

# The Mystery of the Scorched Spouse

By Sam Hill

The flames flicked out from the second story window tasting the night, then withdrew quickly, like a snake's tongue. Carson leaned back against his unmarked Taurus and watched the firemen's desperate efforts. A fire captain wearing a fluorescent green color splashed across the street toward him.

"Where's the investigating officer?" the fireman asked.

"That's me," Carson answered.

The fireman shook his head, "Good god, are they recruiting straight from middle school these days?"

Carson was used to remarks like this, and ignored him. "Can you save it?"

The fireman stared back, openly skeptical. "We never save the building. Not our job. We're supposed to keep it from spreading and burning down half the city like Chicago or London." He turned and motioned up to the fire. "Anyway, couple that lives in that apartment collects records and books and publishes a magazine. Place like that is a bonfire waiting to happen, only in this case, somebody got tired of waiting."

"Arson?" Carson asked.

"No doubt," the captain replied. "Fire started in a back bedroom, center of the room. When everything cools down, we'll find traces of an accelerant. And you'll find the call was made from that payphone right over there." He pointed to a graffiti-smearred half booth standing on a far corner.

"How do you know?" Carson asked, regretting it instantly. He could anticipate the man's answer.

The fireman did not disappoint. "Because I been doing this longer than you've been alive, that's why." He looked back at the fire. "I got to get back to it. Building next door is a hundred year old machine shop. Places like that is full of chemicals and stuff. If it catches, we're liable to have a full-on hazmat." He turned to walk away.

Carson called after him. "Anybody in there?"

Without turning, the fireman yelled over his shoulder, "Woman got out. I'll send her over." Carson leaned on the car, drawing his jacket tight to fend off the cool autumn air, and watched the firefighters direct four-inch thick cannonades of water toward the smoking hulk. True to his word, five minutes later, a fireman with a broad, sharply-lined

swipe of soot across the lower half of his face—it make him look like a bandit in a cheap 30's western-- led a small woman wrapped in a blanket across the wet pavement. At first, Carson thought she held a child, then when she got closer, he saw it was a cat.

“You OK?” he asked.

“Hold this,” she said, and thrust the cat at him. Surprised, he took it awkwardly. The woman reached in her jacket pocket and pulled out a pack of Marlboro's, and fished a lighter out of her jeans. The lighter flared, and light flashed off the necklace around her neck. In the light, he saw that she was older than he'd first thought, fooled by her trim build and a gap between her front teeth. She was the type that forty years from now would be called ‘cute’ by the orderlies in the nursing home. And she probably hated it, just like he hated being reminded that he was a twenty six year old detective in a profession that worshipped gray hair.

“Detective Rob Carson,” he said. “Milwaukee PD.”

She exhaled. “Ruth Jordan.”

“Want to tell me what happened?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Hell if I know. I was asleep on the couch, when all of a sudden there was smoke everywhere. I got up, grabbed the cat and stumbled downstairs. By the time I got the front door open, the first engine turned the corner. Somebody must have called it in.”

Carson wanted to write this down, but his arms were full of cat. He felt the cat begin to purr. “Anyone else live up there?” he asked.

“It's our apartment and office. My husband and I run our magazine out of there. Crimespree.” She drew on her cigarette. “He's out of town. So it's just me and the cat.”

Carson's ears pricked up. “Where is he?” he tried to keep the excitement out of his voice. From the way the woman looked back at him, he wasn't sure he'd succeeded.

“A convention in Madison for mystery fans, called Bouchercon,” she answered. She'd finished her cigarette and prepared to light another one. She made no move to retrieve the cat.

“Have you called him yet?” Carson asked.

“With what?” the woman extended her hands, empty except for the freshly lit cigarette.

Carson felt himself blush, and hoped the darkness hid it. He shifted the cat to one arm, and held it like a baby. “Why don't we take a ride over to Madison? You'll need a place to stay, and we can break the news to him together.”

The woman smiled cynically. "You want to see his face when you tell him."

