

# Interpretation of Murder

by B.K. Stevens

## Chapter 1

“To be fair,” he said, “I should tell you the last person I hired for this job got killed. Probably, it had nothing to do with the job. Probably. So. You interested?”

You can’t afford to be picky, I’d told myself, not after the way you’ve messed up. If a chance for a paycheck comes along, take it. But I didn’t like that second “probably.”

“You haven’t told me what the job involves,” I said. “I assume you have a Deaf client, and that’s why you need a sign-language interpreter.”

“Nah, the client’s not Deaf.” To me, Walt Sadowski didn’t look much like a private detective. I don’t know what I’d expected, but it hadn’t been this—a marginally heavy, unevenly balding man, fifty or so, big black-rimmed glasses parked on a broad, bland face. He sat forward. “His daughter’s Deaf. She’s nineteen. Nice enough kid, her dad says, but rebellious. Lately, she’s been acting weird. He’s afraid she’s mixed up in things that could hurt her.”

Already, I'd started to feel uncomfortable. "So you'd like me to talk to her?" I said, knowing that probably wasn't it. "To sign with her, that is, and find out what's going on?"

He shook his head. "Her dad says the direct approach won't work. So I've been following her on and off, keeping track of where she goes and who she sees. The problem is, I can't tell what she's talking about, because she doesn't speak. Bugs won't work, tape recorders, anything I'd normally use. Now, she's got this boyfriend, and they spend lots of time together, waving their arms around and stuff. If I knew what they're saying—"

"Just a minute," I cut in. "You want me to spy on her? I can't. It's not ethical. Interpreters keep their clients' communications absolutely confidential."

"She's not the client. Her father is. And it's not like he's trying to repossess her car or something. She's a teenager, for Pete's sake, and he's worried sick about her. How is it unethical to help a father protect his kid?"

I thought back to the ethics class I'd taken two years ago. In every situation we'd discussed, the Deaf person was the client. If the client's a hearing person, does that make a difference? Would it matter that I'd be trying to help her? I lifted my hands. "It doesn't feel right. And is it legal? Don't private detectives have to be licensed?"

"Hell, I'm not asking you to detect anything. I'll handle that. You'd just be—well, providing a service. Like if I was working on a case, and I came across something written in a foreign language, and you translated it. That's all."

Not the world's most convincing analogy. "I don't know. This isn't something interpreters do."

“Look, Miss Ciardi,” he said, and stopped. “Okay if I call you Jane? Jane, I know it’s unusual. That doesn’t make it wrong. And the client says I gotta hire an interpreter right away, and the other people who applied are nowhere near right. So don’t say no yet. Here, I’ll get you more coffee. Plain, right? Two packets of sweetener?”

He ambled off. I wouldn’t have expected Walt Sadowski to pick this place for the interview. It felt too trendy for him. Ginger’s Pantry is a coffeehouse that caters to people in their twenties and thirties, the kind of place with big fruit-studded muffins, fussy little pastries, and lots of syrups and foams and sprinkles to keep the coffee from tasting like coffee. At 3:30 in the afternoon, the long, narrow room wasn’t crowded: A few couples chatting quietly, two teenaged boys poking at iced concoctions and looking bored, a young woman brooding over her laptop, a tall young man sitting at a table near the counter, constantly checking his watch. Well, maybe Walt Sadowski thought this would be a comfortable setting for me, since at twenty-nine I match the place’s demographics neatly. And he might’ve figured I’d rather meet him in Shaker Heights than drive to his office in downtown Cleveland.

He returned to our table and handed me my mug. “I’ll tell you about the case. Maybe you’ll get interested.”

“It’s not that I’m not interested, Mr. Sadowski. But I have serious ethical reservations.”

“Call me Walt. And I know you got reservations.” He stopped stirring his coffee and looked up. “You’re not a nun, are you? You look like a nun.”

