Love or Money
by Ed McBain

Ed McBain is one of the most enduring and illustrious names in crime fiction. His bestselling previous titles include Ice, Candyland, Money Money Money, Fat Ollie’s Book and The Frumious Bandersnatch. Ed has also written a number of screenplays, most notably Alfred Hitchcock’s The Birds. In 1998, he was the first non-British author to be awarded the Crime Writers’ Association/Cartier Diamond Dagger Award. He also holds the Mystery Writers of America’s coveted Grand Master Award and the Sherlock Award for Best International Detective. Ed McBain has been writing successful crime fiction for over 50 years and lives in the United States.

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LOVE OR MONEY: ED MCBAIN

THE RESTAURANT WAS FREQUENTED by the city’s literati, a place neither Carella nor Meyer could afford on their annual salaries as Detectives/Second Grade. They were here only because the Medical Examiner had isolated the cause of Helen McReady’s death as arsenic poisoning, and they wanted to know if there was any rat poison on the premises.

“We don’t have rats in this restaurant,” Martha Bailey told them. “Except for the-two legged variety.”

The food here was reputed to be atrocious, but you’d never have guessed that from the crowds the place attracted or the girth of its eponymous owner, who reportedly ate her own fare and who had to weigh at least as much as a baby elephant. Some forty years old and wearing what the hippies used to call a granny gown, patterned in paisley, Martha stood in stout blonde defiance, her hands on her hips, challenging the detectives to find either rats or rat poisons in her pristine kitchen.

“Who do you mean by two-legged rats?” Meyer asked. Bald and burly with china-blue eyes and the patience of a safe-cracker, Meyer stood beside Carella in the midst of all these glistening pots and pans and spoons and ladles and mixing bowls. Both men were wearing light-weight, light-colored suits in defence against the torrid August weather. Carella had the casual bearing of an athlete. Head slightly cocked, brown eyes slanting a bit downward to give him a somewhat oriental appearance, he seemed intensely interested in just how Martha Bailey would answer his partner’s question about two-legged rats.

“Writers,” she said.

“I thought writers liked this place,” Carella said.

“Doesn’t mean I like writers,” Martha said.

Talk about biting the hand, Carella thought.

“Did Helen McReady come here often?” he asked.

“Only with Harold.”

“Harold?”

“Ames. Her editor at the paper. I tried to discourage it but he’s a regular. Writers get nervous when a critic’s on the premises.”

“So how come she chose this place for her birthday party?”

“She didn’t,” Martha said. “Harold made the booking. He comes here a lot. Sometimes alone with her. They were… ah, very close, shall we say.”
An arched eyebrow.

“Meaning?” Carella said.
“Listen, speak no ill of the dead, am I right? The lady was happily married. Enough said.”

Meyer and Carella exchanged a glance.

“Made the booking for what time?” Meyer asked.

“Eight.”

“What time did they leave?”

“Must have been ten, ten thirty. And by the way she was perfectly fine when they left.”

“Where were they sitting?”

“Harold’s usual table. Come, I’ll show you,” she said and led them out of her spotless kitchen.

Martha had decorated the dining room the way she thought an old colonial tavern might have looked. Or should have looked. Heavy wooden beams from which long stemmed, white clay pipes were hanging. Pewter tankards lined up on shelves behind the bar. High-backed wooden booths with cushion seats. Candles in sconces on all the walls. Lanterns hanging all over the place. Carella expected George Washington to ride in on a white horse.

“This is where Harold likes to sit,” she said, and showed them one of the larger round tables. “I save it for him whenever he books.”

“So who was at this party?” Carella asked.

“Well, Harold and Mrs McReady, of course, and her husband, go figure.” Another arching of the eyebrow. “And her little actress friend. Just the four of them. Cosy”

“Which little actress friend would that be?” Meyer asked.

“Well, actress,” Martha said, and pulled a face. “She’s a chorus girl actually. Playing in a little musical up the street. All dimples and long legs.”

“What’s her name? Would you know?”


“Who do you think poisoned Mrs McReady?” Carella asked.

“Nobody got poisoned in my restaurant,” Martha said flatly.