"What makes you say that?" Carson replied awkwardly.

"Because you're thinking this might be an attempted murder, not just an accidental fire." She looked at his face and laughed. "Hey, I edit a mystery magazine. I probably know more about police procedure than you...." She paused, then continued weakly. "Than half the cops on the force."

Carson looked down at the cat. The woman spoke again. "Don't worry about him. There was a cage in the hall and I kicked it out as I came down. We can dry it out and take him."

They rode to Madison in mostly silence. The cat in the cage on the backseat complained mildly from time to time, but generally seemed to be happier here than where they'd come from. Carson tried several times to engage the woman in conversation, but every time she answered the question fully and politely, then stopped. At one point, she cracked the window and lit another cigarette. Carson explained that she couldn't smoke in a city car. She simply stared back at him for a moment, turned to look out the window, and finished her cigarette. She rolled up the window when she was done, still not looking toward him. In the thin light from the dashboard, Carson thought he saw a wet smear down her cheek.

At the hotel, Carson pulled into a spot marked "Registration," dug around in the center console and pulled out a ragged ID placard and tossed it on the dash. Together they walked into the lobby, Carson carrying the cat in the carrier. Ruth turned to him. "I'm going up to the desk and find out what room we have, and I am going to take a shower. I stink of smoke. Want to hand me the cat?"

Cigarette smoke, thought Carson. I'll have to get this sports jacket cleaned.

The woman looked down at her watch and spoke. "The book room is closed, so you'll find Jon in the bar. He's about five nine or so, a little heavy, bald, glasses, gray beard and moustache. If you don't see him, ask anyone. This is a tight community."

"Hey, wait a minute," Carson said to her retreating back, "I want you to come with me."

"I'll be down in ten minutes, as soon as I shower," she said as she neared the front desk. Carson fought irritation. Tonight was his night to talk to people's backs. He turned and walked through the lobby.

The bar was jammed. Eyes checked him out as he entered, and quickly dismissed him. Carson immediately spotted Jordan sitting at a table across the room. He held a coffee cup and a cigarette. The three men with him all drank from beer bottles. The detective maneuvered across the room, bent over and said, "Jon Jordan?"

The man smiled and nodded. He transferred the coffee cup to the hand with the cigarette, and thrust out his newly unoccupied hand. "Have we met? Are you a new author?"

"Detective Rob Carson, Milwaukee PD. Is there somewhere we can talk privately?"

The color drained from Jordan's face. "What is it? Is Ruth OK?"

"Ruth is fine, but we need to talk privately," Carson said.

"We can talk right here," Jordan said. "These are my friends. Sit down." He motioned around the table. "Richard Katz." He pointed to a tall, thin dark man who bore a passing resemblance to Howard Stern. "Lee English, the writer." English was an even thinner man with a handsome sculptured face and red, sandy hair. "And Dave." A short, round man with a shiny pate, an outrageous waxed moustache, and an infectious grin raised a glass.

Carson hesitated, deciding whether to insist, and instead sat down. "Mr. Jordan, I have some bad news. There was a fire, and your apartment has been completely destroyed. The only things we got out were your wife and your cat." Whatever color had remained in his face drained completely out, and Jordan's skin became so pale as to appear translucent. Carson crossed him off his list of suspects. Pacino could not have delivered this performance.

"Everything?" whispered Jordan. "Are you sure? I just bought a second edition Dash Hammett from Mystery Mike and I'd built a special case for it in the bedroom. Ray Chandler once owned it."

"Everything," confirmed Carson. "Your wife will be down in a moment. She can fill you in. She's taking a shower." Jordan's head sagged.

"I'm afraid I have to ask you some questions, Mr. Jordan," Carson continued, pulling out a small steno notebook and a pen. "Is there anyone you can think of who might want to burn you out? Personally? Do you have any enemies?"

Jordan shook his head dumbly.

"Business? What about competitors to your magazine?"

