shower.”

“Are you warm enough?” I asked glancing at the contour of her breasts for an answer.

“So far,” she whispered, sitting beside me. “Remember this afternoon when I asked you to my poetry reading? You hesitated. Why was that?”

“I was trying to think of a more emphatic word than yes...Shall we do a shot of tequila?” I could smell soap and shampoo. Her skin was like pink tinted cream. I hesitated, checking to see if I was reading all the signals right. Mental head slap. Oh Maggie, get real, she’s in your bathrobe!

She picked up the bottle, “The seal’s still on it. Is this...something you really want?” Maybe she was checking the signals, too.

“I’m up for it, if you are.”

“Hmmm, I could skip the shot,” she said in a low voice, “I like the lime and salt part best, but I don’t need anything to break down my inhibitions. Do you?”

I took a long slow breath, then dipped my finger into the salt and touched it to the tip of my tongue. I picked up a lime wedge and lifted her wrist. The robe slipped down to her elbow. I pressed the lime to her smooth skin, then drew it along her inner arm. I took the lime away and touched my tongue there, licking up slowly to the inside of her wrist, where I lingered, sucking the tart juice off her skin, feeling her warm pulse, trailing my lips over the surface.

She exhaled sensually, reaching to stroke my face as I continued to kiss her wrist, biting gently. She shifted her fingers to lift my chin, guiding my mouth to hers. I savored the softness of her lips, teasing and coaxing. She responded with ardor, pulling my body to hers, holding me tightly as though she feared I’d draw away.

I did pull back, but only to say softly, “We have all night.”

I eased her against the pillows of the couch. “Slow down, Olivia, there’s plenty of time for us to share all sorts of pleasures.”

She watched my hands as I opened the robe. Drinking her in with my eyes, I took more than a peek.

“How lovely you are...” I whispered letting my fingers play sensually over her skin. She leaned her head back, responding to my exploration, convincing me to go on. She gasped, arching to offer me more, as arousal coursed through her.

“I need to feel you,” she said hotly.

I was struck with the searing desire to thoroughly satisfy her. I began to taste her. Starting at her throat, trailing sensually down to her breasts, I sucked them roughly to her obvious aching delight. Nipping her nipples to impossible hardness I continued to tease her breasts firmly with my hands as I went on down with my mouth...moving slowly to a target not ripe for an arrow, but for an endless velvet caress.

Later in the bedroom, she made love to me with tantalizing intensity. She’d brought me to the edge several times with her skillful darting tongue, then backed off, making me desperate for release. Finally sensing I couldn’t be more aroused she ruthlessly worked my most sensitive areas until I was thrashing with climax. She’d accepted that we had all night. We used every minute of it, yielding to each other, sensing that this might be our only encounter, losing the past and future, concentrating on the moments we had.

That morning, I watched the the sky lighten as she slept by my side. I thought about my life, my work, my solitude. The solitude part didn’t seem very appealing at the moment. I thought about asking if she had a girlfriend. Then realizing I might spoil the moment with my irrepressible nosiness.

My mind drifted to other things; the vandalism in Farrel’s class, the equipment thefts at Irwin. Related because some of the actors held roles in each. Lt. O’Brien wanted action. I needed a short cut. Easy. Just answer two simple questions. Who benefited from the thefts and who wasn’t telling the truth? I thought about the players, Cam Laurence, Oren Baylor, Tim MacGonigal, Gary Argon and...Olivia too. I shook my head...Olivia wasn’t a suspect...but there was something...what had she said...”

I imagined it all as a series of pictures. Kind of like a ‘Highlights’ search; find the coffeepot in the drawing of the garden. Find the person who benefits ...

I strained to sort it...but finally my mind shifted to the other problem. The smashed project in Farrel’s woodshop. I wanted to fix it for Farrel, she was a great friend and a great teacher. Uncompromising when it came to class work, but she’d do anything for her students; stay late to work with them, photograph their portfolios, listen to their problems. She was even going to confront that landlord today. I remembered Farrel saying, ‘To destroy someone else’s work...it just doesn’t make sense.’

I felt Olivia shift against me. I touched her hair. She smiled and settled back into sleep. She seemed to have gotten what she wanted

from me, and honestly, I guess I’d gotten what I wanted from her...It fit with what she’d said last night, “People generally act in their own self interest, don’t they?”

Yes, yes, that was it. The pictures shuffled and I flashed on the answer so clearly that it was like suddenly figuring out the Wheel of Fortune sentence and then being smugly amazed the other TV players weren’t able to guess the right letters. Both cases had one solution. It all made sense; who was lying, who did what. All I needed was a little proof. I got up and made a quick phone call, then slipped back into bed.

I felt Olivia touch my hip under the covers. She smiled at me. She began to sit up saying, “I’m so sorry, I have to catch a plane in the afternoon and I have to pack.”

“Will you be back?” I asked.

“No, my fellowship is up. I leave today.”

“How long does it take to pack?” I asked gently.

She fell back into my arms and we began to kiss again. “Maybe not that long,” she murmured. “Maybe I have an hour or two...Oh!...” She arched as I stroked her in just the right place. “Ah...I’m pretty sure I have a couple of hours...if you do that again...”

Two hours later, well more like three, I drove her back to the MSH dorm.