“At first I thought it was just something she’d eaten,” George McReady said. “I was feeling fine, but I’d ordered a steak, and she had the trout. So I thought maybe the fish was tainted. Unless...”
They were sitting just outside the funeral home’s viewing room, where his wife’s corpse was displayed in an open coffin. McReady seemed truly grief-stricken. A thin, almost gaunt man in his early sixties, they supposed, he sat twisting his gnarled hands, unable to stop the tears that streamed down his face.

“Chills aren’t a symptom are they?” he asked. “She was feeling a little chilly earlier. In the restaurant. But that must have been the air-conditioning don’t you think? She was sitting right under one of the vents, even I felt a bit chilly and I was sitting on the other side of the table. Cyndie offered her a shawl. She was still chilly, but I don’t think that was the poison. I don’t think chills are a symptom are they?”

“When did you suspect she might have been poisoned, Mr McReady?”

“Well, when she began vomiting. That was when I became truly alarmed. What she brought up had the consistency of rice water, so I knew at once that something…”

“When was this, Mr McReady?”

“Shortly after we got home. Well, we were already in bed. Midnight? Around then? She’d been complaining of a burning pain in her stomach and a sore throat. But then she began vomiting and her skin got clammy, so I rushed her to the hospital. By then her face was turning bl…”

He broke into fresh sobs and buried his own face in his hands.

“Were all four of you drinking the same thing?” Carella asked.

“What?”

“The wine. The beer. Whatever.”

“Oh. I don’t know what the others were drinking. Helen had a martini before dinner and white wine with the fish. Yes, that’s right, I remember now. Harold ordered a bottle of Merlot for himself and me… we were both eating steak… and a Chardonnay for Helen and Cyndie. She was eating veal, I think. Cyndie.”

“Who poured the wine?” Meyer asked.

“The waiter, I think. Why?”

Anger suddenly blazed in his eyes like an open fire in the midst of quenching sobs.

“Never mind the waiter,” he said. “It wasn’t any damn waiter who poisoned her.”

They knew when to shut up and listen.

“Both of them had motives,” he said bitterly. “They were both furious with Helen.”

“Why was that, Mr McReady?”
“Simple jealousy! I knew about Harold all along, of course, it had been going on between them for a long time. You make adjustments. A marriage is making adjustments, isn’t it? But this was something new. Another woman? A cheap little lesbian whore? Helen never seemed… well… that way.”

They kept listening.

“When I learnt that Harold had invited Cyndie to the party, I begged him to phone her again, tell her it was called off, tell her anything. Didn’t he know they were lovers?”

McReady shook his head.

His tears had stopped.

His hands were tightly clenched.

They waited for something more.

Patience, Meyer was thinking.

“The chills couldn’t have been a symptom.” McReady said, as if trying to convince himself, nodding, remembering. “Because once she moved from under that vent, she was alright again. Changed seats, and was cheerful, laughing, drinking. Everything still boy-girl-boy-girl, well, sure,” he said, “They were both there to celebrate her birthday, right? Both her little darlings,” he said bitterly, and began sobbing again.

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They found Cyndie Carr in a second-floor exercise room just off the Stem, close to the theatre district and her apartment. She did not look like she needed any fitness routines. Some five-feet nine inches tall, wearing black tights and a sweat-stained black tank top that scooped low over somewhat exuberant breasts, she came off a treadmill with her hand extended, long blonde hair stringy and damp, dimpled smile on her face, blue eyes flashing.

“Hi,” she said, “Whussup?”

Just as if someone hadn’t been killed the night before.

They always wondered about the ones who pretended murder was merely par for the course. In their experience, these were the ones who were either plain stupid or were hiding something. Cyndie Carr didn’t appear to be stupid, but neither could they imagine what she might be hiding. Unless she was the one who’d poisoned Helen McReady.

“Glad you could make time for us,” Carella said.

“Just barely,” Cyndie said, sighing, straddling one of the press benches. “I’ve got to be back at rehearsal by two,” she said, and glanced up at the clock on the gymnasium wall. Everywhere around them, good-looking men and women were prancing and lifting and flexing and grimacing. Made Meyer want to go on a diet. Carella too.
“So tell us about last night,” he said.

“You know… do I need a lawyer here or anything?” Cyndie asked.