Jordan spoke shakily. "No, no one. And anyway, every one of them is in this room and has been all night." He pointed to the bar. "That's Jim Huang, probably our most direct competitor, and he was at the table beside me in the book room all day. Nobody in the mystery world is going to burn someone's house down over a few magazine subscribers. There's just not enough money in it."

Carson paused and thought. "What about authors? Is there anyone you've rejected that might hold a grudge?"

The thin red-haired man spoke with an English accent, "They've probably turned me down more anyone. True, Jon?" He looked to Jordan, who nodded. "Am I a suspect then detective?"

Carson asked, "Where were you today?"

"Here, all day, in panels and things. But I couldn't possibly produce an alibi for every single moment. Am I a person of interest, maybe?" he said hopefully.

"Do you think an author might be behind this, Mr. English?" Carson asked.

The Englishman hesitated, then spoke seriously, "I doubt it, to be honest, detective. There are so few print outlets that I can't imagine any of us would eliminate one, however stinging the rejection. And anyway, writers are incurable dreamers. We would always believe that the next article would be the one."

Carson nodded, "That makes sense."

The writer spoke again, "I say detective, do you have a card? My publicist might want to have a word with you. You know, keep this 'person of interest' thing from getting out of hand." Katz rolled his eyes.

Carson felt, rather than heard, a presence over his shoulder and turned to see Ruth Jordan. Jon leaped up, stepped around the table and reached out to her. They embraced. "Are you OK?" he asked. "What happened?"

Before she could answer, Carson stood. "She's not OK. She's under arrest for arson." He peeled her hands from around Jon and snapped on a pair of cuffs. He did it so quickly and smoothly that she was bound before she could react. Carson reached out a hand and gently shoved Jon back down in a seat.

"There must be some mistake," Jon said.

"No mistake," Carson said. "She said she was asleep on the couch, but she was fully dressed and wearing her jewelry. Women always take off their jewelry when they lay down. She not only saved the cat, but managed to leave with a cage as well. And finally, she fought her way out of a smoky apartment but smelled of cigarette smoke, not the smoke from the fire. One of the firemen who was actually fighting the blaze was covered in soot, but she was unmarked."

Ruth laughed bitterly. "You're a heck of a lot smarter than you look, Bambi."

Jon stared at her, "But Ruth, why?"

“Why?” she snarled. “Why? How about because you moved our bed out of our bedroom just so you could build a mahogany case to hold that Hammett you got from Bursaw. I have to sleep on the couch because I don’t have a bed anymore.” She paused, choked, then pleaded, “I am more important than an old book, honey.”

“You burned the Hammett?” Jon asked.

“I used the pages to start the fire,” she spat.

Before Carson could react, Katz leaped across the table, scattering beer bottles and coffee with his large feet. “You monster!” he screamed. He wrapped his huge hands around her neck and forced her to the floor, straddling her. Ruth’s face turned a shade of magenta.

“Let her go,” Carson yelled. He tackled Katz and wrestled him to the floor. A few minutes later he had Katz face down and a pair of plastic cuffs on him. “Don’t move, or I swear to God, I’ll make it attempted murder and resisting, not just assault one,” Carson gasped. Behind him he heard a rasp. He stood and turned to find Jon Jordan now straddling Ruth, his hands around her neck. Carson reached into his belt and pulled out a nine millimeter Glock. He placed it against Jordan’s head. “I’m tired and I’m out of cuffs. Let her go,” he panted. All noise had stopped in the bar and the patrons had formed a ring around the melee. At the sight of the gun, the entire crowd took an involuntary step back.

With obvious reluctance, Jon let go and raised his hands. Ruth choked and spluttered. “Get off her, and lay down on the floor, face down and hands behind your back. Somebody call the police and tell them to bring an ambulance. Also tell them there’s an armed officer on the scene.”

Carson turned and faced English and Dave. “Don’t move or I’ll lock you two up, too.”

The Englishman raised his hand. “Yes,” Carson said.

“Since I don’t have an alibi, perhaps you should take me in just to be on the safe side,” the writer said. “And could I get that card for my publicist?”