

Mystery Meat 9: Jimmie's des Morts



The name of the town is French for “hill of the dead.” It was fitting I should arrive in Butte des Morts as a hearse pulled out of Jimmie’s carrying the corpse of a waitress who had assembled her last onion ring haystack.

The Fox Valley Butcher was expanding his modus operandi by adding a personal touch to his crimes. The server was shot with a vintage .69 caliber Harper’s Ferry Rifle, a muzzleloader that blasted brutal mini balls. The precise bullets spun when fired. Considering the venue, my suspect displayed a sense of humor.

Jimmie’s, the 1929 restaurant founded by James Kontos, is formally known as The White House Inn. The Civil War themed bar is all sabers and confederate flags. In the front window, there is a diorama of the joint flanked by cobbler’s shoe forms and moonshine jugs.

The collection is courtesy of the LaFever family. Corporal Tunis LaFever’s musket, military papers, and a watch embellished by a braid of his mother’s hair are enclosed in glass. Civil war documents hang on punched tin walls. Rusty canteens and old bullets add an ominous rustic charm. The eyes of Abraham Lincoln follow you through the dark wood dining room.

I requested a seat in their enclosed porch overlooking a garden quaint with gazebo and wind chimes. The table was brightly lit by bay windows and decorated with western scenes, cases of cobalt blue glass, and Hummel figurines. It seemed an unlikely spot for murder. I tried to imagine blowing the brains out of an innocent person in a room filled with cherubic statues of Bavarian children playing accordions in lederhosen.

One of the remaining waitresses brought me a cup of the house specialty, a subtle Greek lemon soup with bits of rice and celery floating in chicken broth. It was an enticing prelude to escargot soaked in garlic butter.

At the next table, my nemesis, Officer Landrace, was romancing a plate of stuffed haddock gorged with crabmeat and covered in Hollandaise sauce. To say he was a large fellow was to infer that Paul Bunyan was big boned. He sweat Crisco and spat gravy. His pants needed an asteroid belt just to stay up and when he finally got his BVDs around his waist they spelled out "boulevard." This was the kind of fellow who required two trips to haul ass.

The man looked hastily composed of swine scraps. Back fat crept over his collar like a bag of hotdogs, his cheeks were a couple of chops, and the dewlap under his chin looked like he was wearing a pork roast for a neck brace. He sunk one of Jimmie's spicy jalapeno poppers into his mouth and I worried his whole face might blow.

Landrace was the type of lawman who secured crime scenes an hour after the perp was safely in the next county and fifteen minutes after reporters had rummaged through the evidence. Still, he had been making it to the murders at local restaurants right before the places closed so he would have time to order his favorite meal: seconds.

Thinking I didn't see him, he slipped his police i.d. card onto my table and winked. I picked it up and examined the photograph.

"Must have been an aerial shot," I said.

"Always wise-crackin'," he mumbled through a maw of Sicilian tenderloin.

My broiled scallops were just right and light enough that I had room for an order of Sand Dabs, tempura battered baby sole seared in burnt butter. It was getting to be a habit. I showed up to investigate the aftermath of a Fox Valley Butcher slaughter and ended up dining on pan fried walleye pike or chicken Wellington without even needing a Tums to settle my stomach. Landrace and I had one thing in common, we had seen too much death to let it spoil our dinner.

The officer snapped his fingers at the waitress and held up a half-finished plate of Jimmie's garden pasta, a tasty tossed entrée of Kalamata olives, vegetables, and sun dried tomatoes.

"Ya think I could get a bigger portion over here?" he asked.

I leaned over, "Better serve it up in a satellite dish."

I ordered some mussels and steamed clams lightly seasoned. When I eat shellfish, I like to taste a little bit of the sea. The White House Inn has a nice light touch with their food and tends to let the ingredients do the work rather than putting pressure on the spice rack.

“Listen Landrace, I know your boys have been tailing The Logger as a suspect in the case. I wonder if he started up an antique gun collection recently. My kid secretary has been staking out his place, but I don’t have the department’s manpower. How about a few tips?”

“You know me,” he said partially laughing, partially choking on his Cajun potato peels, “I don’t even tip the bartender.”

The waitress arrived with a rich slice of New York cheesecake thoroughly whipped and resting on graham cracker crumbs. I cut the sweetness with a well-mixed Grey Goose dirty martini. A P.I. can never trust a lawman. I was into catching killers while they were big on pushing papers, stamping documents, and embossing envelopes. Still, methods both gumshoe and bureaucratic weren’t bringing The Butcher to justice.

Landrace finished his meal and rounded up his crew. True to form, he left enough change on the table for the waitress to make a pay call from a 1950s phone booth. He dipped his finger in my cheesecake and licked it.

“Sometimes you show up places you don’t belong,” he said.

I pushed away from the table, “Sometimes you show up places you don’t fit. Half the restaurants in town have signs reading ‘Maximum Occupancy: 300 or Officer Landrace.’”

Outside, the wind off Lake Butte des Morts cut through my coat and hit bone. I thought of how many diners were still open. Somewhere nice and warm, where hot coffee was being poured and steam swirled above the soup bowl, a waitress, dishwasher, host, or cook was soon to be stacked atop the hill of the dead.