

## **\*Silent End\*** by Nancy Springer

"Whew, what's that?" Unlocking the front door of her very own beloved shop, Judith smelled something that made her think her ex-husband had played one of his nasty tricks. Had broken in and left her a rotting dead rat, perhaps. Stepping inside, she glanced at crisp white bisque arranged on shiny black shelving; except for the stink, all seemed well. Out of habit, she flipped the ceramic door sign that declared "Personal Pottery is OPEN!" before she headed past the plastic-covered studio tables into the back room to hang up her jacket --

"Oh my God!"

She froze by the coatrack, gawking at shards of glazed bisque piled around the kiln like cyanotic casualties of war: shattered butterfly plaques, smashed fish platters, beheaded bunnies and puppies and kittens, pony figurines in pieces, decorator plates and miniature teapots and fallen knickknacks of all kinds strewn amid the insectlike, multi-legged stilts that had supported them -- an entire kiln load of crafts lay in dismembered ruins on the linoleum. The expensive ceramic shelves that went in the kiln had been thrown aside, lying in monolithic, fissured slabs, crushing the bluish bodies. It was, in miniature, like the aftermath of a terrorist strike. Judith screamed, backed away, and stumbled to the phone.

By the time the cop cruiser pulled up, she had recovered from her shock and segued into anger. "I want you to get the detectives in here," she told the township police officer walking toward her as she propped the shop's front door open to air out the place. "I've had enough of this." Though actually, it had never sabotaged her shop before, just stalked her, slashed her tires, left venomous messages, that sort of thing.

"'Had enough of this'?" the cop echoed.

"It's my ex. Because I got a restraining order. I know it's him."

The cop gave her a long, almost bovine look. Without inflection he asked, "What's the problem? The smell?"

"No. Well, I mean, I hadn't thought..." Judith straightened her spine, annoyed by her own failure to connect the devastation in her back room with the stench until this moment. That lapse showed how unnerved she was, and she hated to be less than poised.

Crisp as bisque, she said, "Maybe there's some rotting garbage involved. I don't know. This way." She led him to the inner doorway.

"Everything I loaded into the kiln Sunday night," she told him as he took in the carnage. "A week's worth of business. Several hundred dollars I'm going to have to refund. God knows how many ticked-off customers."

"That stuff used to be, uh, merchandise belonging to you?"

"It was already sold. Glazed, paid for. And overglazed. All I had to do was fire it." Watching the cop, she saw his placid face rumple; like many people, he didn't understand what her business was about. Effortlessly, Judith shifted gears into her spiel. "Personal Pottery is unique to this area, a shop where you can creatively color your own ceramics. Select your inexpensive bisque item, and for a nominal studio fee we supply the brushes, the glazes, studio space, everything you need to paint your own one-of-a-kind ceramic artwork. When your -- "

Starting to get it, the cop pointed at the kiln. "That's an oven for pottery?"

"A kiln, yes." Quite a good kiln, actually. An expensive kiln. A Cadillac among kilns. A brick-and-metal cylinder a yard wide and four feet high, automated, computerized, and complete with adjustable ceramic shelving, large enough to hold dozens of fancy-handle coffee mugs and ruffle-edged pie plates and teddy-bear tissue covers and personalized piggy banks, Judith's kiln was the white-hot heart of her paint-your-own-pottery business.

"That broken stuff, was it baked yet?"

"No." It lay with the greeny-blue overglaze still on it. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, somebody pulled it out of the kiln and smashed it -- "

"What's in the oven, then?"

"Nothing, I guess."

"I don't like that smell," the cop said. "How hot does that thing get?"

"Twenty-three hundred degrees Fahrenheit. But I keep it at eighteen hundred. Why?"

"Smells like a crematory in here. How hot is that thing right now?"

"Room temp." The computer display flashed the blood-red numerals 72.

Keeping his eyes on the kiln as if it might pull a gun on him, the cop fumbled in a black leather pouch on his belt. He pulled out rubber gloves. He put them on. He took a few cautious steps forward, reached over, and inserted his fingertips under the kiln's heavy lid. He heaved it up.

"Stay where you are," he told Judith too late. She had followed, and she saw what he did. Ashes -- yuck, a coating of reeking, greasy ashes in her kiln -- and in the ashes a small blob of something that maybe used to be white, and some quarter-sized puddles with a metallic luster to them. And wallowing in one puddle, an oval, greenly glinting gem. And that was all, except some pallid stubs of -- of bone?

Judith caught just a single shocked glance before the police officer lowered the lid. "Get back," he ordered.

"It could be something else," Judith blurted, starting to shake. "A -- a big

dog..."