“Why would you think that, Miss Carr?”

“Hey,” she said.

They waited.

“Helen was poisoned, duh?” she said, and twirled a forefinger in her dimpled cheek.

“These are just routine questions,” they assured her.

“I’ll bet,” she said.

“How’d you happen to get invited to this party?” Carella asked.

“Helen invited me. Well, actually it was Harold who called me. It was his party, after all. But Helen’s the one who suggested it.” She hesitated. “We’re friends,” she said. “Were.”

“How long had you known her?”

“She came back after a show I was doing a few months ago. Little musical based on Jane Austen’s Sense and Sensibility. Folded in a week, but Helen liked it. Well, love or money, you know how she felt about that. So we started talking…”

“Where was this, Miss Carr?” Carella asked.

“I just told you. Backstage. My dressing…”

“Oh. When you said she came back, I thought you meant she returned…”

“No, I meant backstage. To tell me how much she’d enjoyed the show. And we got to talking, and one thing led to another, and we met for lunch the next day, and became friends. Which is why I was at the party. Because Helen asked Harold to invite me. But, you know…”

They waited.

“Never mind,” she said.

“No, what, Miss Carr?”

“I think if we’re gonna talk some more here, I’d better call a lawyer. Because, I have to tell you, this doesn’t sound at all routine, guys, and I sure as hell don’t want to be accused of murdering my best friend in the entire world. Got it?” she said, her face beginning to crumble.

“Got it,” Carella said. “Thanks for your time.”

“Sure,” she said, and turned away to hide the sudden tears in her eyes.
“There are only two things worth writing about,” Harold Ames was telling them. “Love or money.”

He was in his early fifties, they guessed, lean and green-eyed, with brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard, sitting in slatted sunshine behind a vast desk in his air-conditioned corner-window office. It was now two in the afternoon, and they were here at the newspaper not to listen to literary suppositions, but to learn about that dinner party last night.

“Do you know who said that? Ames asked.

“No, who said it?”

“Helen herself. Well, Jane Austen said it long before Helen did, but she was fond of repeating it. Those words were her credo, in fact and many writers disliked her for it.”

“Anyone in particular?” Meyer asked. “These writers who disliked her?”

“Thousands,” Ames said. “You can’t be the book reviewer for the most influential newspaper in the country, and not expect to make enemies.”

Enemies, Carella thought.

A much stronger word than ‘disliked’.

“Tell us about the party last night,” he said.

“Are we all suspects here?” Ames asked. He seemed amused by the thought.

“No, my partner and I aren’t,” Carella said.

“I meant the three of us.”

“Are any of you writers?”

“Oh, I see,” Ames said.

They waited to see what he had seen.

“You think… because I said writers disliked her, that perhaps a writer poisoned her. Is that it?”

They said nothing.

“There were hundreds of writers in Martha Bailey’s last night,” Ames said.

Narrows the field a bit, Carella thought.

“Were any of them at your table?” he asked.
“Writers were stopping at the table all night long, sucking up to Helen.”

“How do you mean?” Meyer asked.

“Glad-handling her, all smiles, hello, Helen, how have you been? Paying their respects, you know. Looking for that good review on the next book.”

“You’re saying…”

“I’m saying there were wine glasses sitting right there in the open. I don’t know what the lethal dose of arsenic is…”

“Three grains,” Carella said.

“Which is about what? A teaspoon?”

“Much less than that. A pinch, actually. However much she ingested it was enough to kill her in four hours.”

“What I’m saying is any one of those ass-kissers could have leaned over the table and dropped it in her glass.”

And if pigs had wings, they would fly, Carella thought.

“What was your relationship with Helen McReady?” he asked flat out.

“I’m editor of the book page. That was our relationship. Editor to reviewer.”

“That why you dined alone together so often?”

“I didn’t realize we dined alone together all that often. But yes. We had many things to discuss.”

“Love?” Meyer asked. “Or money?”

“Books,” Ames said.

“When did you learn that she was having an affair with Cyndie Carr?”

“Is that a fact?”

“George McReady seems to think so.”

“Jealous husband,” Ames said, and shrugged.

“How about jealous lover?”

