

DOUBLE ELIMINATION

A BRIDGE MYSTERY



JIM PRIEBE

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CHAPTER 1

THURSDAY, MARCH 25, 2004

Art Fraser was not expecting a call. The blinking red light on his phone at the Reno Hilton puzzled him. He was on vacation and hardly anyone knew where he was. Deciding that the message was probably for his friend Karen, who was out of the room checking the afternoon bridge scores, he ignored it. Tossing aside the donut-shaped seat cushion that had been a constant companion to him since the accident, he lay down carefully and relaxed on the bed. Tender buttocks were no fun, even after a vast improvement over the past two weeks.

He felt a pleasant glow as he reviewed the bridge hand records showing the deals that he and his partner, Stewart Appleton, had played that afternoon. They had just completed the first final session of the Life Master Pairs in the 2004 Fall North American Championships, after finishing third among the qualifiers on the first day. He expected they were near the top today and would end up with a respectable placing.

Fraser had never had time to attend a national tournament before. He was able to do so now because the New York State police force allowed officers who had been wounded on duty to take up to three months medical leave. Fraser had been shot once in each buttock in the course of an investigation he had headed. During an early morning raid of a warehouse near Buffalo, they had arrested two suspects and were tracking down the third and final gang member. They had turned on all the warehouse lights and Fraser and a colleague had moved carefully through the aisles of the warehouse, crouching so as not to present much of a target to their quarry. As they duck-walked across the floor, they somehow moved ahead of the man they were after. Two shots rang out and Fraser felt a sharp, stabbing pain, first in his right buttock, then in his left. The first shot spun him around a few degrees and the second bullet entered the other side. Surprisingly, the pain was not nearly as excruciating as the embarrassment he felt every time he explained what had happened. The doctor told him that the wounds were not serious and neither

muscle nor bone had been affected. He would be as good as new in no time.

Fraser quickly learned to appreciate the value of healthy buttocks for all the functions he had formerly taken for granted. He spent the first two weeks after the incident lying on his stomach. He turned on his side to eat and drink. Eventually he was able to sit for a short time, and then, with the help of his blessed thick foam pad, he was able to sit through a bridge game. His six-foot frame normally carried one-hundred-and-sixty-five lean pounds, but a month's forced inactivity combined with the leisure time he was taking now meant Fraser could feel the flab growing around his middle.

After the shooting, the police chief in charge of the Buffalo area, Gordon Bryder, had recounted the policy of allowing wounded officers three months medical leave and had wished him a speedy recovery.

"I have mixed feelings about this generous treatment we're giving you," said Bryder. "I'm a little suspicious about the way you got wounded. You know, some of the Mafia families have resorted to that method of punishment instead of outright killing."

"What method is that?" asked Fraser.

"They shoot the violator once in each cheek," said Bryder.



Fraser had been a bridge enthusiast since his college days. He enjoyed the weekly club games in Buffalo and had a good grasp of many of the finer technical points. His problem had always been that he didn't play frequently, and never with a really good partner, so he rarely had the opportunity to expose and correct his basic mistakes. All that changed with his injury, at least for a while. With plenty of time on his hands during his convalescence, he opted for total immersion. Frequent games, participation in after-game discussions and lengthy talks with Stewart Appleton, the manager of his favorite club, all led to a marked improvement in his play.

After four weeks of recuperation, and with ten weeks of leave remaining, Fraser broached the idea to his partner of going to Reno for a national tournament. Appleton turned the idea down at first, but he did call Susan Strong, a good

friend and an expert partner from former days. When Susan showed enthusiasm for a Reno trip, Stewart changed his mind and two days later he told Art he was seriously interested.

For ten years, Art Fraser had been sharing an apartment with two other police officers — Jill and Karen. The three of them had been close friends since their time together at the New York State police academy. When the trio found themselves assigned to the same unit in Buffalo, they had agreed to take an apartment together. All three had been satisfied with the arrangement, or more precisely, no one had ever been dissatisfied enough to change it. Lately, though, Art had noticed Jill becoming less and less enthusiastic about matters. Karen had given him special attention during his convalescence, especially during the few days when he was totally immobile. Jill had observed this turn of events, and said nothing, but the awkwardness between them had continued to grow.

Unlike Jill, Karen was a keen bridge player. After Fraser's injury, they began playing together three or four times each week. She would need more training before she could realistically become a good tournament player, but she knew what she was doing and much of what she did worked well. Jill had never advanced beyond the beginner stage, and Art had lost interest in playing with her.

When Fraser came up with the notion of traveling to Reno, it was natural that he should ask Karen to accompany him. Equally natural was that Jill chose that day to announce her decision to leave. She told them the news before they left, including the fact that she would be gone when they returned. She wanted her own man and children. Fraser did not try to talk her out of the idea. He understood that the balance between the three of them had shifted. That was alright with him. He liked Karen better anyway.

Even though Karen moved quickly into the void left by Jill, Art often found himself considering what they might do to replace her. Finally, he chose a time to mention his thoughts to Karen over breakfast one morning in Reno.

"I think we should start looking for someone to move into Jill's old room," he said.

"You know what Dorothy Parker said?" inquired Karen.

"Who's Dorothy Parker?"

"Just a woman," responded Karen.

"Oh."

GENERAL INTEREST

ART FRASER IS NOT HAPPY. Bodies are coming to light in upper New York state cottage country and once again it looks as though bridge is an intrinsic part of the case. Art has been sent to help the local police, but his team doesn't turn out to be the elite task force he had in mind. Bridge expertise doesn't seem to be helping to solve this particular crime either. Meanwhile, Fraser faces career and family decisions at home. He must find a way to balance his responsibilities even as he puts all of his energy into tracking down a ruthless killer.

Praise for *Takeout Double*, the first Art Fraser mystery:

"A delightful bridge mystery — polished, suspenseful, and thoroughly enjoyable"

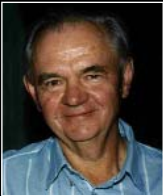
- American Bridge Teachers Association Quarterly

"If you are looking for something different for a change, then your search may be over. I read very little fiction, so the fact that I read the book from cover to cover is praise in itself."

- Julian Pottage

"Jim Priebe writes authentic (read recognizable) characters in a well-told murder intrigue, where the bridge-playing police detective in charge has to realize that even his friends are suspects. This has resulted in a book that any bridge-playing lovers of the crime genre should include in their library. Enjoy!"

- Jon Sveindal, Norway



JIM PRIEBE (Toronto) is a Canadian international player and the author of three previous books, including the first Art Fraser bridge mystery, *Takeout Double*. He is a retired executive who divides his time between bridge, golf and grandchildren.



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