**"Peas in a Pod" by Michael Bracken**

**Twist #325 - September 2011**

Jack Scranton couldn't understand why any woman would have so many photographs of herself scattered throughout her home, but he didn't really have time to worry about whatever form of narcissism the dead woman had been into.

He hadn't meant to kill her, but he hadn't expected her to be home. He'd been so careful about timing her movements and he knew she never returned home before nine on Thursdays. That's why he'd been so startled, when he opened her bedroom door and saw her standing there in her robe and slippers. She'd screamed, so he'd backhanded her and sent her flying backward against the sharp corner of a dresser. Her head had hit it with a sickening thud and then bent at an unnatural angle as she'd slid to the floor.

He'd never killed anyone before, never even come close, and his hands shook unceasingly as he rooted through her dresser drawers. He kept glancing furtively over at the body, not knowing what to expect, and hurried through the bedroom as quickly as possible. He opened the bottom drawer on each dresser, then worked his way up. Only amateurs started at the top, having to close each drawer before opening the next. He found a jewelry box and dumped its contents into the leather satchel he carried with him. Before leaving the bedroom, he glanced at the body, wondering if he should pull the diamond from her finger. But the thought of touching the body made his stomach churn like a washing machine and he gave up the idea.

He knew he should abandon this job, but it had been months since his last successful score and his cash reserve had almost disappeared. He'd spent weeks casing this woman's house after Al Witherspoon-- an insurance agent who took ten percent of every successful score he turned Jack onto-- had given him the details.

"Her name's Annie Rivers. She's a vice-president for Cooper Industries, lives alone, and must keep a good hundred to two hundred thousand in cash and jewels in the house at any one time," Al had told him when they'd met under the neon beer sign in the back booth at the Malibu Bar and Grill.

Al described the security system-- a good one, but one that Jack had cracked many times in the past.

"She's got some relative, Fannie Albright, lives in Arizona, named in her life insurance policy," Al explained. "When I talked to her about her homeowner's policy, she told me there's no other relatives, no husbands, ex-husbands, or boyfriends."

"What about her schedule?" Jack asked.

"That's up to you to figure out. I've done everything I can." Al gathered up his papers and stuffed them into his briefcase. He'd shown Jack her entire file, including a rough layout of the house and Polaroids of the security system and many of the rooms. Everything he'd shown Jack went back into his briefcase so he could return it to the office. The two wouldn't talk again until Jack delivered Al's ten percent.

Jack had spent the three weeks following his meeting with Al watching Annie Rivers' home, tracking her arrival and departure times until he felt certain of a time when she would be away from the house long enough for him to ransack it. Most evenings she returned home between six and seven, but each Thursday she played racquetball with one of the company's other vice presidents. On those nights she never returned home before nine.

The time between eight and nine seemed best. By then the sun would have gone down and her nearest neighbors would be unable to see him prowling around outside. He could be inside her house within ten minutes, could ransack the place within fifty minutes, and be back in his car and pulling away moments before she arrived home from her game.

Jack shook his head, trying to forget all the events that had led to his current, untenable situation. He needed to finish and get out. He needed to get away from the house as quickly as possible, but he couldn't leave until he'd gotten all the cash and everything he could pawn. He would need to leave town as soon as possible. He tried to keep his attention on the task at hand, tried to concentrate on his desire for cash and not on the body in the other bedroom.

Still, the photos spooked him. It was like the dead woman watched his every move.

He finished the room and moved on to the next, then the next. At a quarter of nine he finished with the upstairs and at two minutes past nine he finished with the downstairs. He'd made quite a haul and felt sure he would have enough to leave town, perhaps even to disappear for a long, long time.

As he crossed the foyer from the den to the living room, Jack heard a key in the front door and stopped. Annie Rivers lived alone and never had unexpected visitors. He'd made sure of it.

When the dead woman opened the door, stepped into the foyer, and snapped on the light, Jack was so startled he stood dumbly, caught like a deer in a car's headlights. Annie saw him and instinctively swung her racquetball racquet, connecting with his face and sending him flying backward. He hit his head on the banister of the staircase and tumbled to the ground in a heap, obviously knocked cold. The leather satchel in his hands dropped to the floor and popped open, spilling her collection of jewelry and two tightly banded stacks of twenty dollar bills to the floor.

Annie phoned 911. Within minutes, her home swarmed with police. After Jack had been roused, handcuffed, and escorted away, white-faced and shaking, in the rear seat of a squad car, Annie stood with a police lieutenant trying to maintain her composure. Two men in white uniforms wheeled a gurney containing her sister's body past them. "My sister had just arrived this morning," Annie explained as she dabbed at her tears with corner of her sweatshirt sleeve. "All the way from Phoenix. I had already taken tomorrow off so we could go shopping."

Annie bit her lip and stared at the photo of her twin on the fireplace mantel.