“Mr. McReady says he phoned to ask you to dis-invite Cyndie to the party. Is that true?”

“I couldn’t very well do that, now could I? I invited her because Helen asked me to.”
“She give you any reason for that?”

“She didn’t have to. It was her birthday, after all. But, yes, they were friends.”

“Intimate friends, according to McReady.”

“Well, as I said, a jealous…”

“Didn’t he tell you that Cyndie and his wife were lovers?”

“How’d you feel about that, Mr. Ames?”

“Didn’t he specifically say…?”

“Gentlemen,” Ames said, and spread his hands on the air. “Please. This isn’t a police station, and I’m not under arrest here.”

“You ordered the wine last night, isn’t that right?”

“Yes.”

Curtly now. Lips tightly compressed. Angry frown on his face.

“The red for you and McReady, the white for Cyndie and Helen.”

“If you say so.”

“Well, they did drink wine from the same bottle didn’t they? Cyndie and Helen?”

“I wasn’t checking to see who drank what. In fact, I wasn’t even at the table all the time.”

“Oh? Where were you?”

“I recall going to the men’s room at one point.”

“Was this after you dropped the arsenic in Helen’s glass?”

Ames said nothing.

“Because if the poison wasn’t in the bottle itself…”

“… it had to’ve been dropped in her glass.”

“Isn’t that so Mr Ames?”

Still nothing.

“Did you put that poison in her glass, Mr Ames?”
“The waiter poured the wine,” he said flatly, ticking off the points like a schoolmaster. “Red for George and me, white for the ladies. Helen was complaining about the air conditioning. I excused myself to go to the gents’. She seemed her usual cheerful self by the time I came back to the table. George proposed a toast, and we all drank. If someone poisoned her wine while I was gone…”

Ames shrugged.

“Is that it, gentlemen?” he asked. “Because I have work to do, you see.”

*What happens next? Over to you...*
Meyer and Carella headed towards Martha. She was leaning over the corner table where Helen sat on her last night and she was picking at a damp patch on the wallpaper.

“Sorry,” Martha said, “can’t stop fiddling. I got to redecorate by Sunday night.” She traced a finger around the dark green pattern. “Some of this old stuff has to be touched up. Real mouldy. Got workmen showing up this afternoon.” She smoothed out a bubble.

Carella felt the summer heat smother him. He dreamed of a swimming pool, a drink and someone to share it with. He tried to keep track of Martha’s ramblings.

She was talking a mile a minute. “This whole place cost a fortune. No one tells you these things. The wood’s rotten, the plaster’s a mess and the wallpaper’s got to be treated like an historic monument.”

Meyer woke from his August fug. “This old stuff?”
“This wallpaper is a 120 years old, brother. Imported from England. When Ulysses Grant was president.”

Martha let out a sigh. “And now this crazy murder. C’mon. Into the kitchen. We can talk there.”

They trooped obediently through a stainless steel door and Martha led them to a corner near a double sink.

“C’mere,” she said with a wisp of seduction. “Under here, it’s cooler.” She stepped under the main air-conditioning vent. The two cops followed like chicks behind a hen. The heat had them licked until they hit the vent. Suddenly, it was like standing under a cool waterfall. Carella could almost feel the swimming pool. Taste the drink. See a face, a smile, to share it with.

But he remained impatient: “Look, we’re gonna have to find out which writers were here. And which ones knew Ames and Helen.”

“No problem. I’ll get the names. You know where to find me.”

Carella took a final blast of cool air and headed for the door: “Yeah, under that vent.”

* * * *

Carella dropped off Meyer near his house and headed for the gym. Cyndie was marching towards nirvana on a walking treadmill, eyes locked into the early evening news on a TV above her.
“Thanks for calling in,” she said and kept treading the mill, “I enjoy being interviewed by the murder squad while I’m training.”

“You don’t sound too ecstatic that I’m trying to find out who killed your best friend.”

She turned a dial. The machine quickened. “Look, Helen’s dead. And I’m sad. Got it?”

“No, I don’t got it.” Carella twisted the dial. The machine slowed. “I need more.”

“What kind of more?”

“What was Helen like before she left the restaurant?”

“She had too much to drink.”

“And?”