"Only if the big dog wore jewelry. Get back."

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At the end of the day, Judith was still in shock, so much so that she almost didn't go to Scrabble Club. She had told the police officer she wanted detectives? Hoo boy, she got detectives. The coroner said yes, those were human bones, and Personal Pottery became a crime scene, closed to business -- yet more income lost -- and all day it had been questions, questions, questions, like Chinese water torture. The signs of forcible entry on the back door -- when had she first noticed them? Never. Why? Because I always use the front door. There's no parking in back, just a driveway for deliveries. (Idiots!) The smell, when had she first noticed that? Today. Tuesday. Not yesterday? No, the shop is closed on Monday. Because I fire the kiln on Sunday nights. Heat up and cool down takes twenty-four hours, makes the place awfully hot, you know? (Cretins!) But the pottery broken on the floor was never fired? Right. (Which means he did it Sunday night, shortly after I left. Finally, they're starting to get it!) So, ma'am, Sunday night you left here at nine P.M.? And what were your movements at that time? I went home! Did you see anyone, talk with anyone? No! Anyone who can verify your whereabouts? No, dammit.

Babbling to herself in her car after the detectives finally let her go, Judith declared, "They think I did it! They really think I did it! Morons!" And she was still shaking, because obviously It had put the body in her kiln for some reason, and aside from making her life a living hell, what was It trying to tell her? That she would be next?

She went to Scrabble Club because she didn't want to face the empty house alone. Even joining a group of pedantic misfits in a church basement seemed preferable. Why were all such Sunday School rooms bile green, with those heinous Masonite tables and mustard-colored bulletin boards and the selfsame melanic upright piano with a plastic Jesus on top? As she walked in, an egg-shaped, balding man greeted her, "Hi, Judy."

"Judith," she corrected him more frostily than was necessary. Poor Dick, he couldn't help it that he was a hopeless nerd. Judith just enjoyed cruciverbalization, herself, but some of these people were total word freaks, obsessed with cryptograms, anagrams, acrostics, puns, palindromes, whatever. Utter word geeks. At least Dick had said hi, unlike the club's other nerdy and obsessed male, Doug, who had achieved the Master level in regional Scrabble competition and was now going for national and Expert. Right this minute, while women members stood chatting all around him, Doug sat at one of the tables gazing in his usual baby-blue manner at a list

of words he was memorizing -- not the meanings, just the spellings. Nobody in the club knew or used Scrabble words in any context other than Scrabble.

"Yataghan," Doug whispered to himself, his brow creased beneath blunt, childish bangs. "Y-a-t-a-g-h-a-n."

Standing right beside Doug, Judith knew he was not speaking to her and did not wish to be spoken to. She addressed Dick instead. "Sorry I snapped at you. I've had a terrible day. Had to call the police. Somebody -- "

"Did you see the trophies from Saturday?" Beaming, Dick pointed toward a gleaming, aspiring display.

There had been a tournament, evidently. Who cared. "Somebody put a body -- "

"I'm not in Novice anymore." Dick's smile echoed the lines of his triple chin as several women turned to congratulate him. "Yes, I got Master."

"That's great," Judith mumbled. "I suppose Doug won overall?"

"No, Eloise won!"

Judith almost offered Doug her sympathies. Three times so far she had found herself facing Eloise across Eloise's gold-filigree-and-mother-of-pearl custom-made Scrabble board, and each time she had managed to hold her own -- or so she had thought until Eloise, at the end of each game, had used her seven remaining letters ("Bingo!" Fifty extra points.) and gone out. Which was brilliant if done once, almost impossible if done the way Eloise did it -- habitually. Each time, caught flat-footed, Judith had realized that Eloise had been playing clawed cat to her mouse -- and had looked up to see Eloise watching her get it. ("Aw, Judy want a crying towel?") Even playing Doug was not as bad as playing Eloise. Doug never cut even the most novice opponent a break, and he always won, but he didn't gloat. Actually, he didn't speak at all, usually.

"Sforzato," Doug whispered, tuning out various conversations.

"S-f-o-r-z-a-t-o."

"Um, good for her," Judith told Dick. "I guess. Uh, like I was saying, somebody -- " But Dick headed away, still nattering about his trophy. Judith turned to one of the women, a retired librarian named Phyllis, and started over. "You know my shop, Personal Pottery?" Dumb question. Judith talked up her business wherever she went. Everybody here knew all about it. "The most horrible thing has happened. Somebody, probably my ex-husband, burned a dead body in my kiln, and the police -- "

"Kill," said an unexpected voice in quite a peremptory tone. Judith looked down to find Doug staring up from under his forelock, his vague,

pallid eyes actually focused on her. "Kill," he repeated. "It's pronounced 'kill.' The 'n' is silent."