I get that a lot, and no wonder—my long auburn hair pulled back from my face and twisted into a coil at the nape of my neck, my simple black dress with its high neckline and long sleeves, absolute minimum makeup, no jewelry, no buttons. “This is how we dress for work. It’s to reduce distractions, to help clients focus on our hands and faces when we sign. I thought you might want me to interpret today. No, I’m not a nun.” Though for the last eight months, I thought, I might as well have been one, considering how flat my social life has been. But he didn’t need to know that.

“Good,” he said. “Not that I have anything against nuns. Some of my best teachers were nuns. But if you were one, that might add to the ethical reservations. Anyway, like I said, the father’s worried. For one thing, he doesn’t like this boyfriend she’s been hanging around with the last few months.”

“What’s wrong with the boyfriend?”

Walt lifted a shoulder. “For one thing, he’s white.”

“Oh. And your client, I take it, isn’t?”

“African American—though when you meet him, don’t say ‘African American,’ or he’ll go on for an hour about how he’s not African, he’s just American, and ‘Black’ makes him feel plenty proud. It’s sort of a thing with him. A word to the wise.”

“I’ll remember that. If the boyfriend’s race is the only problem—”

“It’s not. He’s also too old for her. He’s twenty-seven. And when the girl’s that young, an eight-year difference—it makes a difference. Plus he’s sorta low class. And the client’s high class, a lawyer, really rich, senior partner in a big firm downtown. He doesn’t want his daughter dating some loser with tattoos and no regular job. This

boyfriend works part-time at a cousin's garage, part-time at a pizzeria. Plus he teaches martial arts at a community center. That's how he and the daughter met."

"Martial arts?" My interest picked up. "Which art?"

"Hell, I don't know. Karate, judo, one of those. Anyhow, the daughter found out he knew sign language—he's not Deaf, but he's got a Deaf brother, that's how he learned—so she started taking classes. Now, that right there is weird. She's never cared about sports. Her dad's big on sports, always wanted her to go out for one, but she wouldn't. Then suddenly she starts going to these classes twice a week, and a month later she joins a fitness center."

"That's not so weird." A difference in age, a few tattoos—so far, this didn't sound like an emergency. "A martial arts instructor who signs is rare. I can see why she'd get interested. As for the sudden interest in fitness, maybe she wants to lose weight."

"She doesn't need to. She's already thin." He looked up as the door opened behind me, as a shaft of October cold cut through the spicy warmth of the restaurant. "See? There she is."

Two women walked past us. The younger one had cinnamon-colored skin, her dark hair pinned back on one side, falling beneath her shoulders in tight-clustered curls. The other woman, in her mid twenties, was pale, with short, carefully sculpted blonde hair. Both women were pretty, both on the short side, both flawlessly slim. They joined the man who'd been checking his watch, and the younger woman rubbed her fist against her chest in a circular motion—*sorry*. The man shrugged it off. She pointed to the other

woman, and a flurry of signs followed, including some finger spelling. He shook the blonde woman's hand and walked off to get coffee.

I glared at Walt. "That's not fair. You're trying to draw me into taking the job. You didn't say the client would be here."

"She's not the client," he reminded me. "And I didn't know for sure she'd come. Her and the boyfriend sometimes meet here around this time on Mondays—it's near that fitness center—but sometimes, they don't. I thought if they did, it'd be a little audition for you, like. So? What'd they say?"

They hadn't said much; it seemed prissy to refuse to tell him. "She apologized for being late, and she introduced them. She finger spelled the woman's name. It was fast, and too far away to be sure, but I think it was Jenny Linton. And the man's Sam Ryan?"

"That's right." He seemed delighted by this tiny confirmation of my skills. "Say, you'll be great at this."

"I'm not sure. Even if I decide it's all right ethically, I don't know how good I'd be at interpreting from a distance, from odd angles, when the person isn't looking at me. And I don't see how I could watch them closely enough without being obvious. They'd spot me in minute."