“When you finish packing, give me a call and I’ll drive you to the airport,” I said as she got out of the car.

She looked back at me with her head tilted to the side. “Too bad we didn’t meet when I first got here in September. You’re pretty wonderful Maggie. I’m sorry I have to go.”

“Maybe I’ll come and visit you in Oregon sometime?”

“That would be fun. But you know what, I think some lucky woman is going to snatch you up long before we have the time to see each other again, and you don’t seem like the philandering kind. You’re not, are you?” I shook my head. “No, I didn’t think so,” she said softly.

I drove over to Farrel and Jessie’s. On the way, I made a phone call.

Farrel and Jessie live in a row house, also in Washington Mews. They were having breakfast, the fabulous multi-part kind that Jessie is famous for making.

“You slept with her didn’t you,” said Farrel forking a hot waffle onto my plate. It wasn’t even a question.

I just grinned and reached for the syrup. “I didn’t come by to gloat, I’ve solved your problem and the tech case, too. I’m on my way to the station, but I figured you’d want to know.”

Farrel dropped her fork and Jessie leaned forward as I explained, “See, both these little problems were about lies and motive, and they have the same solution. One pathological liar, and he’s responsible for everything. So ask yourself Farrel, who benefited from smashing Oren Baylor’s project? There’s only one person with a clear motive.”

Farrel shook her head slowly, almost as though she didn't want the truth to surface. Suddenly an expression of shock and then sadness clouded her face. "Shit," she said, "...Oren?"

"Yeah, Oren himself. Face it Farrel, you're a hard nose. If he hadn't finished his project, you would have failed him. He wasn't done, so he smashed it and shifted the blame to someone else. It was the only excuse you might fall for."

"But the tech thefts, he did those too?" asked Jessie.

"Uh huh. Once I realized he wasn't telling the truth about his smashed project, it was clear that Oren's not just a run-of-the-mill liar. He's compulsive and he's a pro. He dropped bogus hints everywhere that Gary Argon had Irwin equipment in his house. But I checked, and there's nothing from Irwin there."

"I heard it in the shop...that Gary had the equipment..." said Farrel thinking back.

"Yeah, a kernel Oren planted in a dozen fields. He'd told everyone, 'people had seen the stuff there'. Why not believe him? He didn't act like it was a theory. He stated it as fact. He's lied about everything with such conviction, he snowed everyone. I'm sure when you contact Tim's landlord today, you'll find that Tim was subletting. He was probably paying rent to Oren, who was supposed to give it to the landlord. Tim paid Oren, and Oren pocketed the money. Eviction takes a long time. But Oren didn't count on Tim asking you to talk to the landlord. I bet Oren has already left town."

"Will there be some kind of a trial? Oren's going into the Coast Guard this spring..." Farrel said.

"Farrel honey, pay attention," I demanded, "Oren's a compulsive

liar! Where did you hear that he's going into the Coast Guard? From him? Oren made that up too! And guess what? Remember his dead parents? Well, they've recovered. They live in Paoli. I called a Paoli cop friend of mine, who just confirmed there are thirty-two boxes in the Baylor's basement filled with Irwin Tech Department equipment. Oren told his clueless parents he was moving to California in the summer. He probably planned to sell the stuff there, if that's where he really goes."

"Olivia?" I asked quietly as I helped her put books into a box, "Do you have someone waiting for you in Oregon?"

I'd suddenly realized that that was probably the thing she'd been keeping to herself.

She paused, holding some books in midair, staring into space. After a long moment she put the books down and faced me. She said honestly, with a hint of sadness ... "I don't know...There was someone else in my life, but then I came here for the semester and things have changed. I'm not looking forward to going back."

I reached over to hold her hand, "Do you want to talk about it?" I asked. She looked up at me, I put my arms around her for a hug that comforted us both. Finally I said, "Why don't you stay through the holiday? Think of it as a Christmas present to yourself. No strings, just a nice time."

She sighed, then nodded ... and then asked with a sweet smile, "Do you have any more limes?"



Liz Bradbury is the author of the critically acclaimed Maggie Gale Mystery series. Her first book in the series *Angel Food and Devil Dogs* was called "Perfect" by *Houston Outsmart Magazine*, was a finalist in the Golden Crown literary awards in two categories, got 4 magnifying glasses by the mainstream mystery review site *Mysterious Reviews*, was named one of the 20 top Lesbian mysteries for 2010 in *Curve Magazine*. Bradbury's second book in the series, *Being the Steel Drummer - A Maggie Gale Mystery* won the national Golden Crown Literary Award for mystery. Terry's Lesfic Blog review says of *Being the Steel*:...Bradbury has created a whole cast of multidimensional characters, perfectly cast in their individual parts. Esteemed reviewer Salem West of *The Rainbow Reader* says: "Being the Steel Drummer is one of the very best whodunits to hit the bookshelves this year. It's well written, well plotted, intricate, and inventive...Beyond the classic whodunit, Ms. Bradbury also treats readers to a gripping and sensual love story between two women in post Civil War America. And Salem West says that a section of the hot present day romance "can arguably be described as one of the most well written bondage scenes in all of lesbian literature."

Liz hopes to provide a new Maggie Gale Mystery Short Story in each future issue of *Gay Journal* magazine.