

Gaslit



Gaslight 1. the light produced by burning illuminating gas 2. to terrify and confuse someone to the extent that the victim questions his or her own sanity.

The Logger sat before the Triple B platter (burger, brat and bacon as defined on the menu or burning, braying and belching as manifested in the lavatory). Months of murders had led us to the sting at George's Gaslight Inn. If my instincts were as hot as the house Cajun burger, tonight we would solve the mystery of the Fox Valley Butcher.

I sat a few tables away in an adjoining dining room and ordered my favorite Turkey Divan on French bread covered in broccoli cheese sauce. Everywhere The Logger ate, bodies dropped. His dining routine had been studied and used against him. His ex-girlfriend, a blond waitress named Betty, and my client, a rakish hound called Raymond Brawn, had been setting him up to take the fall for their bloody rampage. The motive was greed. Brawn had invested in a few eateries that escaped the Butcher's wrath, and Betty was along for the diamonds, limos, and blue plate specials.

I had been hired as a diversion. They wanted to shut down half the regional restaurants, frame The Logger, sit before a dish of deception, and devour the Fox Valley. It was time to serve up justice at the same temperature as revenge and gazpacho: cold.

The Logger headed towards the men's room, giving me a slight nod as he passed. I smiled a school girl's smile and let my hair fall forward over hot cheeks. It was strange to feel young and stupid again. When this case was over, I planned on shattering my spyglass and retiring to a shack on the outskirts of Oshkosh. I had taken a liking to The Logger and his wood.

George's Gaslight Inn looked like an aging whore: painted up, bolstered by a rough regal sense of pride and prettier when the lights were dim. The décor was a 1979 interpretation of pre-Raphaelite design standards. Burgundy pleather chairs wrestled with Rosetti-inspired windows. Faux stone medieval wainscoting yielded to Spanish wrought iron gates. Low lit stained glass mimicked a church or bordello.

“Can I finish you off with some potato peels or fried cauliflower?” asked a pert friendly server.

“How’s the French Dip?” I inquired, pointing to a selection of thinly sliced prime rib au jus.

My waitress widened her eyes and pulled her lips over her teeth transforming her pretty face into a skull head of terror. She screamed from a dark chthonian pit in her gut that echoed through the cavernous bar and rattled the country cupboards.

“That bad huh? Then I’ll take the cheese curds.”

A sous chef staggered into the dining room bearing George’s special, a sandwich called the White House with turkey and Canadian bacon on toast. His head was neatly cleaved by an axe. He kept the platter balanced with one hand while reaching out to steady himself against the classic Bun-O-Matic coffee station. Decaf spilled. No loss. Chef and dark roast crashed onto the carpet. A crime.

I pulled the revolver from my garter and fired a warning shot. My former nemesis, Detective Landrace, hustled his hulking form from behind the salad bar and waddled onto the scene. Undercover officers stationed around the restaurant leapt into action. One grabbed Betty by her platinum perm and another apprehended Raymond Brawn running towards the parking lot in dark glasses and a fake beard.

Old Landrace busted the butt of his pistol against Brawn’s jaw. It was the first time I didn’t mind a little police brutality. Betty wailed as she was shoved in a squad car and Brawn struggled against the cuffs, pleading his case.

“It’s not how it looks. We were following The Logger. He’s the guilty one! He killed those people!”

“Nice try,” Landrace deadpanned, adjusting his belt. He was suffering the Swiss, pepper, and mozzarella side effects of his grilled cheese supreme. Yellow cordoning tape was tied around old oak trees like a Tony Orlando death dirge.

The Logger sidled up to me, slipping his strong arms around my waist and gently kissing my neck, “Can we get out of here?”

I handed my gun to the detective, “I won’t be needing this anymore. I’m headed for the simple life of pig farming and wood chopping.”

Landrace shook his head and tipped his fedora, “You’re OK, kid.”

The Logger led me into the frostbitten Oshkosh fall. My ’52 Buick turned over twice before catching its breath and roaring outside the city limits. For the first time in a long

while, I uncocked the hammer of my heart, unloaded misery's buckshot, and faced the world unarmed.

A ramshackle barn rose up red in the dark. The swine shifted their weight in the moonlight. I had wrapped a selection of leftovers from George's Gaslight Inn to toss in the hog wallow. The trough brimmed with perfectly broiled haddock, veal pattie melt, and rich potato salad. One little piggy ate fishwich, one little piggy had filet, and one little piggy trotted across the pen gnawing a human hand.

Stacked amidst cords of wood were loose limbs. Legs, feet, and arms bled onto birch, elm and evergreen logs.

The Logger tilted his head and offered a half grin, "Betty shouldn't have left me for that slick bastard. I don't like when a woman leaves me."

The cold air was still, nearly silent but for the sound of content piglets chewing table scraps and physical evidence. My stomach rumbled loudly.

Despite everything I had eaten, all the food I had shoveled down my gullet throughout the investigation, I felt ravenous. There were many different ways to make things right. I could run, call the police, or fight this man to the death. I could set Raymond and Betty free and straighten out the record. The mayor might even give me the key to the city.

"Come inside. I'll make you some hotcakes," he said.

The Logger ran his finger along a sap trail dripping down the trunk of a maple tree and held the sweet syrup to my lips. He had gaslighted me but the craziness was familiar. It was a rapid-fire slideshow of every wrong turn that had led me to this case, to this abandoned lot of land, to this man. It was a warm buttered short stack sweetened by something that ran thick in a dark forest. I plunged a pitchfork into pancakes. I felt an insatiable hunger.