"You'd be surprised what people don't notice. Just don't stare, don't crane your neck. Keep a low profile. And from now on, don't wear an interpreter outfit. Dress like normal people."

The two women didn't communicate much while Sam got the coffee. Evidently, Jenny didn't sign. There were some smiles, some words jotted on a small spiral pad,

some nods as they admired each other's manicures. I wasn't sure of the younger woman's name. Sam had greeted her with what could be a name sign for "Rose" or "Rosa" but could also be a private term of endearment.

When Sam returned to the table, I got to work—not craning my neck, not staring, keeping a low profile. I hadn't decided to take the job, and I hadn't forgotten about the interpreter who'd been killed, but I couldn't help enjoying the challenge.

Unfortunately, Sam sat with his back to me. He did most of the speaking, most of the signing. He seemed to be addressing himself primarily to Jenny, signing so the younger woman could follow. I watched for five minutes, then shook my head.

"It's no good. I can't see his hands well enough. I catch a word from time to time, but I can't put anything together. Is the Deaf woman's name Rose?"

"Rosa. You can see her hands, can't you?"

"Pretty well, but she's not saying much, just *that's right, good, and go ahead—ask her*, things like that. She—wait. She just signed *promise*. She turned to Jenny and signed *promise*, in a very emphatic way. But I can't tell what the conversation is about."

"What about Jenny? What's she saying? You can read her lips, right?"

"No, I can't read lips. Lots of Deaf people can't, either, at least not well. It's harder than most people think. And I've had no reason to learn, since I can hear."

He frowned. "You work with Deaf people. You oughtta know how to read lips."

What did he think, that Deaf people and interpreters communicate by silently mouthing words at each other? Forcing down my irritation, I tried to focus on the mix of

sign and speech at the other table. But the two teenaged boys who'd been fiddling with their drinks kept distracting me. They'd noticed the signing and clearly considered it hilarious: They mimicked it with bizarre, exaggerated gestures, twisting their faces into ugly grimaces. Rosa had her back to them, and Sam was too caught up in the conversation to notice, but I felt ready to walk over and slap their silly faces.

With an effort, I concentrated on Rosa's table again. Sam doesn't look so unsavory, I thought. He was two or three inches over six feet, and obviously built. Even his back looked muscular. The glimpses I'd caught of his face had been enough to let me see the attraction: strong, good-humored features, olive-tinged skin, a sweetly unruly mop of light brown curls. I hadn't spotted any tattoos, so he must have them in reasonably discreet places. True, he wore earrings—large, dark, button-shaped ones. Rosa's father probably didn't like those. Walt Sadowski probably didn't, either.

Sam leaned forward over the table now, his eyes fixed on Jenny Linton's face. Rosa took her cell phone from her purse and held it toward Jenny, showing her something. A text message, photos, a video? Sam kept his signs low and small. I couldn't make out a single word.

"I don't know what Sam just said to Jenny," I said, "but it upset her. See? She's blushing, shaking her head." Rosa crossed her arms across her chest and tapped her shoulders. "Now Rosa's getting upset, too. She just told Sam to take it easy."

He didn't take the advice. Instead, he grabbed the cell phone, bringing it closer to Jenny. She stared at it, then stood abruptly and headed for the door. Sam looked at Rosa,



and she swung her arm out and brought her fingers together in a sign even Walt could have interpreted: *Go*. Sam nodded and took off, following Jenny out of the restaurant.

“That didn’t go so well,” Walt commented. “I wonder what he showed her, what he said to get her so worked up. Jenny Linton, huh? She sure is pretty. Rosa’s father gave me the names of some of her friends, but he never mentioned Jenny Linton. You sure you got the name right?”

“Pretty sure.” I doubted Jenny was a long-time friend. She hadn’t met Rosa’s boyfriend before, and she and Rosa hadn’t developed an efficient way to communicate. But somehow Rosa had persuaded her to come here, apparently so Sam could ask her questions. *Go ahead—ask her*, Rosa had signed. Ask her what?