"Whatever." Judith just wanted to talk about what had happened. She needed to talk the way she had needed to recite It's infidelities and It's emotional cruelties after It had left her. She babbled at Phyllis, "A woman, it had to be a woman, the ashes, I mean, because there was a lot of gold in there, and a diamond, and how many men wear that kind of jewelry? Besides, the coroner thinks the bones probably belonged to a woman. Girlfriend, maybe. It had to be -- "

But Dick was calling the club to order. Judith sat opposite Phyllis and played, but quite badly. She kept forgetting to tap the timer, she kept forgetting to mark down letters used so she would know what her opponent was holding during the end game; she even forgot to keep score. Instead, she kept talking, while Phyllis and several eavesdroppers listened with varying degrees of incredulity, discomfort, and fascination. Eventually, stopping the timer, Phyllis asked, "You really think the police suspect you of murder?"

"Yes! They're treating it as a homicide. They told me not to leave town."

"But they don't know who the victim is?"

"How could they? There's not even teeth left."

"But you think your ex-husband did it just to implicate you?"

"I wouldn't put it beyond him!" Though honestly, Judith thought, she had never believed It could murder anyone -- other than herself. The bastard, if he had gone and murdered some other woman, it was infidelity all over again. Judith bleated, "If it wasn't him, then who? Who else would want to break in and cremate somebody in my kiln?" Seeing Doug glance at her from a neighboring table, she added lamely, "Or kill, whatever."

Phyllis murmured, "I think it's correct either way." Starting the timer, she said, "Your turn." But presumably she was not speaking of Scrabble when she added, "Poor thing, what are you going to do?"

Judith had no idea. She attempted "cadaver," misspelled it, missed a turn, and lost. During the evening she lost all three of her games, the third one to Dick, whose post-trophy gratification only increased when he scored above 400.

"Eloise beat me 478 to 290 on Saturday," he said. "I wonder where she is? She said she would be here."

Judith didn't care where the hell Eloise was. These people gave her the creeps. Without even saying goodnight she went home.

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"We've been over this a thousand times," Judith complained to the

detective the next day. She hadn't slept well at all, she was not yet allowed to reopen her shop for business, she was losing money, Personal Pottery was headlined in the morning paper as a murder scene, life stunk. "I told you who did it."

Seated across from her at one of Personal Pottery's tables, the detective sighed through his large nose. He was an aging man with elephantine earlobes and a snout to match. Judith wondered whether any other body parts had grown as he got older. Probably not. Probably the opposite. She got the feeling he did not like women as he said, "You think your former husband did it."

"He's mean enough. He put a Calvin-pissing-on-an-X sticker on the window of his pickup."

The detective didn't even blink, just went on woodenly. "And you claim that the broken merchandise was removed before the kiln started to heat on Sunday evening -- "

"No claim about it. Simple fact." It would mean third-degree burns to open the kiln after its first hour of heating.

"What if he had a welder's mask and gloves?"

"Maybe ... No. The overglaze is still blue. Those things had barely begun to fire."

The detective accepted this with a snort of his potato nose. "Well, ma'am, if the break-in was Sunday night, you can forget the idea that your ex did it. He was at work. Thirty-five miles away from here."

Judith took this in slowly, with a chill, as bisque figurines looked on white-eyed from the shelves all around her. "Are you sure?"

"Twenty coworkers say he was there."

"But who else ... I mean, it's so weird...." If somebody really needed to get rid of a corpse, there had to be a thousand ways. Why break into her shop? If they really wanted to burn it, every factory in the county had an incinerator; why use the kiln?

In a cold, bored tone the detective asked, "You still think time of death was Sunday night?"

"Yes! I mean, no, I don't know when she was killed, if she was dead when he put her in there -- " Dear God, please let that poor woman have been dead, or at least unconscious.

"But the perpetrator must have come in Sunday evening, knowing that the crime would not be discovered until Tuesday morning."

"Right."

"So it must have been someone familiar with your routine."

"Not necessarily." He wasn't going to pin it on her, dammit. "Anyone

could look at the store hours. And I advertise delivery on Tuesdays."

"You seem to have a lot of answers, ma'am. Maybe you can explain this." Reaching into a pocket of his suit jacket, the detective pulled out a zip-locked, labeled plastic bag containing a white blob of something.

"What's that?"

"You tell me. It was found along with the ashes in your kiln."

He pronounced it with the final n. "Kill," Judith said just to put him down. "The 'n' is silent." She peered at the white blob with black spots in it. "Is that plastic?"