“And she ended up leaning her head against the wall, spewing bile toward me her husband and her editor and trying to keep her eyes open.”

“Martha said she was OK when she left.”

“You listening to me or not?”

“I’m listening.” Carella almost smiled. “Then?”

“Then her old man waited ‘til she sobered up.”

“Then?”

“Then he took her home.” Cyndie wiped sweat from her neck.

“And?”

“And any more questions and I’m getting that lawyer.”

“Because you’re innocent?”

“Something like that.” And she twisted the dial real hard and the treadmill whipped back into action.

* * * *

The next morning, Carella met Meyer down at the restaurant. They ducked under the police tapes, past the decorators’ workbenches and into the kitchen. Forensics were just getting to work and Martha’s body lay in a chubby heap at the far end of the kitchen.

Just under the cool air vent.

“Those workmen found her about an hour ago. Look at this.”

The paramedic turned Martha’s arm to reveal telltale blotches: “Poison.”

Carella looked up at the vent above the crumbled heap of the body. “You thinking what I’m thinking, bud,” he said to Meyer.

“Yeah.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m thinking this has taken a left turn on a map I ain’t got.”

* * * *

Carella never much liked computers. He didn’t like the way the words flipped up too fast. There was too much information, too much input, too much everything. He was happier where he was now: the public library. And there, tucked into a corner where a pretty 20-
something ate a tuna sandwich, Carella slowly smiled, closed the book he’d been steeped in, shut his notepad and headed back to his office. An invitation to an old friend, one or two tests and he just might have the killer.

Just might.

Later that day Meyer and he once again slipped under the police boundaries. Inside he met the guy he called that old pal - whom he’d asked to the sealed-off bistro.

Professor Stanley Silverman blinked constantly as he talked softly to Carella. Silverman had a ponytail the length of the Hudson River and a chin so sharp it could open beer bottles. Just what a man looks like loaded with a national reputation as a vapour chemist.

“Back in the thirties,” Silverman said as he blinked through his glasses, “twelve workers died when they were stripping wallpaper down at the Old Tavern Inn.”

Meyer was getting nervous. Elaine and he lived for doing up their house. “They died from decorating?”

“Yes, in a fashion.”

Meyer squinted: “Exactly which fashion is that, Doc?”

“Some old wallpaper, especially the green stuff, is made from synthetic Victorian dye.”

“You?” You could hear the cogs starting to stir in Meyer’s brain. “And . . . ?”

“And that’s got arsenic in it.”

Carella managed a small smile. Meyer grabbed a cigarette.

Silverman nodded to the dining room: “Just like out there where they’re stripping out the wet patch right next to the table where Mrs McReady died. ’Y’see, when it gets damp . . .”

Silverman stopped for a second. A bit of a story-teller. Waiting for the class to snap to attention.

He repeated: “When it gets damp, it kinda goes . . .” he made a small gesture with his stubby hands.

“What?”

“Bam.”

Meyer raised his eyes: “Bam?”

“Yeah. Bam. A fungus called ‘Scopulariopsis breviculis’ metabolizes arsenic and emits arsine gas . . .”

Carella held up his hand. “We’ll wait for the technical explanation, Stan.”

Silverman stroked the point of his chin as if to check it was still there. He shrugged. Then he shambled away. Carella turned to Meyer: “Silverman’s arsine gas seeped out of that damp old wallpaper up through the air-con and down the vents. Arsine gas killed Helen.
McReady and . . . sadly . . .” he pointed to Martha’s body, “anyone else near the vents when gas is released.”

Meyer shrugged: “Case of Arsenic and Old . . .”

“Green wallpaper.” Carella watched Meyer make a move to leave. “Where you going?”

“Home.”

“You knocking off?”

“Yeah, it’s too hot. Shift’s ended and I got business back at the house.” Meyer was touchy. There was something bugging him. The air-con was off. It was an oven inside the kitchen. He went for another cigarette. “Anyway, I’m suddenly re-assessing colour scheming in a domestic environment.”

“You mind speaking English?”

“Elaine wants green wallpaper for the baby’s room.”

“And?”

“And after today, I’ve become a magnolia kind of guy.” And then Meyer slipped out, leaving Carella with the body, the air vent and the mouldy wallpaper.