Walt’s cell phone rang, and he glanced at it, grimacing. “I’d better take it. It’s a client. It’s confidential. I should step outside.”

“I’ll wait.” I glanced back at Rosa, who was bent over her cell phone, texting furiously. At the next table, one boy slapped his friend on the arm and pointed toward her. He said something; his friend laughed and shook his head; the first boy spoke again. Then the second boy stood slowly, looking at Rosa. I looked, too, and saw the purse sitting on the floor behind her, ignored as she focused on her message. Bastard, I thought. Sneaking up on a Deaf girl, snatching her purse—what could be safer? What a great joke to brag about to his disgusting little friends.

He moved quickly now, reaching her table in a few strides, scooping up the purse, heading for the door. Without thinking, I stood up, putting one hand on the table for balance. When he got within range, I lifted my right leg and pivoted, then snapped the

kick out to connect, not gently, with his stomach. He doubled over, the air knocked out of him, with a loud half-gasp, half-curse. People sitting nearby took notice, pointing and exclaiming. Rosa looked over in time to see me grab his wrist and twist it back far enough to make him drop the purse.

“It doesn’t go with your outfit,” I said, and let him go.

He looked at me wildly before running out of the restaurant, his friend seconds behind him.

I picked up the purse and brought it to Rosa. “*I think this is yours,*” I signed.

I don’t know what surprised her most—the fact that she’d been robbed, the fact that she’d gotten her purse back, or the fact that I’d signed to her. For a second, she looked stunned. Then her face broke into a slow, delighted smile, and both her hands flew to her chin before spreading out and down in a wide, emphatic *thank you*.

A man from behind the counter, probably the manager, hurried over, asking if something was wrong. I explained what had happened, signing as I spoke so Rosa could understand. Several customers called out to confirm what I said. Others lifted their fists to signify approval. This would make a perfect story to tell at the dinner table: A petite woman who looked like a nun kicking an oversized teenaged boy, rescuing a Deaf girl’s purse. I saw Walt Sadowski watching us, arms folded across his chest, shaking his head. The probable-manager apologized, assuring me the restaurant was usually safe, offering to call the police but looking relieved when I said not to bother. He turned to Rosa with shrugs and smiles that expressed regret with reasonable eloquence.

“Two free lattes!” he shouted, running to the counter. Customers applauded. Rosa and I looked at each other and laughed, both embarrassed but also, I think, a little thrilled by the sliver of action that set this afternoon apart from others.

I smiled. *“I’m glad I could help,”* I signed, and held out my hand.

She shook it but looked distressed. *“Please, sit down. I want to thank you again.”* She gestured at my clothes. *“You’re an interpreter?”*

*“That’s right. I’m Jane Ciardi.”*

*“Rosa Patterson. Are you a black belt?”*

I shook my head. *“The highest belt I have is red, in tae kwon do. But I’ve taken kickboxing, too, and tai chi.”*

She widened her eyes. *“You must be really good. I’m learning sogu ryu bujutsu.”* She finger spelled it. If there’s a sign for sogu ryu bujutsu, it’s news to me. *“It’s a mixed martial art. My boyfriend teaches the class—he can sign. You should come.”*

I lifted my shoulders. *“Mixed martial arts? Too rough for me.”*

*“No, you’ll love it.”* She grabbed her spiral pad and jotted down an address. *“Tomorrow night at 7:00. It’s fun. Will you come?”*

I accepted the jagged-edged paper and tried, frantically, to think through the implications of what had happened. I’d be no good to Walt as a spy now. Was that the end of the job? Or would he want me to spy at closer range? I didn’t want to deceive Rosa or betray her trust. But what if she really did need help?