"Yes."

"But -- how can it be? Plastic would have vaporized."

"Exactly. But it's only melted. It appears to be one of a pair of dice. Do you have any idea how it got in there?"

"No!"

"Would you agree that it must have been put in afterward?"

"Um, yes. Monday night, probably. Once the kiln gets down to a hundred and thirty degrees, you can open it -- "

"Is that what you did, Judy? Opened it and put this in? Part of your game, maybe?"

"It's Judith," she said icily, "and I will not answer any further questions without a lawyer."

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"But he must be absolutely obsessed," she bleated to Phyllis the next Tuesday at Scrabble Club. Judith herself felt obsessed; all week she had been missing sleep, missing meals, unable to think of anything except: Why? Why me, why my kiln? And who? Who was the victim? Who was the murderer, if not it?

Phyllis prompted, "Obsessed?"

"Yes, or insane." Judith herself felt half insane, what with the articles in the newspaper, the cops suspecting her, everybody talking about her; she felt the plastic Jesus on top of the piano watching her. The Scrabble timer flashed its red warning light like a police cruiser's beacon. She covered it with her hand, telling Phyllis earnestly, "He must have come back later to throw a die in the kiln. But why?"

"Something to do with the victim? Have they identified her?"

"No. How can they? All that's left is bits of bone and a jewel stone and that stupid die. Why would he throw a die in my kiln? Kill, I mean."

Die. Kill.

The words hung in the air. Staring at Phyllis, Judith breathed, "Oh my God."

"What?"

Judith whispered, "Nothing." She darted a panicked glance around her. Dick and Doug sat two tables away in utter silence, heads bowed, intent on an epic Scrabble contest. Other players, less serious, chatted over their games. But Judith did not see the member she was looking for. The one who gloated. The one who showed off. The one who always wore lots of jewelry, including, Judith seemed to remember, a large oval aquamarine. She hissed at Phyllis, "Where's Eloise?"

"Huh." Phyllis glanced around, mildly curious. "I don't see her. You'd think she would have been here last week, too, bragging about her trophy."

Without even excusing herself, Judith staggered up and ran to look for a phone. The church office was locked, but way down a dark hallway by the boiler room she found a pay phone on the wall.

"Yeah?" a barking voice answered her at the township police station.

Yes, the big-nosed detective was there, as she expected. The paper had said the police were working around the clock on this one, and even though the guy was a potato-faced misogynist, Judith could not wait to talk with him, help him out, get herself off the hook.

Standing in the darkest corner of the church basement, she told him eagerly, "I think I know who the victim was. A woman named Eloise Hamilton."

But instead of asking her why she thought this, the detective said in a chilly drawl, "Well, isn't that interesting. That's what we think, too."

"But -- but how did you find out?" Too late, Judith realized how bad that sounded.

"Traced the stone. Jewelers keep records, you know." The detective's voice turned frostier yet. "How did you know Eloise Hamilton?"

His tone made Judith grab at the wall-mounted phone for support, yet she found herself babbling, "I'm -- I was -- in Scrabble Club with her."

"Is that right? I understand she was quite an obnoxious person."

"Yes, she was." Shut up, Judith told herself, almost crying, yet she kept going. She had to make this stupid cop get a clue. Had to. "Look, whoever killed her was a word freak. 'Kill,' that's why he put her in my kiln, because of the pun, don't you see? And 'die,' that thing he put in with her was a die. He couldn't stand it that she -- "

A heavy hand clamped over her mouth from behind, choking her off. Another hand wrested the phone receiver away from her and hung it up. Judith struggled, clawed at the fingers bruising her face, tried to bite, tried to scream, but already she knew she was dead. He was very strong. Unexpectedly strong, for such a nerd.



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"Good thing we had you under surveillance," the elephant-eared, potato-nosed detective said.

In the hospital emergency room, being treated for bruises and shock, Judith found it difficult to reply politely, so she did not answer at all.

He tried again. "Good thing I had two of my best men right there in the church parking lot."

Judith said nothing.

"When they got to you," said the detective, "he had you in the boiler room, with your face on the concrete and his knee in the middle of your back, and he was tinkering with the gauges."

Judith shuddered. That part she didn't remember. All she remembered was heavy hands choking her, then nothing. Until she found herself being picked up, brushed off, and watching them take Doug away in handcuffs.

"Are you okay?" the detective asked. "Say something."

Judith cleared her throat and tried out her voice. "He killed Eloise," she said unsteadily.

"So it is alleged, yes."

Judith had a handle on this kettle of fish now. "He kilned her," she declared, as crisp as bisque, "but he should have never said 'die.' He Doug his own grave."

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