I stuffed the paper into my purse. *“Maybe,”* I signed, and gave her a business card. She thanked me again and left. The probable-manager, appearing with two lattes

heavy with whipped cream and chocolate shavings, seemed disappointed that Rosa had gone. I consoled him and carried the lattes to the table where Walt sat waiting.

“Great job at keeping a low profile,” he said, as I’d known he would. “But maybe this is good. That piece of paper—her phone number? She wants to get together?”

“She wants me to come to the martial arts class Sam teaches.”

“Good,” he said. “You saved her purse, she’s grateful, you’ve got a common interest. That’s all good. That’s better than trying to decipher signs long-distance and hoping she doesn’t notice. It’ll be an undercover deal, like. You get close to her, she confides in you about what she’s up to, you report to me, I—”

“I’m not sure I can do that. Ethically, it’s still problematic. And I need to know more about the other person you hired. He was an interpreter, too?”

Walt’s shoulders moved up and down in a hedging, hesitant motion. “Not officially. He wasn’t certified, like you. He was a senior at Cleveland State. Journalism, I think. But he knew sign language. He took two semesters, to get out of taking French or Latin or whatever. When I interviewed him, he really knew what he was talking about.”

And how could you possibly evaluate his skills, I thought; how could you possibly tell whether he knew what he was talking about? “Then he got killed. That’s the part I want to know about. How did that happen?”

Walt grimaced, picked up a spoon, and skimmed a layer of cream from a latte. “It happened a couple weeks after I hired him. He was following Rosa on his own, and he said he was making progress. He never had much to report, though. Then, last week, he got killed. Too bad. Nice kid. The cops decided it was a burglary gone bad.”

A burglary gone bad. I'd come to hate that phrase. The court case that pretty much ruined my interpreting career had eventually been shrugged off as a burglary gone bad. "What happened?"

Walt grimaced again. "It was a Saturday night. The cops say it looks like he'd been out, and someone was burglarizing his apartment. Then Gary came home and surprised the burglar. And the guy basically beat him to death."

Dear God. "Was Gary rich? Did he have a lot of things worth stealing?"

"Some things." Walt had worked his way down to the actual latte. He took a skeptical sip and set down his mug. "The burglar took his laptop, his roommate's laptop, some cash, like that. And he made a mess, ripped things apart. So the cops had good reasons for saying it was burglary. And you got no reason to worry."

I probably didn't. A drug addict desperate for a fix might break into a student's apartment, might get panicky enough to kill if the student walked in. I shouldn't let that scare me away from a paycheck. I took the job.

I felt pretty good about the decision as I drove to Little Italy, waitressed for five hours, and drove back to Richmond Heights through the slow, sleet-like rain, a double order of chicken marsala in a Styrofoam container seat-belted into the passenger seat. I continued to feel pretty good as my roommate and I split the chicken and watched Conan O'Brien, as I signed for her when the closed captions didn't do justice to a joke. Abby thought the job sounded exciting. *Another freelance client*, she signed. So what if the stupid agencies wouldn't place me? I could be my own agency. I could set my rates lower

than theirs and drive them out of business. She'd design a website for me, and business cards and letterhead. She already had some great ideas.

That got me excited, too. My own business, I thought. I'll be an entrepreneur. I'll show those damn agencies; I'll damn well make them damn sorry. I pictured the agency directors cursing themselves, and felt more excited than ever.

I didn't stop feeling excited until I got up the next morning and turned on the local news; I didn't stop feeling excited until I finished making coffee and looked up to pay closer attention to the report about the dental hygienist who had drowned last night, until I saw the picture of the slim, pretty young woman with short, carefully sculpted blonde hair. She'd been found in the Cuyahoga River, the report said, downstream from the entertainment area called The Flats. I didn't have to wait for the closed captions to confirm the victim's name. It was the woman who came to Ginger's Pantry with Rosa yesterday, the woman who rushed off when Sam asked her a question she didn't want to answer and showed her something she didn't want to see. Jennifer Linton.